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Examining the Role an “*Illegal*” Identifier has on the Identity, Social Interactions, and Academic  
Experiences of Undocumented Latina/o Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by

Ana Karina Soltero López

2014

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Examining the Role an “*Illegal*” Identifier has on the Identity, Social Interactions, and Academic Experiences of Undocumented Latina/o Students

by

Ana Karina Soltero López

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Chair

Negative stereotypes associated with immigrants have resulted in the socially constructed notion of “illegality.” Nativist sentiments have perpetuated a barrage of anti-immigrant laws that have become largely associated with Mexican immigrants (De Genova, 2004). Recent implementation of draconian laws such as Arizona’s SB 1070 and Alabama’s HB 56 provide an opportunity to investigate the impact such laws have on the identity, social interactions, and academic experiences and aspirations of undocumented Latina/o students in the U.S.

Research on immigrant youth has favored assimilation frameworks, which highlight deficiencies and perpetuate stereotypes overlooking the systemic role racism and nativism play in the educational outcomes of undocumented students (Perez Huber et al., 2008). In contrast, taking a strength-based approach, this study applies Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) which privileges the in-depth stories of 12 Latina/o undocumented high school, community college, and university students between the ages of 14 and 25.

Findings suggest that anti-immigrant sentiments exacerbate the negative connotation of an “illegal” identifier for certain identities such as class, student, and sibling identities. An “illegal” identifier also influences social interactions. For example, students reveal having a small group of trustworthy friends to whom they confide their immigration status. In addition, students discuss how well-informed and supportive teachers and counselors make a positive impact on their academic progress. Moreover, students share their excitement over the personal benefits of President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). In this study, three legislations—California’s AB 540, DREAM Act, and DACA—are credited for diminishing the economic challenges associated with school related expenses, such as tuition, housing, and books. Research findings will be shared with all research sites in order to help administration create/expand resources, academic programs, and support systems for this student population.

The dissertation of Ana Karina Soltero López is approved.

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2014

I dedicate this dissertation to the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. *La lucha sigue.*

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As I child, I never imagined that I would receive a doctoral degree. At a very young age, I discovered my passion for education and lived for school. However, as I progressed through middle school and high school, my love for education was confronted by low expectations from educators who made me feel that my “deficiencies” (i.e. being a low-income, undocumented female immigrant, from a single-parent household growing up in the “hood”) would be obstacles near to impossible to surpass. I will never forget the day when I enthusiastically asked my high school college counselor to look over my UC application. Without hesitation, she told me that the UC system would be “too difficult” for me and that I should instead aim for community college. Twelve years later with a bachelors, masters and Ph.D., I want to say thank you college counselor and teachers who told me I would never make it, your words only made me work that much harder to prove you wrong!

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I started my undergraduate career at UC Santa Barbara as a lost soul. Fortunately, I befriended the right people and my four-year adventure was like a dream come true. Shout out to Sylvia Perez, who was the first friend I made at the UCSB Freshman Summer Start Program. Being the only two girls from the “hood” on our floor made us connect instantly. Thank you Syl for being the greatest friend anyone can have. Not only did you help me “survive” undergrad but we also started a life-long friendship. Thank you for always being so supportive and nurturing. You seriously have been by my side through the good and the bad. Thank you! Love you!

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

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- M.A. University of California, Los Angeles June 2007  
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- Ahmed, T., Aure, C., Callender, S., Campbell, H.,...**Soltero López, A.**,...Vazquez, N. (2007). *Critical Race Theory: An analysis of the School of Public Affairs*. Urban Planning Course 209, University of California, Los Angeles.

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- **Soltero López, A.**, Salazar, N., Lara, A., Del Razo, J., Chen, A. (2013). Navigating Socio-Educational Spaces: Bridging the Gap between Undocumented Youth Needs and Challenges and Institutional Support. Papers presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA). San Francisco, California.
- **Soltero López, A.** (2013). Examining the Role an "Illegal" Identifier has on the Identity, Social Relations and Academic Performance of Undocumented Latina/o Students. Paper presented at the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, Inc. (AAHHE) Conference. San Antonio, Texas.
- **Soltero López, A.** (2012). Examining the Role an "Illegal" Social Identity has on the Academic Performance of Undocumented Latina/o High School Students. Paper presented at the Critical Race Studies in Education Association (CRSEA). New York, New York.

- **Soltero López, A.** (2012). (Counter) Narrating Illegality: Conceptualizing Social Identity through Undocumented Latina/o High School Student *Testimonios*. Paper presented at the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS). Chicago, Illinois.
- **Soltero López, A.** (2011). Narrating Racialized Illegality: Impact of Social Identity on Undocumented Latina/o High School Student Performance. Paper presented at “Why Race Still Matters” University of Redlands 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer Institute on Leadership for Educational Justice. Redlands, California.

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## **Prologue: Researcher *Testimonio***

In February of 1985, I crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. I entered the U.S. at the age of one and a half using the birth certificate of my U.S.-born cousin. My mother and I settled in the Los Angeles area where I grew up in a traditional Mexican household. As my identity developed, I recognized myself as *Mexicana* among other salient identities of everyday life including daughter and student. However, there was one identifier that I was oblivious to—my immigration status.

My prescribed identity as an “illegal alien” was unknown to me until the year 1994 when California’s Proposition 187 was introduced. I remember my mother telling me how it was that we had come to live in California. She tried her best to explain to an eleven year old the process of migration she had opted for in order to have a better life. Already confused by what she told me, my mother proceeded to explain to me the importance of censorship given my vulnerable status as an “alien.” She explained that if my status were to be disclosed, I would be deported alone to Mexico, a country I never knew. All of my family members—mom, aunts, uncles, and cousins—were legal residents and would be exempt from the sweeping reform that threatened thousands.

The fear that was instilled in me impacted my childhood. I was no longer the carefree, talkative, friendly child I had been. I became very reserved and often times had to think twice before I answered questions by friends or teachers; fearing they would report me to immigration services. My nervousness was so intense that I could no longer carry on a normal conversation. I feared that I would reveal something that I should not. After all, I would be deported by myself to a country I had not known. To reduce my fear and anxiety, I simply decided to cease the close

relationships I had with most of my peers and teachers. At school, I spoke only when spoken to and if applicable would stick to a simple “yes or no” response.

The restricted social life I had created for my safety remained the same for several years. To resolve my case, my mother submitted an application for permanent residency in the late 1990s to no avail. We were never notified about the status of my application for residency. Ironically, my mother had been the person to resolve the residency cases of several family members, but she had no luck with her own daughter.

Throughout my schooling, I remained a dedicated student always seeking honors and AP courses in high school. At the start of my junior year, I began learning about college and was interested in seeking postsecondary education; however, I quickly reminded myself that my immigration status would prevent me from attaining a college education. Sharing my aspirations with my mom, I encouraged her to submit another application on my behalf. I started my senior year and became depressed about the realization that my case would probably not be settled before having to submit verification of status to universities and financial aid. Discouraged but hopeful, I applied to several schools anyway. In my mind, I had agreed that simply being admitted to colleges and universities would be an achievement. Luckily, my prayers were answered and my petition for permanent residency was accepted. I became a United States legal permanent resident in March of 2002 and was able to pursue my dreams of a college education.

The unlawful practice I had unknowingly committed as a toddler shaped my life in so many ways. In particular, it affected the quality of my social interactions and relationships with key people in my life: teachers, friends, and family. Being on guard about individuals around me took its toll on me emotionally and psychologically. My story is not much different than the story of the millions of undocumented youth in the U.S. Our stories of struggle, survival and

resistance are similar, and for this reason I have devoted my graduate career to bringing the experiences of undocumented youth to the forefront.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This introductory chapter provides an overview of my dissertation. I open this chapter with a brief overview of U.S. immigration laws and the evolution of “illegality.” I then connect this history to my problem/significance statement and research questions. Next, I discuss selected pieces of literature and the theoretical frameworks that guide this study. In closing, I provide a synopsis of the findings of this study.

### **Brief Overview of Anti-Immigrant Laws and Formation of “Illegality”**

From 1820 to 1880, the U.S. exercised a “Free Period” in which no federal immigration laws existed. However, in 1882, due to the prevalent presence of Chinese immigrants, the Chinese Exclusion Act was put into effect, which was the first legislative restriction on immigration that attempted to stop Chinese immigration (Alba & Nee, 2003; Connolly, 2005; Foner, 2000; Waters, 2000). This legislation also set the tone for the following half century when immigrants were viewed as biologically and inherently inferior, thus beginning an era of immigration regulation based on race and nationality (Alba & Nee, 2003; Connolly, 2005; De Genova, 2004).

During the large migration of European immigrants to the east of the U.S. there was also simultaneous immigration from Mexicans to the southwest which was unrestricted at first. At the height of the Mexican Revolution and World War I, it is estimated that about one-tenth of Mexican nationals migrated to the United States between 1910 and 1930 (Alba & Nee, 2003). However, at the onset of the Great Depression, the west side of the country scapegoated Mexican immigrants and U.S. born-Mexicans. The nativism intensified to the extent that measures were taken to strip Mexican immigrants and U.S. born-Mexicans of jobs that were solely reserved for “Americans.” A mass deportation resulted in the estimated “repatriation” of 415,000 Mexican

immigrants and their U.S. born children. These actions ceased to be solely about the economy but were clearly about racial affiliation that ignored immigration status (Acuña, 2000; De Genova, 2004; Sanchez, 1993).

Illegality<sup>1</sup> as we now know it originates largely from migration from the Western Hemisphere, particularly from Mexico, Central and South America. Arguably, this term has come to be associated largely with Mexican immigrants more than any other immigrant group; a point I will address in further detail below. The creation of the *Bracero* Program and the constant repatriation of its workers established an ongoing pattern in which different tactics were used to systematically create and sustain “illegality.” This term has served as a dimension which set forth additional immigration laws (De Genova, 2004; Sánchez, 1993).

Its contemporary use is a product of immigration law in which immigrants are regarded as unlawful, illegitimate criminals. The evolution of immigration laws has maintained the sorting, defining, and racialization of different immigrant groups. In the case of Mexicans, it has affected the ways in which they are objectified and racialized (De Genova, 2004).

In the early 1990s, the overwhelming unauthorized migration of Spanish-speaking immigrants contributed to their perception, “as a growing threat to American society, its culture, and the economy” (Connolly, 2005, p. 201). The Immigration Act of 1990 further expanded the purposes of undocumented deportation and created a new visa program that aimed at receiving more immigrants from countries that were low in numbers. Immigrants were blamed for taking and using social services and as a result, two legislations, Proposition 187 “Save our State”

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<sup>1</sup> *Illegality* is a product of immigration law in which immigrants are regarded as unlawful, illegitimate criminals. The principle foundation of *illegality* is in contrast to the hegemonic national identity of American-ness. The social construction of *illegality* was a way to categorize, and later racialize and criminalize immigrants. Thus, *illegality* has become a historically/economically situated identity that is imposed upon undocumented immigrants that simultaneously stratifies them to the margins of society. Consequently leading to the silencing and invisibility of this population (De Genova, 2004; Ngai, 2004; Solis, nd & 2003).

(SOS) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) were put into effect in California to suppress migration.

In recent years, a new anti-immigrant surge continues to sort, define, and racialize immigrants as seen with Arizona's SB 1070. This controversial legislation passed in 2010 and was aimed at identifying and punishing illegal immigrants.<sup>2</sup> The bill itself proclaims that police authority would only detain an immigrant if they have been caught breaking laws, however, legal rights activist considered this police profiling. Furthermore, failing to have the proper documentation resulted in misdemeanor charges. In July of 2010, sections of the law were halted by Judge Susan Bolton, including the one that allows police enforcement to ask for documentation.

This historical overview of attitudes turned legislation is evidence of the deeply rooted bigotry and political convenience used to create and justify illegality. Since its creation, the concept of illegality has continued to reinvent itself to suppress the vulnerable population of undocumented people. At first, it concentrated on a largely male population and then began to include women and children. This prescribed identity maintains the vulnerability and tractability of individuals that become disposable commodities. It is interesting to note that nativism is a result of a perceived threat to national identity and security, however, nativism also impacts the identity of immigrants (Wilson, 2000). I believe it is important to deconstruct illegality in terms of history, race, space, social structures and practices which are some of the factors addressed in this study. As De Genova (2004) writes,

“Illegality reproduces the practical repercussions of the physical border between the U.S. and Mexico across which undocumented migration is constituted. In this important

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<sup>2</sup> The anti-immigrant group Americans for Legal Immigration PAC (ALIPAC) have compiled a list of 22 states considering passing similar legislation: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Utah. Source: <http://www.alipac.us/ftopic-196989.html>.

sense, migrant ‘illegality’ is a spatialized social condition that is inseparable from the particular ways that Mexican migrants are likewise racialized as ‘illegal aliens’—invasive violators of the law, incorrigible ‘foreigners,’ subverting the integrity of ‘the nation’ and its sovereignty from *within* the space of the U.S. nation-state. Thus, as a simultaneously spatialized and racialized social condition, migrant ‘illegality’ is also a central feature of the ways that ‘Mexican’-ness is thereby reconfigured in *racialized* relation to the hegemonic ‘national’ identity of ‘American’-ness” (p. 161).

### **Problem/Significance Statement**

It is evident that there has and continues to be a deeply rooted nativist political agenda in the United States. With the continued evolution and expansion of “illegality,” we have seen in recent years variations of legislation all aiming to do the same thing—cease illegal entry as well as punishing those that are living in the U.S. “unlawfully.” Portes and Rumbaut (2001) use the term “intransigent nativism” whose ideology is to end all immigration by sending all undocumented immigrants back “home” and relegating all other immigrants as inferiors who are not eligible for the same privileges as citizens.

Despite such drastic political and legal measures, undocumented immigration continues. Since 2000, the undocumented population in the U.S. has increased by more than 40 percent (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Five hundred thousand undocumented immigrants per year were estimated to come to the U.S. between 2005 and 2008 (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Furthermore, four in five undocumented people come from Latin American countries, and Mexico continues to be the birth country of most undocumented immigrants (Passel & Cohn, 2008).

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates that approximately 10.8 million undocumented immigrants reside in the U.S. as of January 2010, with California as the leading state of residence. In addition, 62 percent of undocumented immigrants are believed to be Mexican nationals. Moreover, roughly 2.1 million of the undocumented population is believed to be under the age of eighteen (Hoefler, Rytina, & Baker, 2011) yet little is known about their

experiences despite sweeping anti-immigrant legislation, such as Arizona's SB 1070. The consequences of the nation's nativism are unknown and are the foundation for this research.

Despite the national controversy spurred by Arizona's SB 1070 for its perceived racial profiling of Latina/os as "illegal aliens," twenty-three states are still attempting to file copycat versions of this bill (Gheen, Americans for Legal Immigration, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative to study the effects that such macro-social policies have on the micro-social psyche, behavior, identity, social interactions, and academic experiences of undocumented students. This study addresses these issues through the following three research questions:

### **Research Questions**

- 1) In what ways, if any, does the larger sociopolitical discourse on unauthorized immigrants and immigration have on the social identity (re)formation of undocumented Latina/o students? In what ways does this larger discourse magnify one's undocumented status?
- 2) How does an undocumented status impact social interaction with peers, teachers, staff, and strangers encountered in everyday life?
- 3) How do social relations with the aforementioned individuals influence academic experiences and outcomes?

### **Selected Relevant Literature**

Despite the existence of illegality, few scholars center their investigation on its impact on academic achievement throughout the K-16 pipeline (see Perez et al., 2009; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995 & 2001). It is estimated that every year approximately 80,000 undocumented youth reach the age of 18 of which roughly 65,000 graduate from high school (Olivero et al., 2006; Passel, 2003; Passel & Cohn, 2008). Moreover, it is estimated that only 13,000 enroll in U.S. colleges/universities nationwide (Contreras, 2009). The gap between these



figures is appalling and needs to be addressed. Despite the vulnerability of this population, literature on their social experiences in K-16 is limited and does not directly address the impact of immigration status. Yet, the success of immigrant youth continues to be measured through their assimilation/acculturation<sup>3</sup> (Alba & Nee, 2003; Berry et al., 2006; Phinney, 2001; Smart & Smart; 1995). I argue that assimilation is heavily influenced by receptivity and continued social interactions with the host society, thus contributing to a need for understanding immigrant identity (re)development. In order to understand the identity and academic experiences of undocumented youth, this study merges the bodies of literature on social identity and immigrant educational outcomes.

### *Social Identity*

Hurtado et al. (1994) examined the identities of immigrants to assess their adaptation in the U.S. Their findings suggest that identity formation was distinct for Mexican immigrants and Chicanos based on overlooked factors such as historical events and societal structural practices. Furthermore, class and race identities were also found to be the most psychologically powerful and problematic in regards to adaptation. Moreover, Padilla and Perez (2003) argue that identity is constructed based on a collective frame of reference. In other words, visible characteristics leading to stigma such as skin color, accent, and gender may lead to less assimilation as opposed to less visible characteristics such as religion and sexuality. Therefore, people's reactions to stigmatized individuals influence their behavior and identity and reasonably lead to their conscious control to expose or hide certain characteristics in order to manipulate the perceptions people have of them (Goffman, 1963).

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<sup>3</sup> Broadly defined, assimilation/acculturation is the unidirectional lifelong process by which each generation demonstrates a new stage of cultural and psychological adjustment to the American way of life.

Solis' (2003) work addresses how undocumented immigrants and children develop their identities through challenging interactions and pressures of society. She argues that the emergence and perseverance of "illegality" becomes a possible historically-situated identity. Solis (2003) states that "illegal immigrant" is an available identity that pre-exists people - "It comes to function as a identity when it is adopted by individual people for a purpose, such as to understand the organization of U.S. society and their own place of silence and invisibility in it" (p. 3). Furthermore, Solis (2003) believes that "illegality" as an identity becomes theorized by examining the connection of societal and individual histories as opposed to looking at these factors as separate, unrelated entities.

### ***Immigrant Youth Educational Performance/Outcomes***

Norrid-Lacey and Spencer (2000) are two scholars who investigated the impact of immigration status on undocumented Latina/o high school students. They found that several structural and social factors contributed to a 27 percent graduation rate for their participants. Factors of utmost social concern were immigration status and the students' perceived lower status to other ethnic groups. Moreover, the distrust of school personnel and lack of resources had profound negative effects on the students' academic trajectories. In terms of outcomes, we learn that out of the 70 informants: six transferred to other schools, 37 dropped out, one was expelled, one committed suicide, eight did not have enough credits to graduate, and only 17 graduated in four years.

Although "illegality" is not a visible characteristic, some studies suggest that students experience it as recognizable. Bejarano (2005) found that high school students distinguish undocumented peers by their language use and style of dress and thus discriminate schoolmates based on these characteristics. Targeted youth attribute this discrimination to their social

isolation and academic withdrawals. Similarly, Abrego's (2008) work found that undocumented high school youth used the stigma of "illegality" as a source of empowerment that helped them mobilize to pass California's Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540)<sup>4</sup>. Before the bill passed, Abrego (2008) found that the stigma associated with their immigration status made students feel different and vulnerable at all times. Participants likened the undocumented status to a scar that needs to be hidden because it causes shame. Abrego (2008) found that the bill unintentionally legitimized this marginalized group leading to a more acceptable social identity. Students no longer identified themselves as "illegal" or "undocumented." They were empowered by the identifier "AB 540"—a more socially acceptable label that they were not ashamed of disclosing. This brief literature review highlights the impact that labels and social interactions have on academic experiences which is discussed further in this dissertation.

These studies are prevalent today because we find ourselves witnessing a new wave of anti-immigrant ideologies and legislation. Recent legislation, like Arizona's SB 1070, has spurred a national divide between those that see immigrants as assets and those that see them as liabilities. Once again, "illegality" becomes encumbered to include not only immigration status, but also race, language, and geographic location (Solis, 2003). Therefore, the complex definition of "illegal" is important to study in order to assess the ways in which ideologies and legislation impact the everyday experiences of those it has defined. In particular, assessing the ways it affects undocumented youth holistically.

### **Guiding Theoretical Frameworks**

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<sup>4</sup> AB 540 is a California bill passed in January 2002 which allows undocumented students to attend college without having to pay out of state fees.

The literature on immigrant education is dominated by assimilation frameworks that I argue subscribe to problematic American standards of meritocracy, individualism, and deficit ideologies of communities of color and account for misleading factors that critique the progress (or lack thereof) of immigrant communities. Furthermore, the interchangeable use of the terms “social identity” and “ethnic and racial identity,” I argue convolutes two distinct forms of identity. Therefore, this study is guided by the tenets of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) to examine if an “illegal” identifier impacts the multiple identities of participants.

### ***Social Identity Theory (SIT)***

Originating in social psychology, Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that inter-group relations and group memberships influence social identity development (Tajfel & Turner; 1979, 1999, 2006, 2010). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, and 2010), social identity is realized through four processes: 1) social categorization, 2) awareness of multiple identities, 3) social comparison, and 4) search for psychological distinctiveness which are processes highlighted in this study. SIT thoroughly explains the psychological processes of inter-group relations but insufficiently explains how multiple identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, and immigration status contribute to a social identity. Moreover, SIT does not unpack the nuanced intricacies of the numerous identities that make up the self as well as the complexities that arise from them. To supplement the shortcomings of SIT, I also use Latina/o Critical Theory.

### ***Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit)***

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework originating in legal scholarship that is used to theorize and examine the ways in which racism and other forms of oppression impact the lives of people of color and places at the center of analysis their lived experiences (Delgado & Stefancic,

2001). CRT has branched out into various disciplines such as Education (see Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Stemming out of CRT is Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) which specifically focuses on the lives of Latina/os and factors that are relevant to them such as race, ethnicity, language, culture, and immigration status that may be overlooked by the predominance of the Black/White binary of racial discourse (Perez Huber, 2009b). LatCrit uses narratives, counterstories, and *testimonios* (testimonies) as methodological tools to address genuine problems within the education of Latina/os. LatCrit answers research questions using five tenets: 1) intersectionality of race and other factors, 2) challenging dominant ideology, 3) centrality of experiential knowledge, 4) commitment to social justice, and 5) using a transdisciplinary approach (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Although all tenets apply to this study, the tenet I would like to highlight is that of intersectionality. This tenet analyzes the junction of multiple identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, culture, phenotype, surname, immigration status, and sexual orientation among others and how they result in discrimination which is central to this research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001 & 2002). Suited for this study, the combination of these two theoretical frameworks offers a new powerful point of view that discerns the role that anti-immigrant sentiments have on the multiple identities and social interactions of the undocumented Latina/o students that participated in this study.

## **Study Methodology**

### ***Participant and Site Selection***

The twelve participants of this study self-identified as Latina/o and undocumented and were attending high school, community college or a four-year university in Southern California during the time of data collection. Study sites include: three high schools, one community

college, and two four-year universities. Examining student experiences within three distinct educational levels helped in determining what educational institutions can do to improve the experiences of their respective student population because one-size solutions are not likely to work in such different contexts and life stages of students.

### ***Recruitment***

Recruitment of participants consisted of emails and class presentations in which I forged an intimate connection to students by sharing my own *testimonio* (testimony) of my experiences as an undocumented student throughout my K-12 education. I then connected my *testimonio* to the objectives and goals of the study. All students received a bilingual research information sheet with detailed study information and my contact information. To protect student privacy during presentations, interested participants were instructed to contact me directly via email or phone.

### ***Chosen Method and Data Collection***

Communities of color are recognized as natural storytellers (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Passed from generation to generation, oral histories sustain culture, values, and language, but also valiant stories of struggle, resistance, trauma, and displacement that are common among marginalized communities (Angueira, 1988; Benmayor, 1988; Brabeck, 2003). For example, the historical denial of testimony by slaves and free Blacks against Whites in court, rejected the voices, experiences, and histories causing the further subordination of Blacks (Howard, 1973). However, these exact same testimonies are inserted in academic discourse and are used to disprove and challenge knowledge that is accepted as fact (Bailey, 1980; Blassingame, 1975). Testimonies continue to thrive in spaces like Black churches that impart therapeutic closeness, solidarity, and resiliency (Griffith, et al., 1984).

For this dissertation, it is important to contextualize the way I use testimony to include the movements of young Latina/os testifying before Congress to urge for the passage of the federal DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform. These counterstories take an assertive stand against the dominant stereotypes of immigrants as lazy, law-breaking, social leeches. These powerful stories of struggle and resiliency need to be documented and incorporated into academic scholarship. Therefore, *testimonios* (testimonies) were purposefully selected as the primary data collection strategy.

The incorporation of *testimonios* as a methodological tool for academic research, challenges traditional westernized methodological practices because it moves towards a social justice-based research that is guided by the participant and not the researcher. This method is unlike traditional in-depth interviews because it privileges the storytelling ability of participants and maintains its integrity by limiting interpretation (Haig-Brown, 2003). Suited to this research, *testimonios* are recognized as, “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (Perez Huber, 2009a, p. 644). This method is appropriate for this research because currently there is a shortage in qualitative research documenting the life experiences of undocumented students in K-16. Given the continued social and political attacks on immigrant communities, there is no better time to voice their experiences.

*Testimonios* were audio-recorded in one or two sessions of approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in length. The *testimonios* focused on the students’ schooling experiences in their home countries (if applicable), their migration, their social experiences in the U.S. and school, and future academic and personal aspirations. For example, I asked students: “Let’s talk about what factors

led you (or your family) to migrate to the U.S.,” “Let’s talk about your social interactions at school. What type of people do you socialize with the most?” and “Let’s talk about where you see yourself in five years.” Opening up *testimonios* with broad statements such as “let’s talk” constitutes both collective and individual lives that allowed my participants and I to have a dialectic conversation about our similarities as immigrants and invited participants to share how events have constructed meaning for them (Gutierrez, 2008).

### *Analysis*

In line with the methodological practice of *testimonio*, the sharing of an authentic narrative of a life-long journey helped both the participants and I theorize and co-construct stories of struggle, survival, and resistance (Perez Huber, 2009a). Thus, after each *testimonio* was conducted, it was transcribed and reviewed for emerging themes. In reporting study findings (please see chapters 6-10), each code was contextualized for each participant by sharing their unique example. The goal of the analysis phase was to capture the individual experiences of participants yet highlighting the commonalities in all their experiences.

### **Study Findings**

Chapter 6 highlights participant excerpts about crossing the border, their parental employment, and how they found out about their immigration status.

Chapter 7 shares excerpts that answer the first research question and begins by discussing the participants’ perception of the nation’s current discourse on (undocumented) immigration and their feelings towards a few labels used to describe the undocumented community. I then relate how participants self-identify, focusing specially on race, ethnicity, gender, and class and explore their understanding and experiences of each identity.



Chapter 8 extends the conversation of identity and focuses on other salient identity, such as children and siblings, religion, sexual orientation, and student identities.

Chapter 9 focuses on the social interactions and relationships of participants. The excerpts provided in this chapter answer the second research question and build from the first to explore whether having an undocumented status impacts the socialization of participants. This chapter specifically focuses on the way participants approach friendships, professional, and familial relationships. Moreover, I revisit the guiding theoretical framework Social Identity Theory (please see chapter 4) and highlight the social dynamics and comparisons of study participants in and outside of school.

Chapter 10 shares excerpts that focus on the educational experiences of study participants, thus answering the last research question. This question builds off research questions one and two which explore how the anti-immigrant rhetoric and their identity sense making is influenced by peers, teachers, and family. This chapter, in return, examines if and how these people impact their educational experiences.

Chapter 11 discusses the findings of this study, provides implications for theory and practice, and offers a reflection of the journey though the completion of this study.

## **Chapter 2: U.S. Historical Overview of Anti-immigrant Attitudes and Legislation**

As the United States took shape, so did ideologies about foreigners. Throughout the same time that the country began to form, each new state that was gained was simultaneously swept by varying degrees of nativism and thus resulted in the genocide of Native Americans as well as the enslavement of Blacks (Wilson, 2000). The creation of the modern United States attracted individuals from a number of countries across the world. The availability of jobs and opportunity for a new beginning contributed to a steady stream of immigrants. Soon, the influx of individuals from all over the world began to threaten the “face” of the United States as perceived by those in power.

### **Beginnings of Regulated Migration and Immigration Quota System**

From 1820 to 1880, the U.S. exercised a “Free Period” in which no federal immigration laws existed. However, in 1882, due to the prevalent presence of Chinese immigrants, the Chinese Exclusion Act was put into effect, which was the first legislative restriction on immigration that attempted to stop Chinese immigration (Alba & Nee, 2003; Connolly, 2005; Foner, 2000; Waters, 2000). This legislation also set the tone for the following half century when immigrants were viewed as biologically and inherently inferior, thus beginning an era of immigration regulation based on race and nationality (Alba & Nee, 2003; Connolly, 2005; De Genova, 2004).

A couple of decades later, Asian xenophobia permeated and the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, was implemented to halt immigration from Eastern Asia and the Pacific Islands. Previous anxiety over immigrants targeted Chinese, thus this act was enacted and extended further freezes to more Asian countries (Connolly, 2005).

Moreover, Mexicans were subjected to paying double the tax to enter the U.S. and had to undergo a literacy test (Ngai, 2004). Immigration was restricted by denying admission to individuals that were presumably burdens to the U.S. such as those considered feeble-minded, idiots, beggars, or those that were mentally or physically disabled. Added to the list of undesirables were individuals over the age of sixteen who were illiterate (Wilson, 2000).

The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, was a law that further limited the number of immigrants based on a percentage. Only 2 percent of foreign-born individuals would be granted admission. This quota system was established based on the number of people from a specific country that were already residing in the U.S. but also considered the “assimilability” of selected migrants. At this point, immigration reform was focused primarily on European foreigners who had become a large portion of immigrants. Specifically, the Immigration Act of 1924 was aimed at restricting immigrants from Eastern Europe and reserved about 85 percent of visas for Northern Europeans. In comparison to the Act of 1917, the Immigration Act of 1924 was focused on limiting immigration based on nationality (De Genova, 2004; Ngai, 2004). These two immigration laws were intentional efforts aimed at controlling the racial and ethnic composition of immigrants in the U.S. that arose from xenophobic sentiments (Connolly, 2005; De Genova, 2004).

During the large migration of European immigrants to the east of the U.S. there was also simultaneous immigration from Mexicans to the southwest of the U.S. which was unrestricted at this time. At the height of the Mexican Revolution and World War I, it is estimated that about one-tenth of Mexican nationals migrated to the United States between 1910 and 1930. They were influenced by the exclusion of Chinese and Japanese immigrants as well as a need to fill cheap labor (Alba & Nee, 2003). However, at the onset of the Great Depression, the west side of

the country scapegoated Mexican immigrants and U.S. born-Mexicans. The nativism intensified to the extent that measures were taken to strip Mexican immigrants and U.S. born-Mexicans of jobs that were solely reserved for “Americans.” A mass deportation resulted in the estimated “repatriation” of 415,000 Mexican immigrants and their U.S. born children. About 85,000 left voluntary. These actions ceased to be solely about the economy but were clearly about racial affiliation that ignored immigration status (Acuña, 2000; De Genova, 2004; Sanchez, 1993).

As a result of World War II, there was a labor shortage that reversed previous deportations with the inception of the *Bracero* Program which was an agreement established between the U.S. and Mexico that allowed for temporary contract laborers in agriculture and railroads. This program started in 1942 and was terminated in 1964. Throughout its institution, this program ensured cheap labor and benefited employers who did not have to pay contracting fees, fixed wages, among other things. The *Bracero* program also facilitated illegal migration and began to define immigrants and their labor as disposable commodities (Acuña, 2000; Alba & Nee, 2003; De Genova, 2004; Massey, et al., 2002; Ngai, 2004; Sanchez, 1993).

As early as 1949 legalization procedures were put in place, referred to as “drying out wetbacks,” which aimed at reducing “illegal” immigration, however there are estimates that for every documented worker, there were four undocumented workers who entered the United States (De Genova, 2004). In 1954, approximately 2.9 million “illegal” Mexican migrant workers were deported under “Operation Wetback” of the former U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). Up to this point, the U.S. had focused on immigration quotas in which they “controlled” the make up of the U.S. population. While the U.S. focused their energy on convoluted formulas, the phenomenon of illegal immigration was growing but was selectively overlooked when convenient to the U.S.

“Illegality”<sup>5</sup> as we now know it originates largely from migration from the Western Hemisphere, particularly from Mexico, Central and South America. Arguably, this term has come to be associated largely with Mexican immigrants more than any other immigrant group; a point I address in further detail below. The creation of the *Bracero* Program and the constant repatriation of its workers established an ongoing pattern in which different tactics were used to systematically create and sustain “illegality.” This term has served as a dimension which set forth additional immigration laws (De Genova, 2004; Sánchez, 1993).

The Immigration Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, had amendments to the Immigration and Nationalities Act of 1952, which dismantled the racial formulas used for immigration control and also disposed of the quotas for Europe, however, that was not the case for the Western Hemisphere (Alba & Nee, 2003; Connolly, 2005; Ngai, 2004). Once again, the racialization of immigration statuses was evident. Annual quotas were established in which no more than 120,000 migrants from the entire hemisphere would be permitted, therefore, it reversed the racist exclusion of Asians. These amendments were characterized as liberal for their family reunification provision. For both hemispheres, eligible family members would be exempt of the quota. However, it is important to point out that the Eastern Hemisphere had different provisions for family members that included relatives of U.S. and permanent residents such as adult and/or married children and siblings, whereas the Western Hemisphere did not have as much flexibility. Up until this point, illegal immigration had been lacking from legal discourse.

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<sup>5</sup> *Illegality* is a product of immigration law in which immigrants are regarded as unlawful, illegitimate criminals. The principle foundation of *illegality* is in contrast to the hegemonic national identity of American-ness. The social construction of *illegality* was a way to categorize, and later racialize and criminalize immigrants. Thus, *illegality* has become a historically/economically situated identity that is imposed upon undocumented immigrants that simultaneously stratifies them to the margins of society. Consequently leading to the silencing and invisibility of this population (De Genova, 2004; Ngai, 2004; Solis, nd & 2003).

## **Onset of Illegal Immigration, Border Policing, and Criminalization of Immigrants**

In 1969, a year after its inception the U.S. government started to investigate the Mexican border. By 1976, illegal immigration had become a focal point in U.S. politics, which permanently affected the focus of immigration legislation (De Genova, 2004). New amendments to the Immigration and Nationalities Act were enacted in 1976 that extended the provisions to the Western hemisphere, which resembled those of the Eastern hemisphere. It also established a fixed national quota for every country in the Western hemisphere with a maximum of 200,000 individuals per year.

In 1978, hemisphere quotas were disregarded and a worldwide maximum was set at 290,000 individuals per year. However, the 1980 Refugee Act reduced this number to 270,000 individuals per year. Due to drastically reduced opportunities for legal entry, many immigrants resorted to entering illegally, though; the government focused most of their attention to Mexico. The influx in illegal entry from the U.S.-Mexico border resulted in the conception of illegality. Its contemporary use is a product of immigration law in which immigrants are regarded as unlawful, illegitimate criminals. As I have detailed above, the evolution of immigration law has maintained the sorting, defining, and racialization of different immigrant groups. In the case of Mexicans, it has affected the ways in which they are objectified and racialized (De Genova, 2004).

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed which specifically focused on illegal immigration. It attempted to manage undocumented immigration through three approaches: 1) amnesty for undocumented citizens already residing in the United States, 2) increased funding for additional border patrol, and 3) employer sanctions (Alba & Nee, 2003; Ngai, 2004). Selective amnesty would allow for the adjustment of statuses for undocumented

immigrants. Those that could prove that they had continuously resided in the U.S. since before 1982 were granted temporary residency and after 18 months of continued residency could apply for permanent status. Once again, the law was confined to defining and sorting based on measures of illegality. In other words, the law provided selective amnesty to some and not others. For example, those that had not interrupted their illegality before 1982 were given temporary residence whereas those who did were not granted any adjustments. Again this perpetuated illegal immigration among Mexicans because INS wanted to give amnesty to those that had not been inspected upon entry (border crossing) as opposed to those that overstayed their visas. As a result, more funding was provided for the Border Patrol.

IRCA also implemented sanctions for employers that hired undocumented workers. Although checking the legitimacy of the forms was not enforced, this allowed employers to be protected with greater consequences for the immigrant who contributed to a booming fraudulent paperwork industry, once again, maintaining the commoditization of undocumented immigrants (Connolly, 2005; De Genova, 2004).

In the early 1990s, the overwhelming unauthorized migration of Spanish-speaking immigrants contributed to their perception, “as a growing threat to American society, its culture, and the economy” (Connolly, 2005, p. 201). The Immigration Act of 1990 further expanded the purposes of undocumented deportation and created a new visa program that aimed at receiving more immigrants from countries that were low in numbers. Immigrants were blamed for taking and using social services and as a result, two legislations were put into effect in California to suppress migration. In 1994, Proposition 187 “Save our State” (SOS) initiative was passed to regulate state benefits—education, health care, and social services—for undocumented immigrants also granting authority to state workers to report “illegal aliens,” which was later

rescinded by a federal court (Connolly, 2005; Martin, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Seif, 2004; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2001; Yates, 2004).

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 was punitive in nature and included provisions that would criminalize, apprehend, fine, and deport undocumented immigrants for a multitude of infractions. It also excluded undocumented and legal immigrants from social security benefits and food stamps. In order to access these benefits they had to work for 10 years and pay social security taxes or secure U.S. citizenship (Massey, et al., 2002; Wilson, 2000; Yates, 2004).

Furthermore, students were also punished by being made ineligible for federal financial aid and not granted tuition privileges in their home states. In other words, states could not offer undocumented immigrant students the same tuition as a documented resident of the same state, and were subject to the same rates as non-resident citizens (Oliverez, et al., 2006; Perry, 2006; Yates, 2004). This further broadened the definition of illegality to include youth, which often times were unaware of their immigration status.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 specifically targeted women and their children who became integrated into the definition of illegality (De Genova, 2004). In 1998, Proposition 227 was passed in California that required all school instruction to be conducted in English. It also supported unrealistic short-term placement, not to exceed one year, in intensive sheltered English immersion programs for children not fluent in English (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 2001).

In recent years, we have seen a new anti-immigrant surge that continues to sort, define, and racialize immigrants. In 2005, HR 4437 was introduced which aimed at increasing the policing and the fencing along the U.S.-Mexican border. Furthermore, before being deported



each undocumented person was to pay a \$3,000 fine. Those that were found with fraudulent paperwork were fined and had a minimum jail sentence of 10 years. In order to gain state approval, this regulation would reimburse states that aided in the enforcement of national immigration laws. HR 4437 grabbed national attention from both opponents and proponents of immigration and spurred national marches all over the country on May 1<sup>st</sup>.

The reoccurring May Day marches have now run into Arizona's SB 1070. This controversial legislation passed in 2010 and was aimed at identifying and punishing illegal immigrants.<sup>6</sup> The bill itself proclaims that police authority would only detain an immigrant if they have been caught breaking laws, however, legal rights activist considered this police profiling. Moreover, failing to have the proper documentation resulted in misdemeanor charges. In July of 2010, sections of the law were halted by Judge Susan Bolton, one key section being the one that allows police enforcement to ask for documentation.

This historical overview of attitudes turned legislation is evidence of the deeply rooted bigotry and political convenience used to create and justify illegality. Since its creation, the concept of illegality has continued to reinvent itself to suppress the vulnerable population of undocumented people. At first, it concentrated on a largely male population and then began to include women and children. This prescribed identity maintains the vulnerability and tractability of individuals that become disposable commodities. It is interesting to note that nativism is a result of a perceived threat to national identity and its security, however, nativism also impacts the identity of immigrants (Wilson, 2000). I believe it is important to deconstruct illegality in terms of history, race, space and social structures and practices, which are factors explored in this

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<sup>6</sup> The anti-immigrant group Americans for Legal Immigration PAC (ALIPAC) have compiled a list of 22 states considering passing similar legislation: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Utah. Source: <http://www.alipac.us/ftopic-196989.html>.

study. The stigmatization of undocumented people subject them to extreme forms of policing and defined human rights. As De Genova (2004) writes,

“Illegality reproduces the practical repercussions of the physical border between the U.S. and Mexico across which undocumented migration is constituted. In this important sense, migrant ‘illegality’ is a spatialized social condition that is inseparable from the particular ways that Mexican migrants are likewise racialized as ‘illegal aliens’—invasive violators of the law, incorrigible ‘foreigners,’ subverting the integrity of ‘the nation’ and its sovereignty from *within* the space of the U.S. nation-state. Thus, as a simultaneously spatialized and racialized social condition, migrant ‘illegality’ is also a central feature of the ways that ‘Mexican’-ness is thereby reconfigured in *racialized* relation to the hegemonic ‘national’ identity of ‘American’-ness” (p. 161).

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

The existing literature on immigrant student performance and outcomes in U.S. schools has greatly contributed to the field of education. In reviewing this literature, findings suggest that both internal and external factors contribute to student academic experiences. Among the external factors are: parental education, family's socioeconomic status/assets, residential placement, established networks, social capital, and discrimination. On the other hand are internal factors such as attaining English proficiency, motivation, self-esteem and identity (Alba & Nee, 2003; Foner, 2000; Kasinitz et al., 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Waters, 2000). Some studies find that immigrant youth outperform native youth (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995) especially those with social capital (Alba & Nee, 2003).

Moreover, to facilitate an understanding of immigrant student experiences, much of the literature is conceptualized by differentiating between generations and offering comparison groups. This allows researchers to gauge how certain groups do in comparison to others. Disaggregating by generation has served as a fundamental key to assess groups longitudinally. Furthermore, assimilation theories are overwhelmingly the theoretical framework of choice which poses several challenges when assessing immigrant education, something that is addressed throughout this review. For example, the use of assimilation frameworks subscribe to problematic American standards of meritocracy, individualism, and deficit ideologies of communities of color and account for misleading factors that critique the progress (or lack thereof) of immigrant communities.

Therefore, the exclusive use of assimilation frameworks is problematic in today's society. The contemporary sociopolitical context around immigrants and immigration has contributed to the categorization, racialization, stigmatization, and criminalization of immigrants, particularly

those that are undocumented. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which the current sociopolitical atmosphere influenced the social identity of undocumented Latina/o youth and impacted their socialization and academic experiences and outcomes. The following research questions were addressed:

- 1) In what ways, if any, does the larger sociopolitical discourse on unauthorized immigrants and immigration have on the social identity (re)formation of undocumented Latina/o students? In what ways does this larger discourse magnify one's undocumented status?
- 2) How does an undocumented status impact social interaction with peers, teachers, staff, and strangers encountered in everyday life?
- 3) How do social relations with the aforementioned individuals influence academic experiences and outcomes?

Most of the education literature on immigrant youth does not discuss and/or briefly alludes to immigration status. Therefore, the majority of the literature discussed throughout this chapter broadly discusses the experiences and schooling of immigrant students. However, the plight of undocumented students is emphasized. First, I briefly describe the assimilation theories that are discussed throughout the review. Then, I present research on youth migration challenges and receptivity at the societal level followed by a discussion about their social experiences within schools. Lastly, I discuss immigrant youth school performance and outcomes.

### **Dominating Assimilation Theories**

Some scholars (Kusow, 2003; Polyzoi, 1985) have critiqued the overrepresentation of assimilation frameworks in studies of immigrants. Kusow (2003) highlights that the first researchers investigating immigrant experiences were not immigrants themselves and were mostly White males who subscribed to the growing assimilation theoretical framework.

Moreover, Kusow (2003) believes that the increase in ethnic researchers working with immigrant populations has spurred a controversy over assimilationist vs. ethnic retentionist perspectives.

As a Somali immigrant exploring the experiences of Somali immigrants in the U.S., Kusow (2003) addresses the complexities of being both an insider and outsider. He says, “This dialectic of simultaneously being an insider and an outsider is a familiar situation for the majority of immigrants” (p. 593) referring to the challenging and sometimes painful experience of losing aspects of the self that are rooted in our home countries while still never quite feeling fully welcomed in our new setting.

In her psychological study of Greek immigrants in Canada, Polyzoi (1985) critiques the existing literature on immigrants for their focus on determining degrees of assimilation given situational variables. Her observation of the overrepresentation of assimilation frameworks in studies of immigrants in both theoretical and empirical literature allowed her to recognize that this research, which usually relies heavily on surveys and other standardized measures, is not grounded in the concrete, everyday experiences of the individuals being studied. As a fellow immigrant, Polyzoi (1985) asserts that her intuition told her these frameworks were incomplete and static because the immigrant experience was being viewed through the lens of the receiving society. She writes, “The assimilation literature assumed that the immigrant experience was linear, that the end-product was more important than the process, and that experience could be compartmentalized through measurement with little loss to the immigrant experience as a whole” (p. 50). Moreover, she argues that a limitation of assimilation frameworks is that they only examine immigrant experiences upon arriving to a new country and often times overlook the importance of examining immigrant experiences before and during their migration (Polyzoi, 1985).

### ***Straight-line Assimilation***

The traditional assimilation theory, also referred to as straight-line assimilation, posits that assimilation is a one-way process by which each generation demonstrates a new stage of adjustment to the American way of life. For example, second generation immigrants will try to prove how American they have become while the third and later generations will strive to regroup their ethnic roots because their incorporation into the American mainstream is evident. Thus, any narrowing of economic or cultural differences can be regarded as evidence. As a result, ethnic ties become weaker the longer an immigrant is in the U.S. (Alba & Nee, 2003; Hirschman, 2001; Kasinitz, et al., 2004). However, this model does not account for discrimination in education which impacts the assimilation of immigrant youth (Telles & Ortiz, 2008).

### ***Segmented and Downward Assimilation***

Segmented assimilation theory argues that the individual characteristics of first generation immigrants, receptivity of immigrant groups, and the establishment of ethnic enclaves govern the form that acculturation will take for the first and second generations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). The second and third generation immigrants take notice of the disadvantages of their peers, family, and community, and exemplify resistance to assimilation due to feelings of hopelessness (Lutz, 2007). This model proposes that incorporation into the mainstream will be determined by class origins and human capital (Hirschman, 2001). It also argues that there are several pathways to assimilation for different groups. For example, some immigrants may achieve economic upward mobility and let go of their ethnic roots, while others may not (Alba & Nee, 2003).

Similarly, downward assimilation conceives that certain immigrant characteristics will contribute to a downward assimilation process in which little to no acculturation takes place (Alba & Nee, 2003). For the most part, phenotypically Black immigrants, such as Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and West Indians are more susceptible to this form of assimilation due to their skin color and/or race. Furthermore, this theory argues that immigrants who face overwhelming challenges in the new environment begin to associate themselves with the oppositional culture of natives, who are generally Black (Hirschman, 2001; Waters, 2000). Additionally, immigrants living in urban “ghettos,” which have low academic achievement and hold low-wage jobs are associated with this form of assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Latino immigrants are found to be overrepresented in such environments (Hirschman, 2001). Moreover, many new immigrants establish a distancing from native Blacks in order to prevent downward assimilation (Foner, 2000; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

These three assimilation frameworks have been consistently used to examine the experiences of immigrants in the U.S. since the 1930s. Alba and Nee (2003) push for a new theory that explains why assimilation is likely to remain a central social process in the adaptation of immigrants and their descendants and why it will encompass divergent outcomes in American society today. However, their theory does not elaborate on how social boundaries change but it does address some of the deficiencies in the traditional theories, such as: 1) deficient view of ethnocentrism, 2) assimilation being viewed as an inevitable direction, not an end result, and 3) lack in understanding the agency of *how* and *why* immigrants chose to “assimilate” (Alba & Nee, 2003).

Moreover, I would add that segmented and downward assimilation theories depict native Blacks as deficient because immigrants identified as having assimilated downwardly tend to be

compared to native Blacks. Also, I believe that these assimilation frameworks subscribe to problematic American standards of meritocracy, individualism, and deficit ideologies of communities of color and account for misleading factors that critique the progress (or lack thereof) of immigrant communities. These faulty beliefs overlook the role of systemic discrimination in the educational outcomes of immigrant youth of color. These various assimilation deviations measure adjustment based on social perceptions, interactions and outcomes that classify immigrants into stagnant categories. The face of U.S. immigrants today is different from the time in which these theories were conceptualized.

Previous generations of European and East Asian immigrants exhibited evidence of advanced assimilation, however, some scholars reject assimilation as an outcome of contemporary immigrant groups based on the differences in historical circumstances (Alba & Nee, 2003). Critics argue that the non-European origins of new immigrant groups makes assimilation less likely (Alba & Nee, 2003). The first major difference between old and contemporary immigrant groups is the absence of a significant immigrant hiatus since 1965 (Alba & Nee, 2003). However, the impact of the current anti-immigrant rhetoric coupled with the declining economy is yet to be seen. Nonetheless, I believe that these conditions contribute to the pressure immigrant youth experience to assimilate as rapidly as possible to the English language and U.S. cultural practices (Olsen, 2000; Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008).

### **Youth Migration Challenges and Societal Receptivity**

#### ***Psychological Implications of Youth Migration***

When considering the reasons why individuals emigrate to the U.S., economic, political, and religious freedom come to mind (Smart & Smart, 1995). Overall, one assumes that immigrants consciously choose to seek a better future. There is an abundance of opportunities



that attracts immigrants, particularly adults. They seek to provide their families with a wealth of opportunities that were not available to them. Yet, the progression to a “better life” comes with numerous challenges such as loss, separation, and discrimination among more. The profundity of such changes would impact anyone, especially youth, which eventually captured the attention of psychological research.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, psychological research began exploring personality traits, life experiences, cultural background, reason for migration (all before migration), stress of move (during migration), receptivity of country including laws, economic opportunities, social ideologies, pressure to acculturate, homogeneity of environment, fulfillment of expectations and aspirations (all after migration) (Morrison, 1973). Commencing in the 1970s, much more research began to explore the lives that immigrants led before migration and considered how this would impact their acculturation.

Eventually, research on immigrants began to examine the long-lasting effects of migration on children and youth. The initial expressions of joy and happiness evolved into sadness and disappointment, especially if a child was separated from loved ones such as parents and friends. The physical, psychological, and emotional impact of migration began to be thoroughly investigated. Researchers began to document the toll the pressure to assimilate had on immigrants. The euphoria often felt by recent immigrants then transitioned to feelings of helplessness and anger (Arredondo-Dowd, 1981).

One of the most distressing adjustments is having to leave behind the comforts of friends, family, jobs and schools. Leaving behind these important social support networks can be especially difficult for youth who rely on such individuals to make sense of who they are (Berry et al., 2006). Moving to a new country alone is a tremendous strain for a child, not to mention

starting at a new school. Smart and Smart (1995) found that acculturative stress has three aspects: 1) life-long duration, 2) pervasiveness, and 3) intensity. The intensity associated may be experienced in phases similar to the stages of coping with loss. An immigrant in particular may initially feel relieve at arriving safely into a new environment and hopeful at the economic prospects (Smart & Smart, 1995). However, upon settling, immigrants may face numerous stressors such as discrimination, exploitation, among much more which may lead to regret, anxiety and even depression (Smart & Smart, 1995). These factors could also possibly impact adolescent immigrants.

Immigrant children are most often found to exhibit behavioral disorders, identity conflicts, substance abuse and in some cases acute psychiatric dysfunction (Aronowitz, 1984; Blake et al., 2001; Hovey & King, 1996) while others have found them to be dedicated and determined to succeeding in their new homes (Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). The ongoing stressors may persist throughout an entire lifetime and may go through stages of pervasiveness and intensity. For those that are undocumented, the constant fear of deportation consumes their everyday lives. Smart and Smart (1995) state, “Their lives are pervaded by a sense of caution and mistrustfulness” (p. 329). The loss and/or confusion of identity coupled with lack of social support and everyday stressors can destroy the will and ability to cope with everyday events and responsibilities, not to mention the added pressure to acculturate.

### ***Societal Receptivity of Immigrant Youth***

By definition, acculturation is viewed as the unidirectional lifelong process of cultural and psychological adjustment that takes place after migration (Alba & Nee, 2003; Berry, 2006; Phinney, 2001; Smart & Smart; 1995). For Latino immigrants, a significant factor leading to

acculturative stress is the loss of social support as well as the pressure to learn the social rules and behaviors of the new environment (Berry, 2006; Phinney, 2001; Smart & Smart, 1995). The culture shock experienced also impacts self-identity and self-esteem which is intimately tied to interpersonal relationships. Individuals come to understand their role with family, friends and society at large through socialization and upon transplanting their lives to another environment, immigrants experience identity conflicts and question their social status within the social groups they are now associated.

Complementing Smart and Smart (1995), Berry et al. (2006) specifically looked at the acculturation of immigrant youth between the ages of 13 and 18 in an international study. Their findings suggest four acculturation profiles that are a reflection of assimilation frameworks: 1) integration, 2) ethnic, 3) national, and 4) diffuse. They also propose two adaptation profiles: 1) psychological, and 2) sociocultural. Findings imply that youth with an integrated profile—meaning there was a presence of both national and cultural identities and socialization with mixed groups—had the best psychological and sociocultural adaptation outcomes. They argue that youth should be encouraged to preserve their cultural and ethnic identity while also creating ties with their new environment. Supplementing these assimilationist profiles are the assimilated and marginalized identities proposed by Phinney et al. (2001).

Phinney et al. (2001) argue that ethnic identity is the subjective aspect of acculturation that deals with one's sense of belonging to social groups. During adolescence, youth have an interest in learning about their ethnicity, especially those that are marginalized (Phinney et al., 2001). They found that Mexican immigrants in southern California did retain their cultural traditions and felt welcomed by the larger society. Phinney et al. (2001) found that links between policies and ethnic identity were weak. They argue that attaining a bicultural identity is most

conducive to good academic performance. However, more research is needed to understand whether immigrant youth feel the same today despite the dominant anti-immigrant rhetoric of legislation such as Arizona's SB 1070 which has largely contributed to the criminalization of immigrants.

Padilla and Perez (2003) argue that acculturation is harder for individuals who are stigmatized for their race, skin color, language, etc. They refer to this as psychological acculturation which they define as, "the internal processes of change that immigrants experience when they come into direct contact with members of the host culture" (p. 35). Their model focuses on the constructs of social cognition, cultural competence, social identity, social dominance, and social stigma. Padilla and Perez's (2003) model holds social stigma at the center and assesses how skin color, language, ethnicity, and other factors assist acculturation. Padilla and Perez (2003) found that the more discrimination immigrants and their descendants experienced over generations strengthened their ethnic loyalty. Today, acts of racism and discrimination are more subtle, but it does not mean their institutionalization does not create limitations for new immigrants (Alba & Nee, 2003). In particular, the external characteristics of immigrants often make them targets of discrimination.

Bejarano (2005) found that U.S.-born Mexican youth distinguished U.S.-born youth from foreign-born youth based on style of dress and language choice. Based on these differences, students treated each other accordingly. Both groups had negative appraisals of one another that contributed to fights, exclusions and perpetuated the stereotypes of the greater society. Interestingly, Bejarano (2005) argues that there are distinctions in U.S.-born youth of Mexican descent and Mexican immigrant youth that many Americans do not see or understand but that are acknowledged among both groups. In society at-large, both Mexican descent and Mexican

immigrant youth shared similar experiences of discrimination. Therefore, Bejarano (2005) argues that school interactions are a central place where identity is created and shaped that leads to the reproduction of racial, ethnic and class divisions of society.

In order to understand the social experiences of undocumented youth, it is important to look at the power relations between dominant groups and immigrant groups. Padilla and Perez (2003) argue that social identity is constructed based on a collective frame of reference. For example, immigrants who are stigmatized based on visible characteristics that may lead to negative perceptions, such as skin color, accent, and gender, versus those with less visible characteristics such as, religion and sexuality, may be less willing to acculturate due to their belief that this stereotype will persist. The more discrimination immigrants and their descendants experience over generations strengthen their ethnic loyalty (Padilla & Perez, 2003). Therefore, people's reactions to us influence our behavior and identity and reasonably lead to our conscious control to expose or hide certain characteristics in order to manipulate the perceptions people have of us (Goffman, 1963; Robben, A.C.G.M., & Suarez-Orozco, M, 2000). Moreover, illegality is not a visible marker; no research has determined whether some students feel as if it is, be it via language use or dress. More importantly, it is necessary to examine how macro and micro social experiences impact academic experiences and outcomes for undocumented youth.

Suarez-Orozco and Todorova (2008) examined the ways immigrant children conceptualize achievement and how they attribute success and failure in their new environment through narratives. Using the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) they showed participants a card that depicts a boy gazing at a violin lying on a table in front of him and elicited narratives. The study shows that these students are very optimistic in the first year. In year one, 53 percent of Mexican immigrant children replied positively to the image describing the boy's ability as an

external impediment that could be overcome with the help of peers and others. In year five, 58 percent of participants discussed the challenge as an internal impediment and were concerned about failure also expressing a sense of alienation and lack of support. Clearly, over time, immigrant student experiences within and outside of school contribute to the conceptualization of achievement as doing for oneself. The perceived lack of support increases the bleak performance and outcomes of this student subgroup. These social perceptions of immigrants have resulted in legislation that further describes the future prospects of immigrant youth.

### **Recent Legislation Impacting Undocumented Immigrant Youth Education**

An undocumented status limits access to jobs, education, and other social benefits and relegates immigrants to the shadows of society where they live with a constant fear of deportation (Smart & Smart; 1995). Social interactions between immigrants and U.S.-born individuals shape public opinion around immigrants and immigration which result in legislation that end up negatively impacting the education of immigrant youth. As Calavita (1998) suggests, “despite the rhetoric of control and integration, immigration laws and policies have one conspicuous effect: Instead of controlling immigration, they control the immigrant” (p. 560).

In recent years, political debate has sprung when discussing access to public education for undocumented immigrant children. Discussions around this issue have mainly focused on policy and the economy. The two predominant arguments are as follows: the opposing side, argues that undocumented immigrants should not have access to any public services including education because they are breaking a law, while the proponent side argues that by allowing undocumented immigrants to attend K-12 and beyond as they await permanent residency, will give them the opportunity to fully integrate into this country. Below are brief descriptions of such legislation.

### ***Plyler v. Doe (1982)***

The *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court decision of 1975 struck down a Texas law that banned undocumented children from attending K-12 public schools (Flores 1984; Hutchinson 1982; Perry, 2006; Rangel, 2001; Yates, 2004). Recognizing that unauthorized children were innocent of their illegal entry, the court said, “We cannot ignore the significant social costs borne by our Nation when select groups are denied the means to absorb the values and skills upon which our social order rests” (as cited by Garcia y Griego, 1986, p. 79). Moreover, the decision states:

“[p]ublic education has a pivotal role in maintaining the fabric of our society and in sustaining our political and cultural heritage: the deprivation of education takes an inestimable toll on the social, economic, intellectual, and psychological well-being of the individual, and poses an obstacle to individual achievement” (as cited by Garcia, 2006, p. 264).

This statement affirms the notion that the lack of (quality) education for immigrant youth has a harmful effect on society at large and at the individual level as well. Moreover, Garcia (2006) writes, “undocumented students testify that their awareness that they will have limited opportunities for advancement after high school deters them from making the effort required to succeed in or graduate from high school” (p. 266).

### ***California’s Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540)***

AB 540 is a California bill that was passed in January of 2002, which allows undocumented students to attend college without having to pay out of state tuition, however, there are three requirements that students must meet. The first is to have attended a California high school for three or more years. Secondly, the student needs to have graduated high school or received a GED in California. Lastly, the student needs to be registered or enrolled in a California community college, State University or a University of California school. In addition,

the student must sign an affidavit with their institution stating that they will apply for legal residency as soon as they become eligible to do so (Oliverrez, et al., 2006).

### ***The DREAM Act***

The Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is a proposed legislation that will provide undocumented youth the opportunity to attain higher education as well as legal status. The DREAM Act proposes to amend a section of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) which prohibits undocumented students from accessing post-secondary education and federal financial assistance. Moreover, IIRIRA also harshly limits states from determining undocumented student eligibility for in-state tuition and other benefits. Therefore, the DREAM Act would return to the states the discretion to decide whether or not to provide in-state tuition to undocumented youth. Furthermore, this act would allow youth to begin the legalization process granted they fulfill the following requirements: 1) came to the U.S. before 16 years of age, 2) have lived in the U.S. at least five years since the bill's enactment, 3) have good moral character, and 4) have graduated from a U.S. high school. Once the student has applied for the DREAM Act, six years of conditional permanent residency need to be completed in order to file for legal permanent residency. There are two options provided: 1) enrollment with good standing in a college or university for at least two years or, having acquired a college degree, and 2) serving in the U.S. Armed Forces for at least two years (Abrego, 2006; Connolly, 2005; Garcia, 2006; Oliverrez et al., 2006; Stevenson, 2004).

### ***The California DREAM Act***

The California DREAM Act, passed in 2011, is composed of three bills, Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540), Assembly Bill 130 (AB 130), and Assembly Bill 131 (AB 131). The combination



of these bills permit eligible undocumented and nonresident documented students to pay resident fees at California public colleges and universities, as well as apply for and obtain state-administered financial aid such as university grants, community college fee waivers, and Cal Grants, and private scholarships through public institutions of higher learning. Eligibility provisions include the same requirements necessary for AB 540, that is: 1) have attended a California high school for at least three years, 2) graduate from a California high school or pass the high school proficiency exam, or received a General Equivalency Diploma (GED), 3) be enrolled in an accredited institution of higher learning in California. Undocumented students are required to submit an affidavit stating they have or will file an application to legalize their status as soon as they are eligible to do so. Lastly, in order to be considered for Cal Grants, applicants must meet the criteria for each.

Instead of filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), students wishing to qualify for aid based on the eligibility requirements listed above, must file the California DREAM Act application where they will supply parental income and asset information as well as other demographic information usually collected by schools.

### ***Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)***

As a result of relentless mobilization over immigrant rights and unjust deportations by the undocumented youth movement (also known as DREAMERS), President Obama made a historic announcement on June 15, 2012 that would change the lives of many. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protects eligible youth from deportation and provides work authorization and a social security number. It is estimated that 11 million undocumented immigrants reside in the U.S. (Department of Homeland Security). Recent studies by the Brookings Institute and Immigration Policy Center indicate that over half a million people have

applied for DACA nation-wide although roughly one million are believed to be eligible.

Presently, California ranks number one of all U.S. DACA applicants (Brookings Institute).

The ongoing mobilization and demonstrations around the DREAM Act and immigration reform in general shape the identities of youth (Portes, 2008). Defining identities takes place as a result of social interactions where youth become aware of who they are and who they are not. In reflecting on recent immigration events, Portes (2008) says,

“the divisive campaign had the unintended consequences of accentuating group differences, heightening group consciousness of those differences, hardening ethnic identity boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and promoting ethnic group solidarity and political mobilization” (p. 110).

The invisibility and well-being of undocumented immigrant students must be unveiled and must be brought to the center of educational reform (Gonzales, 2009). All immigrants are assets and not liabilities (Perea, 1997) whose dedication and determination makes them a resilient subpopulation in U.S. society today. It is imperative to begin to address and repair the challenges of undocumented immigrant youth in schools so that desired benefits such as: 1) decreased drop-out rates, 2) increased college-going rates, 3) increased legal/citizenship rates, 4) increased civic participation, 5) increased skills and competent labor force, 6) increased economic performance, 7) increased tax revenue, and 8) increased bilingual and bicultural citizens flourish.

### **Immigrant Youth Social Experiences within Schools**

#### ***Discrimination and Stereotypes of Immigrant Youth***

One of the ways in which immigrant youth are detected as such is through language use. Not only do recent immigrant youth have to adjust to their new surroundings but they must also

deal with a new school, new peers, and new teachers. A main hurdle for these students is learning English. Olsen (2000) argues that education occurs in a social and political climate and focuses on the debate of language use. The youth in her study described their school environments as intimidating and discriminatory. The immense pressure to learn English coupled with difficulties communicating with peers and teachers caused students to feel overwhelmed. Olsen (2000) describes students that are scared of being called on in class, who get headaches, and feel invisible. She writes, “using English becomes imperative—a protection against the embarrassment and shame of using their home language” (p. 198). Therefore, if students cannot speak English properly, they prefer not to talk at all because the humiliation that results is difficult to bare in an already unwelcoming and foreign environment. These students find a lack of caring teachers and peers that will assist them through their transition (Valenzuela, 1999). Furthermore, Olsen (2000) discusses that not only are ESL students being criticized by teachers and peers for their limited English skills, but are also condemned for not knowing slang either. In essence many students find themselves not knowing two important languages needed to interact with teachers and peers (Olsen, 2000).

Vollmer’s (2000) ethnographic study looked at how schools construct student identity based on their conceptions of the “typical” ESL student. Vollmer (2000) tried to understand the assumptions underlying such ascribed identities by analyzing the discourse among teachers and assessing how it affected student performance. The Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in the study consisted of Russian, Latino and Asian students. Despite the language challenges these students experienced, they all had goals of becoming successful members of society. Vollmer (2000) found that teachers thought Russians were the atypical ESL students. Descriptors such as mature, good relationship with authority, assertive, good sense of humor, and easy to talk to were

used to describe the Russian students. Furthermore, they were regarded as the new model minority because they made more of an effort to participate in the American high school experience. Also, the teachers thought that they were heading towards assimilation and upward mobility because they had “good backgrounds” which included prior education, parent participation, and middle class values. In this sense, the teachers acknowledged their individuality and unique characteristics and did not demote their academic potential based on racial stereotypes. Despite the fact that Latino students were the largest group, they were not discussed by teachers and the few occasions they were it was in negative terms. Therefore, the students were passive recipients of attributes that were imposed on them by the school community. Never was school context or teacher-student interactions discussed during the interviews.

Matute-Bianchi (1986) found five categories that were used by students and teachers to differentiate the large Mexican student population. Recently arrived immigrants were viewed as pleasant and eager to learn and their difficulties in school were attributed to their lack of English skills, whereas the Chicano and *cholo* (gangster) students were viewed as unsuccessful due to their lack of motivation and interest in school and were described as mistrusting and apathetic. Such labels were found to impact these students’ perceptions of success. Mexican descent students were also overrepresented in alternative schools that were less rigorous. Matute-Bianchi (1986) argues that socialization in schools contributes to navigational strategies that are anticipatory and reactive. In other words, based on the quality of their interactions with school personnel, students will anticipate their future and develop their skills accordingly in response to those expectations and stereotypes.

In contrast, the work of Abrego (2008) talks about how the mobilization of undocumented youth around California's Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540), unintentionally legitimized the social identities of these students. Abrego (2008) discusses that before the bill was passed, these students felt stigmatized making them feel different and vulnerable at all times. Informants likened the undocumented status to a scar that needs to be hidden because it causes shame. In her longitudinal study, Abrego (2008) found that the passing of this bill relieved stigma and thus lead to an acceptable social identity that empowered these students.

### *Negotiating Social Identities*

The social interactions immigrant youth experience not only impact their academic performance but also manipulate their ethnic and social identity (re)development. Much of the literature that examines the phenomenon of immigrant identity formation reflects the ideologies of assimilation frameworks which are problematic because they attribute success to those that identify as American or bicultural. On the other hand, those that held on to their Latino ethnic identity are found to be failures. For example, Lopez, Ehly, and García-Vazquez (2002) found that students that identified as being integrated and bicultural tended to have better achievement. Reflective of assimilation ideologies, their model measured degree and type of acculturation. They also used a two-culture matrix model in which youth fell into either of four quadrants: 1) acculturated, 2) unacculturated, 3) bicultural, or 4) marginal. Lastly, Lopez et al. (2002) also used the revised version of the acculturation rating scale for Mexican Americans (ARSMA) which has 5 levels: 1) very Mexican oriented, 2) Mexican orientated to approximately balanced bicultural, 3) slightly Anglo oriented bicultural, 4) strongly Anglo oriented, and 5) very assimilated/Anglicized. They found that the largest group at 48.3 percent of students fell into the "strongly Anglo oriented" category and 75.5 percent were identified as integrated high.

Moreover, these students also reported better experiences in school, in comparison to the 10 percent of participants that were “very Mexican oriented.”

Contrasting studies applying assimilation frameworks, Suarez-Orozco and Todorova (2008) apply a qualitative approach that highlights the complexity of immigrant identity development. In detailing the story of one student they address contrasting identities—one in the classroom and another in the streets. Despite having limited English skills and support systems, this student had created strong relationships with his counselors which kept him in school. Although he was not a citizen and continued to struggle with English, within one year of being in the U.S. he had begun to identify himself as American. As an immigrant, his identity had become a compilation of varying experiences. He maintained original customs from his native country, those from Black culture, and mainstream American culture. His migration, loss and separation, academic challenges and discrimination contributed to an adaptation of identity shift processes that go, “from wounded to empowered and back, from the frustration of the classroom to perceived competence in the street” (Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2008, p. 18).

Similarly, in an ethnographic study with youth from ages five to 14, Solis (nd) looked at the tools employed by undocumented youth to transform their social context and themselves. She specifically focused on how undocumented immigrants developed their identities based on their societal experiences as a means to understand the psychological functions of an “illegal” identity. Solis (nd) writes, “Illegality as an identity is theorized as the integration of societal and individual histories, rather than as separate, hierarchical, or linear progressions. Therefore, society and individual are dialectal dimensions of the history of identity as a psychological system” (p. 3).

Solis' (nd) take on youth identity development is in contradiction to traditional assimilation theories. She argues that external forces such as undocumented status, race and gender are adopted by individuals in order to characterize themselves. In other words, identity development is an ongoing process that is susceptible to material and social contexts. Illegality, therefore, is an identity that is formed from external circumstances that pre-exists people. In analyzing the text and illustrations of youth, Solis (nd) found that they did not define themselves by immigration status, but instead used other characteristics such as non-English speaker, New Yorker, age, as well as physical characteristics to define themselves. Through discussions, youth were able to demonstrate their knowledge of the social-historical contexts of immigration. They challenged the definitions of terms such as: immigrant, citizen, resident, legal, and illegal. The extensive conversations about such topics also shed light on social structures of power which simultaneously impacted the identification of immigrants and lead to a critical consciousness (Solis, nd).

The critical consciousness and empowerment that evolved from passing AB 540—a pro-immigration bill—improved the way undocumented youth felt about themselves and their place in society. As a result, students began to identify themselves, not as “illegal,” or “undocumented,” but as AB 540—a more socially acceptable label and identity (Abrego, 2008). Before the passing of this bill one informant was so fearful that he hid his status from strangers and even friends. His self-esteem and social identity had been damaged but after the passing of the bill he felt more comfortable disclosing his status. The collective identity of AB 540 increased his confidence in social situations. Abrego (2008) argues that although by law undocumented youth are seen as criminals, they continue to create spaces that legitimize their existence.

An undocumented identity, “comes to function as an identity when it is adopted by individual people for a purpose, such as to understand the organization of U.S. society and their own place of silence and invisibility in it” (Solis, nd, p. 3). This identity serves as a political and moral divider; some are validated as insiders that belong in the U.S., while others are identified as outsiders for breaking a law (Solis, nd). The socialization that immigrant students experience informs them that they are deficient, thus the labels, linguistic discourse, sheltered tracking, and discrimination leave students feeling inadequate. Trueba (1988) writes,

“It does not matter what the construction of reality is, or whose construction it is; what matters is that some people have the ability to control others, and that this ability is not directly related to language, or to any other psychological entity, but to the use of power and authority in the macrostructure” (p. 271).

This quote points to the hierarchy of groups and the unequal dissemination of power. For immigrant students, as Olsen (2000) argues, this is the politically charged discussion around language and unauthorized immigration ever so present today. Therefore, immigrant students, especially those that are undocumented, are left feeling powerless and looked upon negatively not only by their peers but by society as well which in turn negatively impacts their social identity and interactions. New immigrants do not know when to trust others because they cannot read their motives, Padilla and Perez (2003) write,

“Often, individuals who are cautious about revealing or displaying their social identity remain ‘in the closet.’ In other contexts (e.g. classroom), such individuals are deemed to be shy and to possess a poor self-concept. Thus, stigma represents a potential threat to individuals’ sense of safety...Stigma also denotes how we construe our social world” (p. 49).

## **Immigrant Youth Educational Performance and Outcomes**

### ***Immigrant Educational Aspirations***

Norrid-Lacey and Spencer (2000) asked undocumented students during their first year what they aspired to be and like most youth, common answers included doctors, lawyers and



teachers, yet as they progressed through their high school careers, many students grew ambivalent about their goals and found many limitations, especially their undocumented status.

In a study of recently arrived adult Mexican and Cuban immigrants, Portes, McLeod, and Parker (1978) examined their occupational, income, and educational aspirations. These three factors were compared to actual attainments. Two competing hypothesis on aspirations were tested: 1) rationality and 2) motivational. Findings suggest that current aspirations are set based on rationality of past attainments and skills. The rationality framework deals with the rational product of individuals past experiences and their assessment of their abilities and goals, which set levels of aspirations accordingly. Thus, there is a causal relationship. The higher the ratings of one's own experiences, the higher the future aspirations will be. On the other hand, the motivational needs framework emphasizes attitude and basic needs as sources of aspiration.

Portes et al. (1978) found that Cubans had more education than Mexicans but both fell short of the average education level in the U.S. English was found to be a significant factor for all three aspirations types for Mexicans, but only for education aspirations for Cubans. As a result of limited education and English proficiency, these participants, most of which were Mexican, sought unskilled, blue collared jobs. Thus, what becomes of the aspirations of adolescent undocumented immigrant youth? Does arriving in the U.S. pre-adulthood to an educational system that will only maintain them until the age of 18 affect their performance and career aspirations?

### ***Immigrant Academic Experiences and Outcomes***

Suárez-Orozco, Rhodes, and Milburn (2009) assessed the adaptation of recently arrived immigrant youth from Central America, China, Dominican Republic, Haiti and Mexico over a five year span. This comprehensive, interdisciplinary study known as the Longitudinal

Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA) evaluates the much talked about immigrant paradox which finds that length in the U.S. is associated with academic decline. Despite the strong family ties, high aspirations, and optimism immigrant youth possess, they face numerous challenges in their new society as discussed earlier. These conditions, Suárez-Orozco et al. (2009) argue, instill overwhelming fear that debilitates students' adjustment and academic performance.

Additionally, I would argue that the added stressor of fear of deportation for an undocumented student further complicates overall adjustment leaving students vulnerable of academic failure. However, much of the literature documenting student performance applies divisive assimilation theories.

Hirschman (2001) examined the educational enrollment of immigrant youth (ages 15-17) using census data exclusively. He argues that his findings support the segmented assimilation and immigrant optimism theories. He explains that Cuban immigrant youth are more likely to be absorbed into the U.S. Black population and identify as minorities rather than immigrants. Moreover, he found that phenotypically Black Cubans and Puerto Ricans had higher non-enrollment rates than their fellow White counterparts. Thus, there are several problems with such broad assumptions: 1) Native Blacks are viewed as deficit, and 2) no clear distinctions are made between a minority identity and an immigrant identity. Additionally, assuming and categorizing these youth into the "minority" or "immigrant" identities suggests a quantification of oppression.

Hirschman (2001) also examined factors such as family composition, residence, and SES. He found that students who lived with both or at least one parent had higher support to stay in school. Foreign-born youth were found to be less likely to live with parents. Hirschman (2001) found that the single most important predictor of enrollment was family composition. Students residing in inner cities were found to be at a disadvantage because poor schools have lower

educational aspirations that result in lack of social mobility. Hirschman (2001) also found that 39 percent of immigrants lived in inner cities, compared to 14 percent of native-born youth, although the number was low for Asian immigrants and Latino immigrants were overrepresented. The groups at risk of dropping out and with the highest non-enrollment rates were Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Salvadorian, and Guatemalan. On the other hand, Lutz (2007) also found that SES had the largest impact on high school completion among Latino immigrant groups. Using NELS data, she found that proficiency in two languages is associated with greater likelihood of high school completion. Using the segmented assimilation framework she suggests that Mexicans have higher dropout rates in comparison to Cuban and other Latinos because of SES.

Furthermore, interested in assessing the replication of educational advantages and disadvantages from the first to the second generation, Portes and McLeod (1996) examined the educational performance of second generation eighth and ninth grade Cuban, Vietnamese, Mexican and Haitian students. Findings suggest that SES, length in the U.S., and hours spent on homework significantly affected academic performance. Higher SES and attendance at a higher status school increased the average academic performance. Portes and McLeod (1996) found that parental SES and an established ethnic community had a significant independent effect on the education of the second generation. For example, Cuban and Vietnamese students were better off economically and performed above average in math despite school context while Mexican and Haitian students performed below average. Additionally, Cuban and Vietnamese reading scores were below average but were still better than Mexican and Haitian scores. Even though all parents had high aspirations for themselves and their children, the Haitian and Mexican parents had more doubts due to their economic status. This uncertainty was transmitted from parent to

child. The authors make the point that class and ethnic privilege are transmitted from one generation to the next. Vietnamese and Cuban parents were passing on optimism and growing assets. Clearly, SES heavily influences families and schools which in turn affected academic performance (Portes & McLeod, 1996).

Contradictory to the studies above, Fuligni (1997) looked at family background, and attitudes and behaviors that determine academic achievement of adolescents from immigrant families. He reported the academic attitudes and behaviors of students as well as those of their parents and peers. Findings suggest that only a small part of their academic achievement could be attributed to SES. Results suggest that first and second generation students received better grades in math and English and shared similar views of education with peers and parents. These same values were also important in understanding the variation in academic performance among immigrant students.

Duran and Weffer (1992) also echo Fuligni (1997). They found that family educational values affected the behavioral choice of participating in a math/science enrichment program. The authors argue that although immigrant students' academic performance is poorer than their U.S.-born counterparts, the strategies they employ in high school help them perform better on standardized tests, although the same was not found for grade point average. Contradictory to the findings of segmented and downward assimilation, Duran and Weffer (1992) found a positive relationship between length of residence in the U.S. and academic achievement. Although, the average residence in the U.S. of participants was nine years, the longer an immigrant had been here, the better their reading skills and thus their motivation for seeking out advanced classes. As a result of participating in a math/science program, ACT scores were high. Duran and Weffer (1992) argue that although most times immigrant students perform below their native-born

counterparts, their research shows that utilizing extra resources in high school allows them to perform better on standardized test. Although parents could not assist their children because of the language barrier, the strong educational values demonstrated in their program participation contributed to 25 percent to be at the top of their graduating class.

Padilla and Gonzalez (2001) found that first and second generation Mexican descent students reported higher grades than third generation students in college preparatory courses. Their work emphasizes the impact of age of arrival. Students who immigrated before the age of five had significantly lower GPAs compared to those who migrated after age 11. Like Duran and Weffer's (1992) study, these findings are not consistent with the literature. Most studies talk about the benefits in academic performance for students who immigrated as young children but they also rarely look into the education of these youth prior to settling in the U.S. As a result, there continues to be a disconnect that limits understanding and placement of immigrant students.

In my previous pilot work with undocumented immigrant high school students, participants explained the differences they perceived between their native schooling and their current schooling in the U.S. For the most part, most of them talked about how they had already learned a lot of the material they were presented, especially in math. Because these students were placed in ESL, by default they were enrolled in elementary math where they were learning how to add, subtract, divide, etc. in English which led to their disengagement. This detachment of immigrant students in poor and even patronizing curriculum shapes their futures. Many immigrant students get stuck in ESL programs with no opportunity for advancement, how then, will they achieve their goals? Matute-Bianchi (1986) argues that aspirations must be acted upon but falls short in addressing the numerous obstacles presented to undocumented youth.

One of the few studies specifically documenting the experiences of undocumented youth is the work of Norrid-Lacey and Spencer (2000). They interviewed and observed 70 Latino immigrants from their freshman through their senior year. All students were in ESL classes and some had been mainstreamed throughout their high school careers. Most had been residing in the United States less than two years. Their findings suggest that several structural and social factors contributed to the lower graduation rate and self-preservation in the ESL track. The impact of the following factors was assessed: language choice, ethnic identity, tracking, school staff, legal status, and graduation rate. However, the factor of utmost social concern to the students was their perceived lower status to other ethnic groups. Correlated with this was students' legal status, both these factors had profound effects on their academic trajectories. As they progressed through high school, their performance and aspirations dissipated. Clearly, none of the students would qualify for federal aid and regardless of their high school completion; the grim reality was that they would not find good employment either. In terms of graduation rate, we learn that out of the 70 informants: six transferred to other schools, 37 dropped out, one was expelled, one committed suicide, eight did not have enough credits to graduate, and only 17 graduated in four years resulting in a graduation rate of 27 percent.

This literate review provides an overview of research that focuses on immigrant youth in the U.S. We learn that upon migrating, youth face a myriad of challenges that undoubtedly affect their academic performance and futures. Adolescence is a complicated time in which youth begin to explore and solidify their identities, however, for immigrant youth this process gets convoluted by the additional psychological process of migration, such as dealing with loss, anxiety and depression. What is more, the discrimination they face in society, with teachers and peers makes these students vulnerable to failure (Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009). Not

to mention the unknown impact of the current anti-immigrant sociopolitical discourse. Despite these distressing barriers, researchers continue to assess immigrant adaptation based on western ideals of meritocracy, individualism, and middle class standards embedded in assimilation frameworks.

The almost exclusive application of assimilation lenses depicts immigrant students as deficient and unmotivated. Youth who have a strong attachment to their culture, ethnic identity, and native language continue to be cited as pathological impediments to academic success (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). This is an issue particularly for Latino immigrant groups such as Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican and Central American students who are continually found to be the worst performing immigrant groups (Alba & Nee, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Telles & Ortiz, 2008; Waters, 2000). Moreover, many immigration researchers fall short of sufficiently discussing the role of institutional and structural policies that affect the academic performance of immigrant youth. Factors such as politics, legislation, funding, equity, racism, discrimination, tracking, and cultural and linguistic hegemony often times go undiscussed. Student's schools, classrooms, and curriculum are reflective of this. Immigrant students are disproportionately attending poorly funded schools in inner cities (Hirschman, 2001). Classroom practices and pedagogy is often biased due to the stereotypic and deficit beliefs of some teachers. Curriculum is also biased and reflective of the dominant homogenous White society and history (Bernstein, 2007; Meyer, 2007). The goal then becomes holding schools, teachers, administrators, peers and curricula accountable for the negative internalization immigrant students are exposed to (Perez Huber et al., 2006).

Rist (2007) talks about this internalization in what he defines as a self-fulfilling prophecy in which students blame themselves for their failure. Because immigrant studies are

overwhelmingly comparative, immigrant students see other immigrant peers excel and begin to question their capabilities. For example, some of the cited studies found clear distinctions between several groups of immigrants. Asian and Cuban immigrants were found to possess characteristics that allowed them to assimilate faster, whereas Haitian, Mexican, Dominican and Puerto Rican immigrants did not have these characteristics. Interestingly, many of these expectations are often based on teacher stereotypes regarding social class, physical appearance, test scores, sex, race, language, and school records. Considering the deeply rooted U.S. history of anti-immigrant attitudes and legislation discussed in chapter two, it is no surprise that these ideologies continue to manifest themselves in schools. Today, the immigration debate continues to categorize, stigmatize, racialize and criminalize immigrants, and immigrant youth are paying the price.



## **Chapter 4: Guiding Theoretical Frameworks**

### **Methodological Influences**

Grounded Theory and Phenomenology are two similar qualitative methodological tools that shaped the methodology of this research study. Contrary to the positivist tradition, both of these methodological orientations employ purposeful sampling to get participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Because one participant can generate numerous concepts of rich data, large samples are not sought out especially for a topic that has not been investigated thoroughly such as my study. In addition, the data analysis phase, unlike positivism, prioritizes quality over quantity. For example, all participant data is analyzed thoroughly for emerging themes and concepts. The saturation of themes and concepts enables the researcher to build theory (Glaser, 2002). Overall, the goal of these two frameworks is to elicit the comprehensive stories of participants which are not to be generalized to the larger population (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser 2002 & 2004; Sanders, 1982; Stark & Trinidad, 2007). Below is a brief description of each method in order to familiarize the reader with the principles of each framework, however, a thorough discussion of their applicability will follow in the data analysis section of the methodology chapter.

### ***Grounded Theory***

Grounded Theory was first introduced in the 1960s as a form of qualitative inquiry originating in sociology, particularly, symbolic interactionism, which posits that behaviors, occurrences, and life take on meaning through the negotiation and understanding of our social interactions with others (Annells, 1996; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2004). These social processes include structures, codes of conduct, and procedures that define and characterize an emerging meaning. Given the stark differences in quantitative and qualitative orientations to

research, grounded theory emerged as a solution to the specific needs of qualitative researchers (Annells, 1996; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2004). Therefore, the purpose of grounded theory is to develop a set of explanatory concepts that provide a theoretical explanation of social processes within their natural environments (Annells, 1996; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2002, 2004). In other words, it examines the six C's of social processes outlined by Stark (2007): causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions, and finds relationships among them. For example, in this study the context was U.S. society and schools, the investigated "causes" was the rhetoric about "illegal" immigrants, and the "contingency" was student social identities.

### *Phenomenology*

Similar to grounded theory, phenomenology is a methodological practice for studies that are noticeably infrequent in the existing body of literature such as this study. Most simply stated, phenomenology is the study of conscious phenomenon that analyze the way in which things or experiences show themselves (Sanders, 1982; Stark, 2007; Van Manen, 1984). It searches for essences that cannot be revealed in ordinary observations and, "concentrates neither on the subject of experience nor on the object of experience but on the point of contact at which 'being and consciousness meet'" (Edie, 1962 as cited by Sanders). Supplementing grounded theory, phenomenology's qualitative application "seeks to make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experience" (Sanders, 1982, p. 353). For example, this study sought to explore the complexities of multiple socially and culturally constructed identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, etc.) and their influence on social identity. Phenomenology takes the approach that research begins with the researcher's intuition and insight of the studied phenomenon (Polyzoi, 1985). Therefore the researcher is charged with the task of conducting a

descriptive investigation of conscious phenomenon, both objective and subjective (Sanders, 1982; Stark, 2007; Van Manen, 1984).

## **Guiding Theoretical Frameworks**

### ***Social Identity Theory (SIT)***

Conceptualized by Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010), Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that inter-group relations influence social identity development. Grounded in social psychology, this theory examines how individuals behave due to their association with certain groups and examines the role of both group and individual identities. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) state four processes that individuals undergo: 1) social categorization, 2) awareness of social identity, 3) social comparison, and 4) search for psychological distinctiveness. Before detailing these four processes, I briefly discuss its origins.

Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) anchor their theory in Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RCT). RCT is an approach to looking at social relations, however, Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) felt that in-group identity was not prominently discussed in RCT but was instead regarded as an epiphenomenon or byproduct of another experience. In other words, the processes contributing to group identity in inter-group relations are not fully explored in RCT. Therefore, SIT was conceptualized to supplement RCT in order to understand the social psychology of inter-group relations and conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1999, 2006, 2010).

First and foremost, Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010), operationalize *interpersonal* and *inter-group* behavioral interactions. They define *interpersonal* as, “the interactions between two or more individuals that is fully determined by their interpersonal relationships and individual characteristics, and not at all affected by various social groups or categories to which they respectively belong” (1979, p. 34). An example provided to represent

this type of interaction would be a husband/wife. *Inter-group* is operationalized as, “interactions between two or more individuals (or groups of individuals) which are fully determined by their respective memberships in various social groups or categories, and not at all affected by the inter-individual personal relationships between the people involved” (1979, p. 34). A study related example of this is the political positions on immigration—proponents and opponents. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) preoccupied themselves with the empirical question concerning the conditions that determine one extreme or the other. Common knowledge would tell us, the more intense the inter-group conflict, the more likely it is that members of opposing groups will behave in relations to their group membership ideologies (i.e. presence of both anti-immigrant and pro-immigrant marches/demonstrations) rather than on individual or inter-individual characteristics.

In previous studies, Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) found that inter-group discrimination exists even with member anonymity. In the context of this study, I argue that an undocumented status not only impacts undocumented youth, but all Latina/o youth. As discussed in the introduction, illegal immigration has been racialized and therefore, any and all Latino/as in the U.S. may be labeled as such.

Tajfel and Turner’s (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) theory also discusses *social mobility* and *social change*, although not in sociological terms. They operationalize *social mobility* as, “the individuals’ belief systems about the nature and the structure of the relations between social groups in their society” (1979, p. 35). Moreover, they anchor their definition of social mobility on the assumption that society is flexible and permeable, allowing individuals unhappy with their social group membership the possibility to move from that group to one with more prestige. This assertion, I argue subscribes to ideologies of meritocracy and individualism, being two

misleading factors that critique the progress (or lack thereof) of immigrant communities. In particular, theoretical frameworks reflective of such ideologies are assimilation theories which dominate the literature on immigrant students in the U.S. This study investigated the perception of social relations and interactions based on the lived experiences of undocumented Latina/o high school, community college, and four-year university youth to assess their realities of social mobility.

Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) define *social change* as, “the nature and structure of the relations between social groups in the society is perceived as characterized by marked stratification, making it impossible or difficult for individuals, as individuals, to invest themselves of an unsatisfactory, underprivileged, or stigmatized group membership” (1979, p. 35). Given the topic of this study, evidence of this includes the political tactic of prolonging the standstill of the federal DREAM Act and immigration reform. For undocumented immigrants, these political decisions impart day-to-day challenges navigating society. Furthermore, a major characteristic of social change behavior is that with the relevant inter-group, individuals will not interact as individuals but will instead behave based on their membership to a group that stands in opposition to another group. Today, we see this in marches for immigration legislation in which people of different races and backgrounds mark group solidarity. Moreover, this study investigated how undocumented youth feel about the prescribed identity of “illegal.”

In addition, Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) argue that there are two overlapping continua with social consequences—group variability and uniformity—that inform perceptions of the “other” group. They argue, that when members of a group are nearer to the social change belief system as well as the inter-group behavior extreme, the more behavior uniformity they will show towards individuals in the relevant out-group. On the other hand, the

opposite extremes of both belief and behavior will be associated with greater in-group behavioral variability toward members of the out-group. In other words, the more close-knit a group identity with a goal for social change, the more they will all treat members of the opposing group the same way due to their group membership despite individual characteristics. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) cite that these extremes are seen when social movements aim at maintaining the status quo. Examples for the context of this study include the increase of ICE raids, deportations, anti-immigrant demonstrations, and increased border patrol, among more, as well as those creating social change, such as pro-immigration, DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform mobilization.

The antagonism created between both groups cannot be mentioned without undermining the role of unequal distribution of power, prestige, and wealth. Accentuating the social stratification that this leads to support previous work which has continually found that social relations between subordinate and dominant groups usually determine the identity of the subordinate individuals (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1999, 2006, 2010). Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) argue that according to RCT, the impact of low status on a marginalized group intensifies the antagonism toward the dominant group which results in pervasive ethnocentrism. For example, when a subordinate group questions or denies a presumed negative characteristic associated with low status, such as illegality, this reawakens a conflict which causes the dominant group to work harder toward the preservation of existing differentiations and the status quo. This leads Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) to a tentative hypothesis on inter-group conflict within stratified societies. They state, “An unequal distribution of objective resources promotes antagonism between dominant and subordinate groups, provided that the latter group rejects its previously accepted and consensually negative self-image, and

with it the status quo, and starts working toward the development of a positive group identity (1979, p. 38).” As a result, the dominant group works just as hard to keep their power. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) note that this hypothesis raises at least two theoretical questions: 1) What social-psychological processes are involved in the development of positive group identity? and 2) What are the conditions in which status differences between social groups are likely to enhance or to reduce inter-group conflict?

These two theoretical questions lead Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) to discuss *social categorization* in which they argue that belonging to two groups is enough to trigger bias favoring the in-group. The presence of an out-group provokes competition and discrimination but they fall short in addressing the circumstances under which it occurs. I argue that anti-immigrant attacks reach their peak during economic downturns which has been documented in research. What is more, Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) conceive *social identity* as,

“Cognitive tools that segment, classify, and order the social environment, and thus enable the individual to undertake many forms of social action. But they do not merely systematize the social world; they also provide a system of orientation for *self-reference*: they create and define the individual’s place in society. Social groups, understood in this sense, provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms. These identifications are to a large extent relational and comparative: they define the individual as similar to or different from, as ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than, members of other groups. It is in a strictly limited sense, arising from these considerations, that we use the term *social identity*. It consists, for the purposes of the present discussion, of those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (1979, p. 40).

Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) do not explain their notion of social categories and do not provide concrete examples of how social categories yield *social identity*. In addition, they operationalize groups as, “a collection of individuals who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of

themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership in it” (1979, p. 40). Similarly, they define inter-group behavior as, “any behavior displayed by one or more actors toward one or more others that is based on the actors identification of themselves and the others as belonging to different social categories” (1979, p. 40). With this in mind, they argue the following three assumptions:

- 1) Individuals strive to maintain/enhance a positive self-image.
- 2) Social group membership is associated with either positive or negative connotations. Consequently, according to these evaluations, social identity may be positive or negative.
- 3) One’s own group evaluation is determined by social comparison of other groups.

These three tenets lead Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) to propose the following theoretical principles of *social identity*:

- 1) Individuals strive to attain/maintain a positive *social identity*.
- 2) A positive *social identity* is based on favorable comparisons between the in-group and similar out-groups.
- 3) When *social identity* is negative, members will strive to leave the group for a better one or will work towards making their group more positive.

Moreover, they argue that there are at least three variables that influence group differentiation in social situations:

- 1) People must internalize their group membership and must subjectively identify with the group. It is not enough that others impose such labels on them.
- 2) Social situations must allow for group comparisons based on relational attributes.
- 3) The out-group to which they compare themselves to must be perceived as a relevant



comparison (they cannot compare themselves to every single group). Some measures include similarity, proximity, and situational salience.

At this point, it is important to readdress status hierarchies and social change from the earlier discussion. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) emphasize that status is an outcome of inter-group comparison and not merely a scarce resource or commodity. They argue that a low status does not promote competition directly but is instead mediated by *social identity* processes. For example, a member's subjective low status position will lead to less contribution for positive *social identity*. This study investigated how youth viewed and felt about their undocumented status and how this understanding shaped their identities. As conceptualized by Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) social identities include:

- 1) *Social mobility*: refers to trying to move up in life from a lower to a higher status group. It is important to remember that this is not a group goal, but an individualist need. This study asked participants about their future aspirations.
- 2) *Social creativity*: refers to group members redefining group identity for positive distinctiveness. This is a group (not individual) strategy that may rely on: a) comparing groups on new dimension, b) changing value of group attributes so that negative aspects are now viewed positively and c) changing the out-group and ceasing comparison to a high status group so that feelings of inferiority end. This study discussed whether undocumented students associated their status with a group membership.
- 3) *Social competition*: refers to a competition to reverse the positions of in-groups and out-groups. The work toward group goals causes conflict and the dominant group feverishly seeks to maintain their power. This study asked about inter- and intra-

group comparisons.

Although this theoretical framework thoroughly explains how social interactions shape *social identity*, it falls short in critically addressing the origins of such conflict. It discusses power, prestige and marginalization at a surface level and does not deconstruct the ways in which these factors have been institutionalized and legitimized in society as discussed in the introductory chapter. Additionally, Hurtado et al. (1994) argue that SIT is limited in discussing historical structures that set a foundation for social identity formation. Furthermore, the premise of this theory lays ideologies of meritocracy and individualism that are problematic and clash with the reality of immigrant communities. Moreover, Tajfel and Turner's (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) conceptualization of *social identity* does not unpack the nuanced complexities of the numerous social identities that make up the self as well as the complexities that arise from them. As a researcher, it is important for me to understand how these multiple identities intersect and negotiate the prescribed identity of "illegal." I argue that undocumented youth are socially categorized, which is a macro-social characteristic, but my study aimed to find out how undocumented youth compare and interact with others leading to their social identity (re)development, which is the micro-social characteristic investigated that informed and challenged Social Identity Theory. Using SIT as a guiding framework, I supplement some of the shortcomings with Critical Race and LatCrit Theory.

### ***Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit)***

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework originating in legal scholarship which investigates the marginalization of people of color in law that is used to theorize and examine the ways in which racism and other forms of oppression impact the lives of people of color and places at the center of analysis their lived experiences (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). CRT has

branched out into various disciplines such as Education (see Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Within education, CRT examines the ways in which racism, classism, sexism, etc. impacts the socioacademic structures, practices and discourses of students of color. Moreover, stemming out of CRT is Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) which specifically places at the center of analysis, the lived experiences of Latina/os and factors that are relevant to them such as race, ethnicity, language, culture, phenotype, and immigration status that may be overlooked by the predominance of the Black/White binary of racial discourse (Perez Huber, 2009b). Like CRT, LatCrit use narratives, counterstories and *testimonios* (testimonies) as sources of useful information that address real issues within the everyday lives of Latina/os. What constitutes reality for each individual is socially constructed and therefore CRT and LatCrit acknowledge that there are multiple realities in existence (Pizarro, 1998). Both CRT and LatCrit ask questions such as: How do institutional practices maintain racial, ethnic, gender and class discrimination? How do students of color resist such structures? CRT and LatCrit aim at answering these questions and more using five tenets:

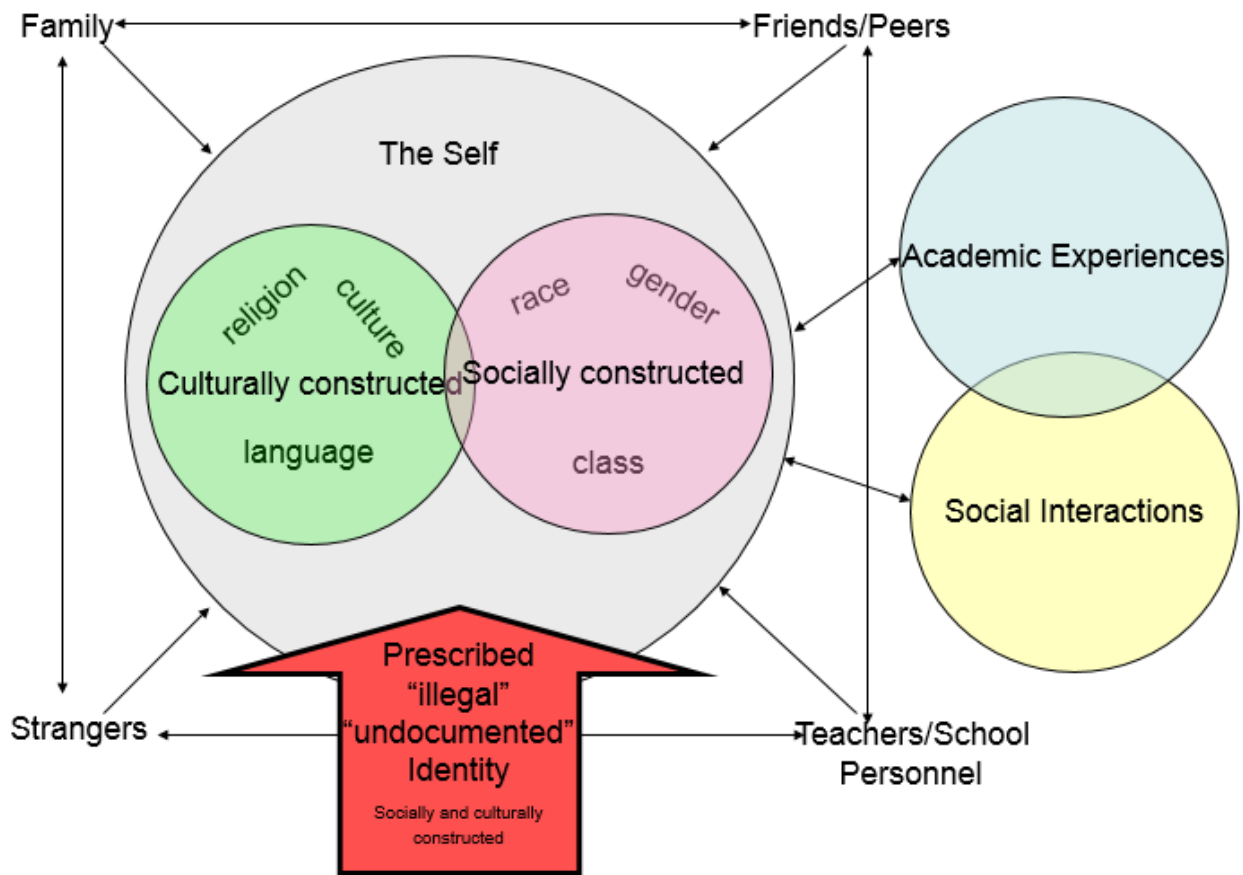
- 1) The centrality of race and racism: refers to analyzing the intersectionality of gender, class, language, culture, phenotype, surname, immigration status, and sexual orientation among more and how they result in discrimination. This tenet is key to this research study and embedded in my conceptualization of social identity discussed below.
- 2) Challenging dominant ideology: refers to questioning a set of beliefs set to justify racism. An example would be questioning societal status quos and empowering those that are seen as “other.” This study sought to challenge the consistent application of assimilation frameworks investigating the schooling of immigrant youth as well as

- the dominating stereotypes of immigrants as social leeches, criminals, etc., (Pizarro, 1998).
- 3) Centrality of experiential knowledge: refers to questioning whether there are sources that are not validated, such as the lived experiences of people of color. Emphasis is placed on listening to the perspectives of those who are too often silenced and/or marginalized. The repeated use of quantitative data within immigrant education studies led me to purposefully select a *testimonio* methodological approach in order to hear about undocumented youth experiences from the students themselves.
  - 4) Commitment to social justice: refers to the idea of working hard to endorse a solution to all forms of marginalization of people of color. It is my hope that the powerful data this study yielded will reach a wide audience of stakeholders that work with immigrant students and are actively involved in the immigration debate (i.e. politicians, educators, community members, activist, etc.) and will challenge the stereotypes they may have of (undocumented) immigrants in the U.S.
  - 5) Using a transdisciplinary approach: refers to applying the knowledge of various disciplines, such as ethnic and women studies, law, history and sociological studies to better understand the experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Solórzano and Yosso, 2001). This study is grounded in the disciplines of education, social psychology, sociology and history.

### **Visual Representation of Study**

Influenced by the tenets of both Social Identity Theory and CRT/LatCrit, I conceptualized social identity as the cognitive, sense-making process of negotiating the

intersection of ascribed<sup>7</sup> socially and culturally constructed identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, and sexuality, to name a few, with the prescribed<sup>8</sup> identity of “illegal,” “undocumented,” and “criminal” and how this intersection is informed/modified by social interactions and relationships with family, friends, peers, teachers, staff, and strangers encountered in everyday life.



**Figure 1: Social Identity Conceptual Model.**

Note: not an exhaustive list of ascribed social identities.

<sup>7</sup> Ascribed refers to characteristics an individual consciously recognizes and attributes to oneself (e.g. race, gender, language, sexual orientation, etc.)

<sup>8</sup> Prescribed refers to an appointed characteristic imposed on individuals such as “illegal/undocumented.”

Figure 1 above begins at the center with the self. For the purposes of this study, the self is an undocumented Latina/o student. For the self, I assume that youth have already developed and determined both socially and culturally constructed identities such as their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, etc. hence the two circles overlapping with the self. These ascribed social identities, meaning characteristics an individual consciously recognizes and attributes to oneself are intercentric, in other words, they are always intersecting with one another. Furthermore, as adolescents begin defining who they are, they are influenced by key individuals such as family, friends, peers, teachers, school personnel, and even strangers. For example, family members shape the culturally constructed identities we possess such as our language, our cultural practices and traditions, as well as our religious beliefs. Because a large part of our childhood and adolescence is spent at school, our friends and peers have a major impact on our sense of self as well. For example, many children learn bad words and slang from their school peers. For many students of color, school is also when they become aware of racial differences. Similarly, teachers and school personnel shape youth identity also. From teachers, youth also learn language—academic English. Moreover, through the politics of curriculum and pedagogy, teachers may also pass messages of gender roles and race relations. Lastly, the strangers youth interact with on a daily basis may have less of an impact on their identity development; however, some of the messages discussed above can be reinforced through daily contact with all individuals who cross a youth's path. It is important to note that I see these four groups as connected. In other words, the language and mannerisms we learn from our peers may be corrected by parents and teachers and so forth. As social beings, the role that each group plays is informed by the actions and behaviors of others. Moreover, the saliency of certain ascribed identities influences our social interactions and academic experiences—hence the two circles

outside the self. Social interactions and academic experiences are overlapping because who we befriend and how we socialize shapes our schooling. In addition, undocumented Latina/o youth in the U.S. are prescribed—meaning an appointed characteristic imposed on individuals—an “illegal,” “undocumented,” “criminal,” etc. identity that is often times perpetuated by the individuals in the youths social circle such as friends, peers, teachers, school personnel, strangers, and sometimes even family. Therefore, the focus of this study falls in the intersecting section of all four circles.

## Chapter 5: Methodology

The unique topic and perspective of this study contributes to the bodies of literature on social identity and immigrant educational performance and adds to the knowledge gap about this student population within the K-16 system. The purpose of this research study therefore was to investigate the ways in which the current anti-immigrant sociopolitical discourse on immigrants and immigration impacts the social interactions and relationships of undocumented Latina/o high school, community college, and four-year university students, thus shaping a social identity. In addition, I explored how this social identity influenced their academic experiences and outcomes. My hope is that the *testimonios* (testimonies) my participants shared provide insight and understanding into the complexities of being an undocumented person and student in the U.S. today. Using qualitative inquiry, the following research questions were addressed:

- 1) In what ways, if any, does the larger sociopolitical discourse on unauthorized immigrants and immigration have on the social identity (re)formation of undocumented Latina/o students? In what ways does this larger discourse magnify one's undocumented status?
- 2) How does an undocumented status impact social interaction with peers, teachers, staff, and strangers encountered in everyday life?
- 3) How do social relations with the aforementioned individuals influence academic experiences and outcomes?

I open this chapter by discussing my positionality as the researcher. Then, I thoroughly discuss site and participant selection after which I discuss the data collection and analysis procedures. Lastly, I close with a discussion of the study's strengths.



## **Positionality of Researcher**

Before discussing the plan of inquiry for this study, I believe it is important to disclose my positionality as the principal investigator. As discussed in the prologue, I was an undocumented student throughout my K-12 education. This lived experience shaped my social relationships, my educational trajectory, and has greatly informed this research study. Baca Zinn (1979) argues that there are advantages and disadvantages of being considered an “insider” within the communities we study. She argues that researchers that share background with study participants have some empirical and methodological advantages. Baca Zinn (1979) writes, “The most important one is that the ‘lenses’ through which they see social reality may allow minority scholars to ask questions and gather information others could not” (p. 212). The insight I have gained through my personal struggle with illegality and my processes of understanding social and political ideologies about immigration are reflected in my methodology. The formulation of my guiding protocol, chosen technique for data collection, and analysis procedures are also a reflection of my research principles. Moreover, these insights coupled with sharing my personal story, and being bilingual in English and Spanish were advantages that reduced the understandable distrust participants may have of unfamiliar people. However, the dichotomy of insider and outsider is not so clear cut.

Several authors have complicated the notions of insider and outsider (Chavez, 2008; Gans, 1999; Irvine et al., 2008; Kusow, 2003; Witcher, 2010). Irvine et al. (2008) argue that one’s role as researcher and insider becomes blurred contributing to objectivity challenges. Challenging the positivist tradition of objectivity, Chavez (2008) argues that being an outsider is not as optimal as many believe. She believes that biases of both insider and outsider researchers

seep through the research process and analysis. Echoing Irvine et al. (2008) and Chavez (2008), Kusow (2003) also challenges the insider/outsider categories, specifically in immigration research. He argues that these categories are multidimensional and situational and are based upon various social identities. Intimately related to the objectives of this study, Kusow (2003) asserts that,

“The issue at hand is whether we use religion, political identities, and the degree of conflict between groups, gender, race, nationality, or some other category to determine who is an insider or who is an outsider... These considerations lead me to assert that we must not see insider/outsider identities as predetermined roles but rather as a result of the nature of the research topic under investigation, the status characteristics and biographic particularities of both the researcher and the participant(s), and the local conditions in which the fieldwork takes place” (p. 598).

Moreover, Kusow (2003) believes that insider/outsider categories emerge and become defined through the research process, which links researcher and participants in a collaborative process of meaning-making.

To mediate the complexity of the insider/outsider dichotomy, Irvine et al. (2008) and Witcher (2010) encourage researchers to practice reflexivity throughout the study in order to overcome these challenges. Nonetheless, I lived five years as a permanent resident and the last seven years as a U.S. citizen, which have afforded me numerous privileges that current undocumented people do not have, such as driving, traveling, and access to federal financial aid, among more. Moreover, I find it extremely important to disclose the recognition of my numerous privileges as a documented *Mexicana* in higher education. The recent surge in anti-immigrant political rhetoric (2005 HR 4437, 2010 Arizona’s SB 1070) exert devastating surveillance on immigrant communities that I no longer experience, contributing to a potential disadvantage. However, throughout the process of completing this dissertation, I constantly reflected on my study’s goals and objectives. For example, I struggled with my assumptions about schools

perpetuating the social stratification of immigrants and documented these thoughts and ideas in dated memos. Engaging in theoretical memoing is essential for grounded theory because memos are an integral part of the formulation and revision of theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

## **Plan of Inquiry**

### *Site Selection*

For this research study, site selection criteria included high schools, community colleges, and universities within Southern California. At the high school level, I targeted schools with a critical mass of Latina/o students using the California Department of Education website as a resource. Upon finding local schools, I looked up their staff directory and sent emails to a handful of teachers, counselors and principal inquiring about the possibility to recruit students for my project. Although a lot of emails were never returned, those that did reply either said they would not grant me permission or requested that I secure the appropriate clearance from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), at which point I submitted my proposal to the Committee for External Research Review and was approved. Of the ten schools I reached out to, I was able to recruit students at three Los Angeles high schools. The last high school participant attended school in Santa Barbara, California and was recruited through my personal network.

Through a friend, I was put into contact with an immigrant's rights and advocacy group at a community college in Los Angeles. After a meeting with the club chair where I discussed the objectives and purpose of my project, she allowed me to make a recruitment presentation at one of their meetings.

Lastly, three four-year universities were selected for recruitment given their accessibility. Two institutions are part of the University of California system and one is private, however, although having been granted permission from the chair of the immigrant's rights and advocacy

group at the private school, recruitment never ensued due to conflicting availability. The two universities students were recruited from were UC's in Southern California.

### ***Participant Selection***

Study participants had to self-identify as Latina/o<sup>9</sup> and undocumented and had to be attending a high school, community college or four-year university in Southern California. I recruited a total of twelve gender-balanced participants (4 in high school, 4 in community college, and 4 in university) that reflected a diverse juncture of identity and academic stages of undocumented students under the age of 25. Examining experiences within three distinct educational levels can help determine what educational institutions can do to improve the experiences of their respective student population. Recruitment for participants consisted of the following techniques:

- 1) After securing complete access from the appropriate individual(s), I set up a time to give a recruitment presentation in which I forged an intimate connection to students by sharing my own *testimonio* (testimony) of my experiences as an undocumented student throughout my K-12 education. Vickers (2002) refers to this practice as “researchers as storytellers,” in which they engage in the taboo practice of sharing their own experiences. Vickers (2002) acknowledges that as researchers, we are fully (analytically, methodologically, and theoretically) prepared to write about others life experiences but do not do the same for our own. She describes this practice (or lack thereof) as “underrated, dismissed, and trivialized, especially as a useful, deliberate, and provocative approach” (p. 611). I recognized the importance in reciprocity given

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term Latina/o as a pan-ethnic umbrella which includes ancestry, nativity and/or political identification with regions including Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean.

the sensibility and vulnerability of my research topic, therefore, if I asked youth to expose their lives with me, the least I could do is share my story with them (Vickers, 2002). I then connected my *testimonio* to the objectives and goals of the study. I emphasized participant privacy and anonymity by affirming that pseudonyms were assigned and no other identifying information was collected. All students were given a bilingual research information sheet with detailed study information and my contact information. To protect student privacy during presentations, interested participants were instructed to contact me directly via email or phone. Per IRB's request, participant oral consent was obtained in lieu of a signature. However, for high school students under the age of 18, a bilingual parental consent form outlining the objectives and study procedures was sent home.

- 2) Another strategy used was sending an email to my personal contacts and asking them to forward it to any people or groups they think may be interested. The email was brief but included a short *testimonio*, and brief description of the study, commitment and compensation. All participants were paid five dollars cash for each session. Upon hearing back from students, I first answered any questions and scheduled the first *testimonio* session. All sessions were conducted in a place where the student felt comfortable, such as an empty classroom, the library, their home, or eatery.

### ***Chosen Method and Data Collection***

Communities of color are recognized as natural storytellers (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Passed from generation to generation, oral histories sustain culture, values, and language, but also valiant stories of struggle, resistance, trauma, and displacement that are common among marginalized communities (Angueira, 1988; Benmayor, 1988; Brabeck, 2003). For example, the

historical denial of testimony by slaves and free Blacks against Whites in court, rejected the voices, experiences, and histories causing the further subordination of Blacks (Howard, 1973). However, these exact same testimonies are inserted in academic discourse and are used to disprove and challenge knowledge that is accepted as fact (Bailey, 1980; Blassingame, 1975). Testimonies continue to thrive in spaces like Black churches that impart therapeutic closeness, solidarity, and resiliency (Griffith, et al., 1984). For this research, it is important to contextualize the way I use testimony to include the movements of young Latina/os testifying before Congress to urge for the passage of the federal DREAM Act and comprehensive immigration reform. These counterstories take an assertive stand against the dominant stereotypes of immigrants as lazy, law-breaking, social leeches. These powerful stories of struggle and resiliency need to be documented and incorporated into academic scholarship. Therefore, *testimonios* (testimonies) were purposefully selected as the primary data collection strategy.

The incorporation of *testimonios* as a methodological tool for academic research, challenges traditional westernized methodological practices because it moves towards a social justice-based research that is guided by the participant and not the researcher. This method is unlike traditional in-depth interviews because it privileges the storytelling ability of participants and maintains its integrity by limiting interpretation (Haig-Brown, 2003). Suited to this research, *testimonios* are recognized as, “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (Perez Huber, 2009a, p. 644). This method is appropriate for this research because currently there is a shortage in qualitative research documenting the life experiences of undocumented students in K-16. Given

the continued social and political attacks on immigrant communities, there is no better time to voice their experiences.

*Testimonios* were audio-recorded in one or two sessions of approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in length. The *testimonios* focused on the students' schooling experiences in their home countries (if applicable), their migration, their social experiences in the U.S. and school, and future academic and personal aspirations. For example, I asked students: "Let's talk about what factors led you (or your family) to migrate to the U.S.," "Let's talk about your social interactions at school. What type of people do you socialize with the most?" and "Let's talk about where you see yourself in five years." Opening up *testimonios* with broad statements such as "let's talk" constitutes both collective and individual lives that allowed my participants and me to have a dialectic conversation about our similarities as immigrants and invited participants to share how events have constructed meaning for them (Gutierrez, 2008; Pizarro, 1998).

Polyzoi (1985) highlights the importance of learning about our participants prior experiences in order to understand their present and futures. Polyzoi (1985) states,

"By examining this initial domain of the immigrants' experience, an attempt was made to identify a principal basis of comparison from which both I and the reader could then better understand the immigrants' subsequent experiences. The importance of the immigrants' home-world was also perceived as a major contributing source in the formation of the immigrants' familiar frame of reference from which they then move towards establishing a new scheme of interpretation" (p. 54).

Moreover, in line with the four processes of Social Identity Theory: 1) social categorization, 2) awareness of multiple identities, 3) social comparison, and 4) search for psychological distinctiveness and the theoretical tenets:

- 1) Individuals strive to attain/maintain a positive social identity.
- 2) A positive social identity is based on favorable comparisons between the in-group and similar out-groups.

- 3) When social identity is negative, members will strive to leave the group for a better one or will work towards making their group more positive (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1999, 2006, 2010).

I probed to get answers to the following questions:

- 1) Do undocumented students view themselves as categorized? If so, on what terms and factors?
- 2) Do undocumented students compare themselves to others? If so, based on what conditions (i.e. driver's license, financial aid, etc.) Outside of such features are there certain groups they compare to?
- 3) What groups do undocumented students associate with? How do they feel about their group prescribed identity (being undocumented)?

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis phase of this study drew on grounded theory and phenomenology analytic approaches. In line with the methodological practice of *testimonio*, the sharing of an authentic narrative of a life-long journey helps both the researcher and participant theorize and co-construct stories of struggle, survival, and resistance (Perez Huber, 2009a). Thus, after each *testimonio* was conducted, it was transcribed and reviewed for emerging themes. The emergence of *testimonio* themes was then documented and refined on an excel sheet. For example, categories such as identity, social relations, and educational experiences and corresponding codes such as race, class, gender, friendships, family, and challenges emerged across *testimonios* from the data. In reporting the findings of this research, each code was contextualized for each participant by sharing their unique example. The goal of the analysis phase was to capture the individual experiences of participants yet highlighting the commonalities in all their experiences.



In the analysis phase, I paid close attention to social categorization and group membership because they were likely to require the most negotiation and psychological work, thus in a school context this came across when and with whom students interacted with and under what circumstances. I also paid attention to the described interactions and relationships students have with the individuals in my model in order to assess what individuals have more of an impact on their academic experiences and aspirations.

Witcher (2010) talks about the predicament of data transcription and highlights the approaches in the positivist and interpretivist traditions. The positivist approach would engage in the verbatim transcription of data which yield an exact reproduction of speech events. However, the interpretivist approach would view transcription as a contextual process that assists with theoretical construction rather than an objective representation of the data. For the purposes of this study, I engaged in both the positivist and interpretivist approaches to transcriptions. One noted limitation of transcribing data is that it does not pick up on non-verbal cues, emotions, and tone in voice, etc. (Witcher, 2010). To mediate this, I tried to jot down my observations of these factors right after each session with participants.

Qualitative analysis of transcripts requires reviewing for emerging themes because data collection and analysis are interrelated processes. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990) analysis begins as first data is collected and can guide the next session. Every concept discovered was considered provisional and earned its way to building theory upon being presented repeatedly. Identified concepts are the basic unit of analysis. Reported incidents were taken as potential indicators of the phenomenon under investigation and thus were tentative concepts. Finding similar incidents that can fit under the concept is when theorists have units for theory building. Categories are higher and more abstract than concepts but are also created as are

concepts. Categories are the cornerstones of theory building. Moreover, the groupings of concepts form categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Therefore, the analysis of each *testimonio* was conducted in two phases. In accordance with grounded theory and phenomenology, preliminary codes were created in order to facilitate analysis. First was the decontextualizing phase, where I separated data from the original context of each participant and assigned codes to emerging themes across *testimonios*. Second was the recontextualizing phase, where I examined the coded patterns and contextualized them for each participant (Stark, 2007). In other words, primary codes were created to capture larger themes (e.g. identity, social relations). To capture the nuances of these larger themes, I focused on concrete examples drawing from individual *testimonios* that helped draw relationships across all narratives. Several methodologists (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser, 2002; Stark, 2007) argue that data analysis involves three stages:

- 1) Open coding: refers to examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data. This is a process in which data is broken down, interpreted and analyzed. For example, in this study, I conducted open coding by comparing and contrasting the events, actions, and interactions of each participant and creating preliminary codes. Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest that engaging in this type of coding protects against biases by forcing the researcher to examine preconceived notions against the data itself.
- 2) Axial coding: refers to grouping data based on relationships and patterns within and among the categories identified in the data. Moreover, relationships among the created categories and codes were evaluated and refined. This stage in my data analysis allowed me to assess whether my conceptualization of social identity

stands. Presented against the data, my conceptualization needed to be consistently present across *testimonios*. If my data did not yield sufficient evidence in support of my conceptualization, I took note of the prevalent themes that sustain a thick description of the complex and nuanced experiences of undocumented Latina/o youth today. Hypotheses about relationships among categories and codes were developed and verified throughout the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Glaser (2002) argue that two of the most important properties of conceptualization for generating grounded theory are: 1) concepts are abstract of time, place, and people. It is important to note that my participants were not what I was categorizing, their experiences were what counts, and 2) concepts have enduring grab. In other words, when we locate and contextualize our study, grounded theory loses its abstraction and generalizability (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

- 3) Selective coding: refers to identifying and describing the central phenomenon in the data. This process included unifying all created categories around a “core” category—that represented the central phenomenon, which was social identity for this study. Corbin and Strauss (1990) state, “The more abstract the concepts, especially the core category, the wider the theory’s applicability. However, no theory that deals with social psychological phenomenon is actually reproducible in the sense that new situations can be found whose conditions *exactly* match those of the original study, although major conditions may be similar” (p.15). Moreover, each category is filled with detail to describe it. Corbin and Strauss (1990) emphasize the importance of integrating broader structural conditions (e.g. economics, culture, politics, etc.) impacting the studied phenomenon into the analysis. This is a way of

ensuring that the studied phenomenon is scrutinized from a macro down to a micro perspective which was the overall goal of this study.

The goal of the data analysis phase was to achieve theoretical saturation; in other words when range of themes that inform theory was represented (Stark, 2007). Moreover, another goal was to strive to capture the individual conscious experiences of participants by understanding their sense-making processes which produced a critical review of collected social experiences further informing my investigation of undocumented youth social identity (re)development.

Another important aspect of the data analysis phase, and more generally the data collection process, was the use of researcher memos. Both grounded theory and phenomenology subscribe to this practice (Sanders, 1982; Stark, 2007). The notion of epoché (Sanders, 1982) refers to the idea of bracketing or setting aside the constant and present researcher biases, beliefs, preconceptions, and assumptions. Being honest about these factors allowed me to recognize my prior knowledge and experience while understanding their potential implications for my study results. Therefore, I participated in reflective memoing in order to be analytically open to participant narratives. The memos operated as an audit trail because I was able to see the evolution of my own consciousness and see how they have shaped my study (Sanders, 1982; Stark, 2007).

### **Study Limitations**

The overall goal of this study was to address and shine light on the multiple socially and culturally constructed identities that shape the socialization and educational experiences of undocumented youth. Our social identity is composed of our lived experiences and our multiple ascribed identities. Most importantly, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalizable to all undocumented youth in the U.S. Both grounded theory and phenomenology

emphasize that more subjects do not yield more information and therefore quantity should not be confused with quality (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Sanders, 1982; Stark, 2007). I want the untold *testimonios* of these youth to compose a story in which the reader can immerse themselves in these stories.

The vulnerability of undocumented people and understandable mistrust of individuals has made researching this population challenging. Empirical data on undocumented students has been elusive. Since study participants were raised and were receiving their K-16 education in Southern California, my research findings are limited to this context. In addition, my research focused solely on students that self-identify as Latina/o. Conversely, the small sample size and qualitative approach pose a challenge toward the positivist tradition of generalizing research findings. Firestone (1993) argues that generalization requires extrapolation that cannot be fully justified in academic research so readers must always be critical about these claims. This study follows analytic generalization whereby I strive to generalize my results to a broader theory and not a population. Generalizing to a theory provides evidence that either supports (not prove) or pushes a theory, in this case, Social Identity Theory (Firestone, 1993).

Moreover, the practical implications of this research were also contextualized to the research sites. There is something to say about the sites that did not want to participate in this research versus those that did. I would describe the research sites as welcoming, helpful and receptive to the feedback of their undocumented student population.

### **Study Strengths**

First and foremost, my passion for this research stems from my personal experiences as a former undocumented youth. Therefore, this subjectivity was represented in my research questions, choice of theoretical frameworks, and plan of inquiry. Having previously experienced

some of the challenges study participants shared encouraged and empowered me to conduct powerful research that challenges existing theoretical frameworks (assimilation) and methodologies (quantitative). This qualitative study centered student *testimonios* to challenge and expand the overwhelming quantitative research on immigrant youth in schools that moreover, rarely address or acknowledge the experiences of undocumented youth. This is a strength of my chosen methodology. In addition, I believe my characteristics as a bilingual *Mexicana* made it possible to build rapport with participants.

## Chapter 6: Participant Backgrounds

This dissertation focused on the identity, social relations, and educational experiences of twelve participants, four high school students, four community college students, and four university students (please see table 1 for a summary). Before presenting study findings, this chapter aims to provide some background information of participants and highlights excerpts about crossing the border, parental employment, and how they found out about their immigration status.

**Table 1: Participant Background Information**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Birthplace</b>	<b>Form of migration</b>	<b>Age of migration</b>	<b>Family Composition</b>
<b>Jennifer</b>	14	High School	Puebla, Mexico	Crossed the border	1	Mixed status
<b>Yazmin</b>	16	High School	Guanajuato, Mexico	Used other child's passport	3	Mixed status
<b>Giovanny</b>	18	High School	Guerrero, Mexico	Used other child's passport	3	Mixed status
<b>Pedro</b>	18	High School	Michoacán, Mexico	Used other child's passport	Infant	Mixed status
<b>Yadira</b>	22	Community College	Puebla, Mexico	Crossed the border	15	Undocumented
<b>Jazmin</b>	22	Community College	Baja California Norte, Mexico	Used other child's passport	5	Mixed status
<b>Martin</b>	20	Community College	Jalisco, Mexico	Visa	15	Undocumented
<b>Jose</b>	25	Community College	Distrito Federal, Mexico	Crossed the border	2	Undocumented
<b>Blanca</b>	19	4-year University	Guanajuato, Mexico	Crossed the border	2	Mixed status
<b>Daniela</b>	21	4-year University (transfer)	Jalisco, Mexico	Visa	7	Undocumented
<b>Alejandro</b>	18	4-year University	Michoacán, Mexico	Crossed the border	5	Mixed status
<b>Juan</b>	23	4-year University (transfer)	Guanajuato, Mexico	Used other child's passport	7	Mixed status

When I asked participants to share their background with me, all of them began by sharing their family's migration story. In line with literature on the push and pull factors leading to emigration, all participants identified poverty, lack of employment, family separation, and seeking a better life for a growing family as reasons for migrating to the U.S., such as in the case of Yadira, a 22 year old community college student, who discussed the circumstances she faced in her native Puebla, Mexico.

“I'm part of a low income family and basically we moved from Mexico to the United States because of my dad. He was here [in the U.S.] before so we were separated and my mom wanted to actually live with him. She wanted to live together and because we were facing economic struggles, we decided to move to this country. In Mexico the situation was financial, it's hard, like the jobs, it's not easy. In Mexico you have to pay for school, you have to buy uniforms, you have to buy school supplies, everything. You have to pay for it and it was expensive so we decided to move for that reason. We thought everything was easier here in the United States and there are more opportunities so that's the reason.”

All twelve participants were born in Mexico and half migrated to the United States prior to their fifth birthday. The majority of participants immigrated to California with the exception of Alejandro, a four-year university student who briefly lived in North Carolina before settling in Visalia, California. Participants grew up in several California counties: Los Angeles, Ventura, Santa Barbara, Tulare, and Alameda. At the time of data collection, all participants were students in Southern California high schools, community college, and four-year universities.

Common to the testimonies of undocumented youth throughout the nation, study participants had no role in their family's plan to emigrate to the U.S. The Mexican states students were born in include: Guanajuato, Guerrero, Baja California, and Jalisco which are recognized as leading states of emigration. Moreover, the migration process of participants included: using another child's passport, crossing the desert, or overstaying a visa. Below are some experts of how these youth crossed the border.



## Crossing the Border

Some of the parents of study participants were transnational migrants in their adolescence, traveling to and from Mexico before finally deciding to settle in the United States. Characteristic of the average immigration story, usually the father migrated to the U.S. alone to secure work and establish housing prior to reconnecting with the rest of the family. The process of transnational migration for undocumented people usually consists of dangerous ways of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Most of the youth who participated in this study do not recall their migration because they crossed the border as small children, typically under the age of five as in the case of Giovanni, Jose, and Blanca, who migrated at the ages of three, two, and two, respectively.

“I was brought into the U.S. with my mom’s friend’s baby’s passport because I guess we looked alike or something, or it was easier back then to do that and then my mom and dad walked through the desert” (Giovanni, 18 years old, high school senior).

“We [brother and him] crossed with my uncle’s friend, from what I know we crossed at the line, we were babies so they couldn’t ask us questions. So he just said ‘oh they’re with me,’ as simple as that. I’ve heard stories about like ‘oh this is how I crossed’ and I’m like, ‘wow, I’m really lucky.’ But I have heard from my mom how she crossed from the *cerro* and what she had to go through.” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

“I think from Acámbaro, [Mexico] to the border, I think we took a plane and then from there my dad says that we crawled to the border, the gate, I don’t know, I don’t know what happened. Every time I ask him, he always tells me different things...he doesn’t tell me much, I don’t know why he doesn’t tell me...’Cause I remember he said, ‘we took an airplane and from there we ran across.’ My mom says she was crawling and he [dad] had me in one arm and had a huge stuffed bear in the other arm. He said that was my favorite bear so he brought it with me and he used that to support himself and he said that as they crossed, I thought it was a game. I kept saying “*mas, mas, mas*” (more, more, more) and he was like ‘no no no, don’t say anything.’ I think once we actually crossed the border and were in the U.S., we took a *coyote* (people smuggler), he was in front, my mom was in the passenger’s seat she was very light-skinned back then too, she was really young. So they did her hair and her makeup and they put me in her lap and she pretended to be the *coyote*’s wife and me the daughter and in the trunk I think there were like 5 men, my dad was the skinniest and they put him in front and they put this heavy guy on top of him

and my dad says if they had waited 10 more seconds to cross the border, he wouldn't have made it, he would have died" (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

Although these three students were aware of how they crossed the border, in Blanca's story she shared that she gets different stories from her parents when she asks them about their migration. Interestingly, in the case of Giovanni and Jose, the description of their migration is very brief. Most participants learned about their migration from their parents and rarely did they personally recall the process. It was not uncommon to learn that most participants had never really heard the detailed version of their migration or any family member's prior migration. If they did know the story it was as a result of repeated questioning. This finding is interesting and makes me wonder why some immigrants shy away from sharing their stories. I imagine that for many recalling the long, often dangerous journey to get to the U.S. results in reliving a powerfully painful, traumatic event that is better off in the past. This is exactly what happened with Yadira, who crossed the border at the age 15, and got very emotional as she shared her story with me.

"We walked the desert like the *linea* (the border) and we actually were freezing. We would walk during the night [gets emotional] that's the hardest thing. It was me and my sister, my two little siblings and my mom. The littlest one was 3 years old and the next one was 8, my sister was 12 or 13 and then it was me at 15" (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

Yadira's migration process included varied strategies since there was five people of various ages trying to cross together to reunite with her father. Like Giovanni, Yadira's youngest brother was crossed via car and last minute some adjustments had to be made.

"He [little brother] crossed the line and I don't know how. He actually crossed by car and he was right there, like a couple of hours he was already with my dad. The other one was going to cross like that but he couldn't so we had to stay in Mexicali or Tijuana I don't remember. We were there for a week so my mom was desperate. And the little one, even the little one noticed the difference and he knew we were doing something not legal so he stopped crying and said that he wanted to walk with us. It took 3 days [to cross the desert into the U.S]."

Yadira and her family were not the only ones walking the desert; they were in a group of about twenty other people and she recounted how the *coyote* helped them get through the desert.

“The *coyote* gave us food, like canned food and 2 gallons of water. He was a nice person, he was an old guy and my family knew him very well and he was always taking care of us. He even took us to my dad’s house.”

As a result of continuous illegal immigration, the *coyote* business continues to thrive. The steady stream of undocumented border crossers, presents an opportunity for *coyotes* to make a lot of money and they have become notorious for charging high amounts, often in the thousands, for a single person. In recent years, media coverage has painted a negative picture of *coyotes*, who are portrayed as preying on vulnerable people looking for a better life. Seeking easy money, many *coyotes* promise to get people to “*el norte*” (the north) safe and sound, yet leave people behind to die if they become injured/ill or are captured by the border patrol. Luckily, in Yadira’s experience, the group took care of each other and they successfully evaded dangerous situations and border security.

“If somebody was tired, we would rest. We started [crossing the border] in the morning ‘till around noon, but it was hot so we stopped and hid so *la migra* (border patrol) couldn’t see us. During the days, he [the *coyote*] would give us light clothing to wear, so we had dark and light so we couldn’t be seen.”

Though Yadira’s group made it safely to the U.S., her three-day trek through the deserts provides a glimpse of just how militarized the U.S.-Mexico border has become. Throughout the day, Yadira recalls coming awfully close to being discovered by border patrol agents.

“We passed by, during the day, we saw a little path and would see a truck, like *la migra*, ICE and then during the night also, it was a helicopter. There were a lot of bushes. So we would cross through the mountains but also the desert and it was sad, during that time, we were hiding in the bushes.”

Another way that two participants became undocumented was by overstaying their visa, as in the case of Martin and Daniela. Martin’s family had come to California on vacation to visit

amusement parks and family. Martin's father had secured visas for his family in 2001 and upon realizing that they would soon expire, decided to move his family to the U.S. in 2006, a few days before Martin's fifteenth birthday. Martin recalls the horror stories he heard about crossing the border and reflects on how much simpler his migration was because his visa granted him legal entry.

“Well first of all I remember that back in Mexico a lot of people or even the news would say, ‘oh *cuando la gente cruza al norte* (when people cross the border to the North) it's really harsh, people die and everything and we were in the line *por Tijuana* and [it] probably took us like an hour...they just checked like ‘oh okay you could pass’ and we were like that's it? [laughs] that's it? Really? Like we're on the other side really? We were like *en serio* (seriously) it doesn't feel like [it]...and yea we knew that since we came in with a visa that expires we knew that we couldn't go back” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

When discussing the family's decision to emigrate to the U.S. Martin shares an analogy his father makes to Spanish colonizer Hernán Cortés.

“The story that my dad tells is like *cuando* (when) I think that it's a bad example but that's the one he uses like *cuando Hernán Cortés, el conquistador de México, [mi papa] dice que cuando vino a México que una de las primeras cosas que hizo fue de quemar todos los barcos entonces dice yo no voy a regresar* (the Mexican conquistador, my dad says that when we got to Mexico one of the first things he did was burn down all the boats as a symbol of him never returning to his country)...and my dad kind of did that.”

Daniela's father emigrated to California in early 1999 and upon settling with family, requested that his family reunite with him. Daniela, her brother, sister and mother secured visas and reunited with her father towards the end of 1999.

“We were supposed to start the New Year here [in U.S.]. Everything was weird, my mom was like, ‘don't tell anybody when you're on the plane. Don't tell people we're staying,’ oh because we were able to get visas and so they were still like super secretive about it. They were like, ‘no don't tell anybody that we're staying and if people ask you, just say we are going on vacation’ and I was like, ‘who's going to ask me?’ I had never been on a plane, I was like, ‘what is she talking about? Who are these people?’ But none of that happened, it was just paranoia” (Daniela, 21 years old, university student).

## Parental Employment

Most of the parents of participants were also undocumented, which greatly limited job opportunities and contributed to financial challenges. Commonly, undocumented workers are restricted to working “under the table” a colloquial term referring to being paid in cash to avoid a paper trail. Such practice is hidden from state tax provisions, social security administration, and is in violation of labor laws. This form of employment also subjects undocumented workers to exploitation such as poverty level wages, work days extending eight hours with no breaks, and no benefits as in the case of Blanca who describes her family’s employment history below.

“My dad he’s done so many things. He is very talented and he learns very fast, so he has been a carpenter, he’s worked delivering bread, he’s worked as a security officer, as a young kid back in Mexico. But now, he’s a cook, he’s like the head cook. They don’t pay, they pay him better than any other job he would get 'cause his boss knows he doesn’t have a social security so they pay him well but it’s not enough. He’s the only one working. My mom, she started working washing dishes *pero* (but) it’s like, it’s not a good job you know and then just last week was her last day because the restaurant is losing business so they are going to close it down.”

Blanca’s excerpt highlights a few things about the employment of undocumented workers. The first is their adaptability and their dedication to work hard and learn quickly. Despite this strength, the constant switching of jobs is never ideal for the worker, yet because of the cheap labor employers see in them, they become disposable commodities (De Genova, 2004) as in the case of Blanca’s mother. The ease with which undocumented workers are terminated combined with the uncertainty of securing long-time work result in financial instability and worry that requires everyone in the household to work in order to make ends meet. Many of the parents of study participants were transnational, migrating to and from the U.S. and Mexico for temporary work until crossing the border became much more challenging as a result of the increasingly stricter immigration laws of the U.S.

“My mom didn’t want to be in Mexico because she would go back and forth. She would come to the United States and she would stay for like 2 years and go back. She would go and she would come, she would go back and forth as a teenager. She was 16. She worked with many people. She worked taking care of a girl, she was blond with blue eyes I think, a white girl” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

A few years after her periodic employment in the U.S., Jennifer’s mother moved to the U.S. permanently when she started her family and like most of the participants’ parents, they hold one or two jobs in order to provide for their families.

“She [mother] has 2 stores and she’s about to open a third one. She has a flower shop business...So she has people that work for her in the stores so you can probably say she’s the manager of her 3 stores. My dad he works by himself as a granite worker. He works for different people here and there. He worked in Beverly Hills before and Hollywood, all these big houses. All my uncles work in that actually. They all have a shop in Commerce” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Yadira echoed Jennifer’s sentiments when describing her dad’s pursuit of economic opportunity:

“He [dad] sells fruits like at the stops. Like on the streets. That’s his job. He also is like a process worker. [My mom] helps him do the selling. Basically most of my family works in selling fruit on the streets.”

The necessity of working multiple jobs often limited the time participants spent with their parents as in the case of Alejandro.

“My mom worked, she worked a lot, she worked in a factory so we never really saw her that much when she worked...She would wake up at 4am, wake us up at 5am, take us to my grandma’s house because she had work at 6am and my grandma would take us to school and the bus would bring us back and we wouldn’t see our mom until like 6pm, so she worked like 12-hour shifts everyday” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

Yadira and Martin are two participants that emigrated to the U.S. in their teens and thus were able to compare and contrast their lives in Mexico to their lives in the U.S. In both their cases, their mothers were homemakers in Mexico because their father’s income was sufficient to take care of their respective family, however, the financial strain they experience in the U.S. forced their mothers to get jobs.

“Back in Mexico he [dad] got like a bachelor’s degree...or something like it from CEDI de Guadalajara it’s kind of like a career college. He studied there for 4 years and he got a degree and after he went to UNIVA *Universidad Católica de Guadalajara algo asi* (Catholic University of Guadalajara something like that) and he got like *se llama ingenieria de manufactura* (it’s called manufacturing engineering) something like that. So he got a really good pay check but because we were big [family] it was good but if we were probably like a smaller family you could see it [the income] like a lot more” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

When I asked Martin whether his mother worked in Mexico, he stated the following:

“No actually no because *creo que tenia la vida fácil ella* (I believe she had an easy life) *se quedaba en la casa para cuidar a los niños* (she would stay at home to take care of the children)...She would usually bake or cook something and we’ll sell it to friends so yea I think in a way we had like a really good life in Mexico. We had our own house my dad paid a whole house in Mexico probably in like 6 years, which usually takes people like 30 years.”

As a result of the advanced education and English skills of his father, Martin and his siblings lived a financially stable life with comforts afforded to few in Mexico. His father’s skill set made him aware of his growing employment prospects, leading to the decision to move to the U.S.

“My dad was taking a few English classes during his career and he noticed that because he was working for this company called Dayvill [that manufactured] computer chips, he noticed the little English he knew opened up a lot of doors. I think it has to do more because we moved to Chihuahua and it is a lot closer to the United States I think he saw that more often.”

### **Finding Out about Immigration Status**

Like many second generation youth in the U.S., study participants were aware that their family had an immigration story. They grew up in between two worlds, one American and one Mexican, where they speak Spanish at home and English at school, eat *tamales* and *pozole* with family and burgers and fries with friends. Living in a state like California, which continues to be the state with the highest immigrant population and the largest Latino population (Department of Homeland Security), these experiences were normal to study participants. They shared common values and traditions with school peers, excelled academically and had the same aspirations but

unbeknownst to them, their immigration status was what would set them apart from their U.S.-born counterparts. Every participant shared a different story of when they “found out” about their status. In the case of Yadira and Martin, they both migrated in their teens and were well aware of their status whereas the rest migrated at a very young age and grew up only knowing life in the U.S. Below are the stories of how participants learned about their immigration status for the first time.

“I remember that we all went to the auditorium...they [a federal education program] came to announce that we had become part of this program automatically and they were going to follow us for 7 years up until high school and 1 year of college so they were there to announce that we were going to be part of this program and we were going to go on fieldtrips and have college visits and college experiences and all of that, so when they told us, they were talking about financial aid, and I remember there was a big PowerPoint and they were talking about financial aid and all that stuff and I was thinking, ‘oh my God, I’m going to get money.’ So I remember afterwards I went up to one of the people that gave the presentation, somehow I remember telling them that I wasn’t born here, I don’t know, I don’t remember how, but that’s when they told me, ‘oh you don’t qualify for anything’” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

In Giovanni’s case, who like Blanca, migrated at a very young age, his parents let him know he was not born in the U.S. and knowing this implied there were certain things he could not do.

“I think I always just knew. My parents just told me ‘oh you were not born here. You can’t do this.’ When we were little, they sent my brother to Mexico for Christmas and I was like ‘I want to go’ and they were like ‘*Mijo* you can go but you can’t come back.’”

Like Giovanni, Jennifer and Jose also recount that they “always knew” about their status, however, in Jennifer’s case, she shared how her parents, in an attempt to protect her from potential backlash, would tell her she was born in the U.S. but she always had a sense that it was not true.

“I always knew. There was a point in I think in 6<sup>th</sup> grade that my mom would tell me, ‘if anyone asks in the street or in school, you were born here, you were not born over there, you were born here.’ But I knew I wasn’t born here. I was born there. Most of my friends know that I wasn’t born here. They don’t see nothing bad about it. They are like, ‘okay you were 1 [year old] what can you do?’”



Jose shared that he never thought not being born in the U.S. was a big deal because he considered myself American.

“I knew I was undocumented like pretty much my whole life. People would be like, ‘¿de donde eres? (where are you from?)’ and I’m like, ‘oh de Mexico’ but it was never a big deal, I didn’t know what it meant, yea I’m from Mexico that’s it. But there were times where you had to hide where you’re from ‘cause people might hear and like oh don’t say anything so my mentality was like yea I may be from Mexico but I’m here [in the U.S.] back then I was like yea I’m American, right?” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

Similarly, Yazmin and Juan recount always knowing their status but gaining a deeper understanding of what it meant as they grew older and sought out opportunities.

“I always knew because I was old enough to know where I came from. When I was smaller, being undocumented, I didn’t actually know what it really meant, I just knew that I wasn’t born here. I didn’t know that I was undocumented but as you grow older you start to learn more about the whole undocumented thing and like in middle school I guess I knew what it was but I didn’t see that it affected me in any way besides the fact that I couldn’t travel outside of the U.S.” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

“I had it in the back of my mind like I kind of knew [he was undocumented] but at the same time I didn’t know the limitations that I was going to have once I grew up especially in high school like trying to find a job. I would question my parents ‘why can’t I get a job?’ I thought it was way easier you know, and then it was hard for me to get a job, the only job that I could get was at a restaurant because they don’t really do background checks or anything” (Juan, 23-years old, transfer university student).

Scholars such as William Perez (2011 & 2012) note that many undocumented youth find out about their immigration status in their high school years, when they seek to get a job, driver’s license, and apply for college and financial aid. This is what happened to Jazmin, a 22-year old community college student, who found out about her immigration status during her junior year in high school.

“I was very independent and didn’t ask my mom anything but at school they had a green slip to get a work permit. So I was like ‘social security? Wait, do I have one of those?’ That’s when I asked my mom but she didn’t really know how to explain it until finally she just told me, ‘you’re not from here, you’re kind of illegal here so you’re not gonna be able to do a few things’ and that’s when I was like, ‘ohhh okay so you know it just took time like I had so many goals in high school.’”

## Feelings about Immigration Status

Despite the difference in ages of migration between participants and how and when they learned they were undocumented, they all shared similar sentiments about what life was like once the limitations of their immigration status solidified. Many experienced depression, academic withdrawals yet became that much more determined to accomplish their personal goals.

“I wanted to be in volleyball and I felt because of that [being undocumented] I couldn’t. A lot of things that happened in high school were because of that because I thought that I couldn’t do things and now that I think about it didn’t have anything to do with that” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

Academically, Jazmin described how her grades dropped because she stopped caring about school, believing any hopes of going to college were eliminated because of her immigration status.

“I did kind of rebel a little but not too much because I knew my grades were important but I began to be like, ‘ehhh whatever, I’ll do it tomorrow’ but I always worried about my grades. You come to a certain point where you’re like, ‘I can’t do anything like what the heck? What am I going to do after high school? What’s gonna happen?’”

Similarly, Juan began to let go of his dreams of a college education during his senior year and began to make peace with the idea that he would be limited to the work force.

“It was really hard for me. After that I got really discouraged about school during my senior year. I got discouraged, I felt like I wasn’t going to go anywhere. What I’m gonna have to do is find a job, that’s the only thing I’ll be able to do.”

In Yazmin’s case, she also discussed the discomfort of the travel restrictions she and her family have to deal with.

“My dad is undocumented and he’s a trucker so he goes to Utah often. He has friends over there so we go there yearly. Well the fact that we can’t travel outside of the U.S. to see family members, that’s the only thing I couldn’t do. That’s the only thing I noticed until high school when I began to notice that I needed a social security number to apply for scholarships and I saw that I wasn’t going to be able to apply for financial aid, I couldn’t do anything, I couldn’t do anything because I didn’t have a social security

number. I started understanding everything and it really affected me” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

In Blanca’s case, learning the limitations of her immigration status did make her upset but she did not allow this news to put her down.

“All I remember is that, it didn’t put me down, it did for a second like I guess in the moment, I was like ‘oh my God’ but it didn’t because my mom would always be like, ‘Don’t worry about it, God has something better for you. Don’t worry about it.’ She would always be there for me, always, so I was like, you know what, the only thing I could do right now is just do well in school and see what happens and so that’s what I did. I was always good at school. I always liked it. I was a big nerd, I still am [laughs] and I love reading so I just put everything into school. I ended up graduating with straight A’s and I got a scholarship” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

In conclusion, participant’s migration story, their parental employment and how they found about how their immigration status are aspects that influenced their identity, how they socialized and shaped their educational experiences, topics that are discussed in the following findings chapters.

## **Chapter 7: The Influence of U.S. Immigration Politics on the Social Identities of Undocumented Students**

In this chapter, I share excerpts from the twelve participants that address the first research question that guides this study: 1) In what ways, if any, does the larger sociopolitical discourse on unauthorized immigrants and immigration have on the social identity (re)formation of undocumented Latina/o students? In what ways does this larger discourse magnify one's undocumented status?

I begin this chapter by sharing the participants' sources of information and feelings about the pro- and anti-immigrant dialogue. In general, participants felt grateful and hopeful about the pro-immigration discourse and frustrated and saddened by the anti-immigrant discourse. Next, I share their perception of various labels used to describe immigrants. The evolution of such terms was found to shape the identity of participants, whereby they tended to adopt the label that came with the passage of new pro-immigrant legislation such as AB 540 and DREAMer. The following section explores how participants made sense of their ethnic, racial, gender and class identities. Ethnic, racial and gender identities were not impacted by the sociopolitical discourse, instead, participants expressed confusion over their race and ethnicity and discussed recognizing gendered expectations. However, it appeared that class identity was indirectly affected by anti-immigrant discourse because the socioeconomic status of participants was attributed to the limited employment prospects of their parents and themselves due to their undocumented status.

### **Sources and Feelings about Pro- and Anti-Immigrant Discourse**

The anecdotes of the participants in the preceding chapter allows us to see some of the commonalities and differences among them. We learned how each participant became aware of their immigration status, while Yazmin and Juan both noted that the older they got, the more they learned about what it meant to be an undocumented immigrant in U.S. society. This suggests that

as their identity evolved, so did their recognition of how a prescribed “illegal” identity marked their understanding of self.

Participant *testimonios* suggest that when it comes to their multiple identities, the larger sociopolitical anti-immigrant discourse selectively impacts their identities. In other words, “illegality” rhetoric simultaneously does and does not directly impact their identities, depending on what specific identity marker is being discussed. The context of the situation, specific identity and the impact varied by participant. For example, a few of the participants stated that U.S. anti-immigrant rhetoric makes it impossible for them to not feel bad about being undocumented, yet this same discourse encourages them to continue fighting for their rights. The excerpts to follow demonstrate how complex and intertwined their social identities are and how they are further problematized by an imposed “illegal” identity. Before providing evidence for the first research question, I would like to mention the sources of pro- and anti-immigrant information for study participants, starting first with the high school students and ending with the college students.

### ***Sources of Pro- and Anti-Immigrant Information***

All of the participants stated that they were informed on the various perspectives and opinions about immigration across the political spectrum, however, it is important to note that the high school youth knew much less and were not as politicized as the community college and university students. Significant to this finding is the fact that seven of the eight college students were active members of the immigrant rights and advocacy group at their respective campus. I strongly believe that their mobilization and empowerment efforts combined with their educational exposure contributed to their conscious resistance of the imposed “illegal” label. Moreover, the sources of information for high school and college students were distinct.

The high school students credited media outlets such as network news in both Spanish and English. Spanish language channel Univision and southern California networks such as KTLA channel 5 and KABC channel 7, were cited for supplying them and their families with the most up-to-date information on both the anti-immigrant movements and pro-immigrant legislation such as the California DREAM Act and President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The only participant that did not know about these legislations was Pedro, an 18-year old high school junior from Santa Barbara County. Below are some excerpts regarding DACA.

“When the Deferred Action came out, I was like always listening, ‘oh what do I need? Do I qualify?’ and with teachers’ help I found out I do qualify and I’m already going to send out the papers and stuff” (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

Like Giovanny, Yazmin also spoke about learning about DACA from the news.

“When DACA was going on, we [her family] were talking about that. And I guess my parents see the level of importance so they immediately took me and told me to do it” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

Despite learning about DACA, it is important to note that when I asked high school participants if they knew about pro-immigrant legislations in California, such as Assembly Bill 540 (AB 540) and the state DREAM Act, as well as federal legislations like the proposed federal DREAM Act and DACA, they often confused them or did not specifically know the benefits each afforded them.

In Jennifer's case, she shared with me that she had never heard of AB 540 and stated the following about her understanding of the California DREAM Act, “It's helping kids go to college and I think that's it. I don't know.” Upon briefly sharing with Jennifer the timeline and information of each piece of legislation, we then talked about DACA. Jennifer and her parents had begun to consult with attorney's regarding her DACA application and upon learning of the

cost to file the application; Jennifer decided she would forgo having a *quinceañera* in order to file her DACA paperwork. Currently, the cost for submitting a DACA application is \$465, which includes fees, an employment authorization document and background check. Jennifer told me that the DACA price tag worried her parents, but they admired and appreciated their daughter sacrificing her *quinceañera*. After several conversations, Jennifer's parents decided that they would strive to save for both her DACA application and her *quinceañera*.

Like Jennifer, Yazmin had also heard about AB 540 and the California DREAM Act, but did not know the details of each one. When I asked her if she was familiar with the DREAM Act, she said, "Yea, well I don't know a lot about it but I know it's for AB 540 students and I don't know much about it." Moreover, Yazmin's unique experience as a youth journalist for a local newspaper as well as her enrollment in non-traditional high school courses such as administrative justice, provided her with multiple perspectives on immigration. It is important to note that data collection for this study overlapped with the 2012 presidential race. When I asked Yazmin how she thought U.S. society perceived undocumented immigrants, she responded by saying that perspectives are rooted in political affiliation. She described the Republican perspective as follows:

"Republicans just see like, 'oh they broke the law and are just coming to take jobs from Americans.' They see them as just causing problems and breaking the law and not contributing to the country."

Yazmin described the Democratic perspective as follows:

"[Democrats believe] that we're contributing to the economy, especially in California since [it] is one of the wealthiest states because of its agriculture and its agriculture is run by immigrants. My family knows that and we talk about it. Because of immigrants some of which do not graduate high school, earn low wages, and work in labor that doesn't get them any rights or well paid or things like that."

Younger participants, like Jennifer, discussed paying close attention to the presidential debates looking to understand each candidate's stance on immigration.

"I've gotten into politics all of a sudden because of the debate...I was [looking for] why they want to kick us out. That was my main [goal], to look at that, at their answer. I was waiting for that...I was watching the debate, the one they had the other day. A girl asked Romney what would you do with all the people that came here illegally and he answered I will keep people here who have waited for their green card and it just really got to me, why is he gonna kick [out] all these people that actually want to do something with their lives?...they are here because they want to be. Why are you gonna kick someone out like that? They can be the next best Supreme Court justice of the United States or they can be a senator. Not right!" (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

On the other hand, when I asked the community college and university students about their political views, they were far more critical and sometimes more pessimistic than the high school students.

"They trying to criminalize us, saying we are criminals and the usual that we are taking their jobs away, we are not contributing to the economy, we don't pay taxes. I'm undocumented and since I've been working, I've been paying taxes...What the hell? I feel like all those people that are speaking, they are usually White I feel like they should be more educated, they try to put us down for not being educated but they're the one's sounding *really* [emphasis added] uneducated, ignorant you know? Like what the hell?" (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

When I asked Martin what he thought about the legislations benefitting undocumented youth, he said:

"It means that the United States in general is finally opening their eyes that this nation was created by immigrants, it's the right thing to do...it's a momentum that little by little it has grown *va llegar una culminación y ya después todo va para abajo* (and will arrive to a culmination and everything will go downhill) we haven't reached that and I'm kind of scared when we are going downhill and I've seen a little of that right now in my organization because now more people are working [as a result of DACA] so they have less time for the organization so we kind of lost that connection with some people *ya no son parte de la familia* so it's *totalmente normal* (they are no longer part of the family and it's totally normal), I would call it growing up *estas criando tu hijo chiquito* (you are raising your child) and they grew and now they have to go, it's part of life I think. *Una vez que pasemos las culminaciones va ser triste* (once we pass the culmination it will be sad)" (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).



As a leader in the immigrant youth movement, Martin's response illustrates a recognition of the influence of the movement but also a belief that it will come to an end as more and more people cease their participation in advocacy groups. As more of his peers receive DACA, Martin has seen the drop off in their group meetings, thus why he believes the youth movement will eventually lose its momentum.

Yadira concurs with Yazmin that there are two perspectives of immigrants, one which views them as liabilities and one that views them as assets. In Yadira's perspective, most people in the U.S. see them as the latter.

"I think it's both sides. Many people think positive things of immigrants, others...have something negative with immigrants and create that stereotype in their mind...but I think...the majority are in favor, they probably have a positive conception of immigrants because they know how hardworking people are."

In addition, the eight college students also knew all the details of the legislations listed above. As discussed at the beginning of this section, it appears the older each participant became, the more knowledgeable they were about immigration laws and politics. The availability of a myriad of social sciences courses in college was fundamental. The students who had taken classes in ethnic studies, political science, sociology, and other social sciences disciplines spoke about how much more critical these courses had made them.

"Even like taking Chicano Studies classes, it was great taking classes like that, I learned a lot. Every time I take a class it's like 'wow' it teaches the history about us" (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

Beyond learning about immigration through a theoretical lens in classes, the college students also reported getting immigration news from Facebook posts, National Public Radio (NPR), and the Huffington Post. While DACA was the latest triumph during data collection and was excitedly discussed by the high school students, it was not mentioned as much by the college students, likely because their leadership was at the forefront of this accomplishment. The

organization of young leaders like my participants were largely credited for the implementation of DACA.

### *Feelings about Pro- and Anti-Immigrant Information*

Although each participant had different sources of information, the feelings towards the pro- and anti-immigrant news elicited similar feelings. According to the interviewees the steady victories of the pro-immigrant movement, most notably Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), instilled participants with renewed hope for their futures. I believe that the slow accumulation of benefits that the California DREAM Act and DACA afforded undocumented students, (sub) consciously made participants feel less negative about their immigration status, thus likely impacting their overall identity. Specifically, some participants discussed their excitement over recent discussions regarding the possible passage of comprehensive immigration reform (CIR).

“It's not a big deal to me whether I was born there or here because I know that I will probably get my citizenship and there's a bill that passed about 15 year olds wanting to get their papers [referring to DACA]. Yea my mom wants me to do that” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Jennifer was optimistic that her immigration status will change soon which makes her less worried about sharing with others that she was born in Mexico.

“Well when the Deferred Action came out, I believe, I will be able to travel and stuff and then I was talking to my brother the other day and I was like ‘oh I can finally go with you [to Mexico] and I can finally see my grandparents and my cousins, my uncles and aunts for the first time” (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

In Giovanny's *testimonio*, he shared with me how difficult it was for him to not be able to visit his family in Mexico. Interestingly, Giovanny equates the passage of DACA with the ability to travel outside of the country. Although DACA has very strict limitations on foreign travel, Giovanny assumed that it will lift one of the most painful limitations he experiences as an

undocumented youth. The excitement over his perceived ability to travel was something that calmed his constant fear of traveling short and long distances within the state of California. As new pro-immigration legislation passes, the less restricted youth feel by obstacles that reminded them of their undocumented status, thus reducing the clout that “illegality” had over their identity.

In addition to learning pro-immigrant information that benefits them and their families, participant news sources often also shared anti-immigrant remarks from notorious figures like Arizona’s Chief Arpaio and the infamous “minutemen” that sparked conversation and anger among participants and their families, further fueling a rejection towards an “illegal” identity.

“You know what? They just don’t know. I’m going through the same struggle that we all go through everyday, you’re gonna tell me that you still want to kick us out? I’m gonna send you off to work in the field because that’s what my mom did when she was young so I’m gonna send you out there and see if you want to kick us out because obviously you wouldn’t want to do that [job]. So why are you whining? If you were in our shoes, what would you do?” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman)

Jennifer’s anger and frustration were common emotions that participants had towards anti-immigrant sentiments and dialogue that surrounded them on a daily basis. The more they heard about the stereotypes of undocumented immigrants, the more they recognized that they are the complete opposite of what society perceives them to be. Knowing that they and their families are hard workers led to a denunciation of “illegality.”

Anti-immigrant rhetoric was frustrating for participants and its pervasiveness occasionally casted doubt and fear, particularly the sad and sometimes tragic stories of fellow immigrants they knew or saw on the news. Close to two-million undocumented people have been deported from the U.S. under the Obama administration (Department of Homeland Security; Pew Research Center) as a result of campaigns such as “Secure Communities” championed by former

United States Secretary of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano. Jennifer shared her feelings about the deportation stories she saw on the news.

“Something they show is how Mexicans are being taken away from their home and you just see them sitting down in chairs [in detention centers] and I’m like, ‘oh my God that could happen to anyone’...My mom...told me if she or my dad were ever taken away that I’m in charge of her store ‘cause she’s opening another one so she has 3 now” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Realizing that her parents and she are vulnerable to deportation got Jennifer thinking about the implications for her U.S.-born younger siblings. Being in a mixed status family is one of the many challenges today’s immigrant families continue to deal with on a daily basis.

“There was this one story about a girl whose parents got deported and she stayed here with no one else. That really got to me. What if I’m the one that goes? My mom, my dad, and my sister and my brother stay here. What would they do without me?...My uncle and my aunt left to Mexico with their 2 kids, one was born here and the other they passed with my sisters papers...They were both living here with my aunts for about 4 months and then later [their parents] came. They tried crossing so many times and they made it on their 6<sup>th</sup> attempt.”

The “deportability” of themselves and family members is one of the many fears that crossed the minds of participants on a daily basis. They stated that they often wondered, “Will I make it back home?,” “Will I be stopped by police?,” “Will my parents be raided at work?” These are just some of the questions that preoccupied participants as well as the current 11 million undocumented people in the country. This legitimate concern is compounded by the horrific stories people hear on the news. One noticeable difference participants noticed between Spanish and English network news is the rhetoric that is used to discuss immigration. In particular, the participants stated that they noticed the way immigrants are addressed. The many labels used to talk about this community sparked a conversation with participants about their feelings towards such words.

## Evolution of Immigrant Labels and Feelings toward Them

“I just have to ask why, why does there still have to be a label, why? I’ve learned that the United States is like that, they like to have specific groups, they designate people to a certain area and that’s just how they do it and you have to fight against the whole country and that’s really hard. I just try to educate people and tell them why they shouldn’t call me illegal, ‘don’t refer to us like that, we are people, we are human beings’” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student)

This quote illustrates the power of labels. When I asked Blanca if she thought these labels affected her identity she said “I think they do.” As she describes above, the numerous derogatory labels used to describe immigrants is disheartening and educating people on the effect that these labels have on identity is a daunting task.

Some common descriptors used to depict undocumented immigrants include illegal alien, undocumented, AB 540, DREAMer and more recently DACAmented. The evolution of these labels is intimately tied to legislation and also causes shifts in identity. For example, in the last fifteen years, youth have adopted the terms AB 540, DREAMer, and DACAmented with legislation passing in 2001, 2011 and 2012 respectively. Below are a few excerpts from participants as they shared their opinions and feelings towards some of these labels and how they impact their identity.

### *“Illegal Alien”*

The longest standing and among most controversial label used to describe undocumented immigrants is “illegal alien.” Below are some of the thoughts of the participants on this term.

“Illegal alien, I don’t like it. It just sounds like we came from another planet when they use the word alien specifically. It’s just that we are people like you” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

“I don’t know, [I don’t] like the word at all, it feels like its dehumanizing people it’s not... considerate. These people are humans that are calling them aliens, illegal aliens so I just don’t use the term because of that... It’s discriminatory because there are other ways to refer to them like undocumented and I think illegal alien is like, I don’t know, you don’t have an

identity you are just nothing just dehumanizing people” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

“I don’t know I have a different point of view on a lot of things, and I know there’s a lot more people like me but I just see them often but like words really truly only have power if you let them...if people want to call me illegal, there’s nothing to do they just decided to call me illegal. Obviously I don’t think I’m illegal, I’m just a human on earth chilling, living, getting an education...The only thing I really label myself is as an undocumented student” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

“Honestly like, *a mi las palabras nunca* (to me words never) like don’t really hurt me as much. It does suck. I mean I guess it depends on who says it you know there’s so much we try to correct people, there’s so much we can we do. I have been in situations where I’m like, ‘hey, the correct word is undocumented’ or like ‘hey, that’s pretty offensive” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

All of the participants unanimously agreed that the term “illegal alien” dehumanizes and displaces undocumented immigrants by comparing them to aliens— a species that is not human and does not belong in the U.S. Although they reject such label, the use of “we” by participants implies a group identity that is tarnished when perceived by others as “aliens.” Alejandro and Jose both expressed that they do not let labels affect them. While Alejandro will just ignore someone calling him an “illegal alien,” Jose mentioned that he corrects people whenever he has the chance. The excerpts above also show that Yadira and Alejandro prefer the label “undocumented” over “illegal alien” yet in Giovanni’s and Jazmin’s responses, they expressed their dislike of the term “undocumented” but noted that they prefer this term over “illegal alien.”

“I think it’s mean that they call us aliens or say we are undocumented. I just think we are people” (Giovanni, 18 years old, high school senior).

“I don’t like it. Wetback is the one I really don’t like. I don’t mind undocumented so much but illegal it just sounds so bad, I hate it like, ‘oh are you illegal? Are you an illegal? Are you an alien?’ It’s like okay are we like some kind of different species? [laughs] Or are we like different you know? It just sounds bad, it just sounds kind of I don’t know, I don’t like it, I don’t like it at all but undocumented is like okay it’s a little bit better it’s not too great but I don’t know, I rather be called undocumented than illegal” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student)

When I asked participants who they believed use the term “illegal alien,” Giovanni said, “Well I’m not gonna say all White people but like [they] use it more.” Yadira shared with me that she has heard classmates, specifically Latina/os, use “illegal alien.”

“Some of my classmates like when they’re talking about immigration issues, they’ll refer to undocumented people as illegal aliens but then they’re some people that kind of look at the person weird because it sounds not only [bad] for undocumented people, it sounds bad for other people, it doesn’t sound right, but they don’t use it as that, like to be mean to people just because they have heard it from someone else.”

In Giovanni’s anecdote, he notes that White people tend to use this label more often while in Yadira’s anecdote, we see that she seems to feel as if her Latina/o peers do not intentionally mean to degrade undocumented people, but simply are using a descriptor commonly used to refer to this population. The inter- and intra-group dynamics and their role in shaping participant identities is explored in depth in chapter nine. “Illegal alien” as an identifier was overtly rejected by all participants, suggesting that this label, although imposed on this population, has never been used by participants to identify themselves. However, this is not the case with the following labels that were discussed.

### *Undocumented*

Another term more commonly used is “undocumented.” With this label, participants either approved the term or expressed an aversion to it. As mentioned above, both Jazmin and Giovanni stated that they were not fond of this term and described it as follows:

“It sounds right but still, I don’t like it. I mean I think it’s just a label but it’s not...but at least it sounds better, a little bit better than saying illegal alien” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

“I feel like it’s bad. I don’t know, like being undocumented, you can’t do anything. You just have to go to school and go home” (Giovanni, 18 years old, high school senior).

Giovanni said that he associated the label “undocumented” to restrictions imposed on immigrants, such as the inability to travel outside the country, a situation that pains him during

the holidays. Yazmin agrees with Giovanni and notes how such restrictions often leads many undocumented immigrants to compare themselves to their U.S.-born counterparts (for a discussion on social interactions, please read chapter nine).

“Undocumented it just means, well to me, what it kind of says is not having the same rights as others that are documented” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

Echoing Yazmin, Yadira and Pedro also discussed differences, specifically highlighting the role of stereotypes and inter-group relationships.

“Undocumented well at least the word doesn’t sound too bad [laughs] and its just undocumented, you don’t have documentation...for now, that’s the word to use...I think undocumented you don’t have papers, that’s all, but when you say alien or illegal, I don’t know, their just labeling people as if they have done something bad, people who are committing crimes. Even some people say that immigrants are terrorist when the White people, or the people who commit the more like dangerous [crimes] sometimes they [immigrants] aren’t the ones that are terrorist...and I guess that’s just one stereotype so there’re higher levels of [people of] color incarcerated because of that, like that they just see people of color and something doesn’t look right, they just right away label them as criminals” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

“Terrible, it’s like discrimination of a race, they call us wetbacks, beaners. They call us beaners because we eat beans? I never did understand that” (Pedro, 18 years old, high school junior).

Unlike the term “illegal alien,” which participants described as dehumanizing and dismissive, and “undocumented” that had split opinions among participants, some of the participants stated that they did like some descriptors used to describe undocumented immigrants, such as AB 540, DREAMer and DACAmented. The varied opinions on these labels in many ways demonstrates a hierarchy among these words, where “illegal alien” is least desirable, next is undocumented and then each participant rated AB 540, DREAMer and DACAmented differently. In addition, the ascription of any of these labels by participants show that they consciously reject terms that they do not see fitting to their identity as expressed by Blanca.

“It does affect me because I remember last year in my first quarter, I think we had undocumented week, or coming out week and there was shirts with ‘I am undocumented’



and oh I couldn't wear it, I couldn't buy one. I was going to buy one. I've always been open about my status, but just the fact that I had to wear a shirt saying that I was undocumented, to me I was like, maybe I'm wrong, I was like, 'why do I have to tell you that I'm undocumented?' I guess I'm proud of it, I mean not proud of it, I mean I embrace it, yea I'm embracing it cause it is a part of who I am but I don't think that's the most important thing at least I don't see it like that so I couldn't bear myself to wear that shirt and still to this day I can't wear that shirt and not because I'm embarrassed but...on the contrary, I don't know. Sometimes in the group that I'm in since we are all are undocumented or most of us are allies I just feel like, they joke around '*oh es que es un indocumentado*' (oh it's because he is undocumented) or 'are you going to marry a U.S. citizen?' and comments like that...so sometimes I just like to step out and look at it from a different perspective, what do I like and what don't I like."

### ***AB 540***

"When I say AB 540 many adults don't even know what I am talking about and many students don't have a clue to what that is" (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

Yazmin was not the only participant that shared this opinion on AB 540. Several participants who also chose to describe themselves as "AB 540" talked about having to explain what this term meant more than they would have liked to. For some, they stated that being aware that this term is not commonly recognized provides comfort in knowing that they could disclose their immigration status without overtly doing so as Yadira and Jazmin explained:

"Students use the word, they don't say undocumented. It's still covering your identity because people don't know what AB 540 is and other people are just ashamed or afraid of asking what it means. It's like covering your identity" (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

Blanca brought up the point that using the term AB 540 is misleading because not everybody that benefits from this legislation is actually undocumented.

"AB 540 when I hear that, I'm like a number. I use it all the time because there is no other way of describing like that status. I like it a little bit better but it takes more effort to describe it. 'Well what is that' and I have to say 'well there's a law that this and that' and not everybody that is AB 540 is undocumented, so it's complicated but I mean I just don't see the necessity of using them [referring to labels]" (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

Jazmin and Jose were two students that self-identified as AB 540 and value the level of protection this term offers.

“I think I’ve learned that I like to say AB 540 instead because people are like, ‘huh? AB 540?’ It’s a new term so it’s like okay they don’t know about it but they will ask about it, which I don’t mind now like, ‘oh AB 540 is this blah blah’ like, ‘oh okay so you know, is he an AB 540? Or like are you AB 540?’” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

“We don’t say he’s *indocumentado* (undocumented), we say he’s AB 540. Maybe he’s not AB 540 but we don’t use undocumented we use AB 540 because we assume he’s going to school, we’ll assume he’s from a different country. It’s just weird how we caught ourselves saying stuff like that. I feel like a lot of people now don’t use AB 540, they use DACAmented or DREAMer and like I still use AB 540 and there’s still people like, ‘what is that?’ ...so I still try to keep that word because it’s something that helped a lot of us. I can say I’m a DREAMer in a way but I say I’m AB 540 first, which is all the same thing in a way” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

As mentioned in the opening of this section, Jose’s excerpt brings up the point that each pro-immigrant legislation passed results in youth adopting that identity. For example, California passed Assembly Bill 540 in 2001 and relatively quickly, youth began to identify as “AB 540” renouncing labels such as illegal alien and undocumented. As the oldest participant in this study, Jose continues to identify himself as AB 540 even though has newer options. For him, these terms all have a similar purpose and meaning, which is to repel the negativity of anti-immigrant discourse and ideologies. I believe that this concerted effort does and does not impact the various identities of participants as we will see in the next section.

Yadira, Jazmin and Jose are part of a support and advocacy group for undocumented students on their campus and Jazmin pointed out to me that in their outreach efforts, flyers and posters will use “AB 540” instead of “undocumented” to protect students to a certain extent, and also have the group relatively unnoticed by others who may not be happy to learn that there are undocumented students on campus.

“Yea that’s exactly what we do, we don’t put undocumented, we put AB 540 instead

‘cause we as a group are also aware that their might be people out there like, ‘there’s an undocumented group here? What the hell?’”

### *DREAMer*

Similarly to AB 540, the term DREAMer came as a result of the ongoing fight for the passage of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which seeks to grant eligible undocumented youth with the opportunity to attain higher education as well as legal status. In 2011, California passed the state DREAM Act, allowing undocumented youth to access certain sources of financial aid. Since the introduction of the DREAM Act, youth have adopted the term “DREAMer.” Below are some participant thoughts of this term.

“I think [DREAMer] is good, it’s like, our dreams are going to be met and we are making it possible” (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

“DREAMer I don’t know, that one is like referring to someone that is pursuing higher education, someone contributing to society. I say DREAMer...I think that one is more positive because usually a DREAMer is identified as a person who’s doing something positive regardless of their status regardless of everything. I don’t know people just see a DREAMer as someone successful even when they have not like achieved something” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

“DREAMer. I guess I like that one. I like that one because it kind of says more about you not just your status, that you have a dream you know, and that you are here for a reason. So I like that one more than the rest too. DREAMer, yea, DREAMer, I am fighting for my dreams” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

Giovanny, Yadira and Blanca approved of this term and personally referred to it as is evidenced in the use of words such as “our” and “I” to describe their feelings. Jazmin also self-identified as a DREAMer and shared with me that during her school orientation and job interviews, she uses the term.

“I like DREAMer. I even call myself a DREAMer [laughs]. I do. During the orientation they would ask me something like, ‘tell me about yourself?’ And then I’ll be like, ‘oh okay well I’m a DREAMer’ [laughs] I tell them that...but I explained to them what a DREAMer is. A DREAMer is AB 540 which is the name of undocumented students or an illegal resident that’s what I tell them and then they’re like oh okay sometimes I do feel

like they're shocked, like they were like, 'oh my God we can't hire her'" (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

As with the term AB 540, identifying as a DREAMer reveals one's immigration status without explicitly stating they are in the U.S. illegally. As Jazmin went through her job interviews, she explained to me that it was very important for her to be honest with her potential employers, letting them know that she is indeed undocumented, but had recently been DACA-approved, allowing her to work legally.

"I would tell them yea I'm a DREAMer, I finally got [DACA] you know and it's a risk to be honest, to say that 'cause they might be like, 'oh no we can't have her here, no...she might put our company at risk or something' cause you know they think about that too but I want them to know that I'm very honest and I'm very open and I will tell them that 'cause I want people to trust me and I want them [to trust me] and I want to trust them so I want to tell them at least that you know. Before, oh no, I wouldn't have said that, I would have been like, 'oh I'm a student and I go to [community college] and that's pretty much it, but you know now I'm like yea I own up to it and I tell them yea I'm you know [undocumented]."

In the excerpt above, Jazmin's expression of "I own up to it" referring to her undocumented status shows that she accepts this identity. But again, as has been discussed with the previous terms, participants disassociate with the negative connotations of "illegality." However, in the case of Yazmin, she described her feelings toward this term in third person, indicating that she does not personally subscribe to this label.

"[A DREAMer is] someone that is not from this county but wants an opportunity to succeed in life and wants an education" (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

In the case of Jose, Juan and Pedro, they were not very fond of the term as explained below.

"I feel like it's a label and the reason why is cuz they try to say oh DREAMer you know like student, he's a student trying to get an education you know but I don't know they just started using everything as a label...but not everybody goes to school...I myself never really call myself a DREAMer" (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

"It's a good one, but American dream, assimilation, it can have its bad side, yea we have dreams of being successful, we are also giving in to that hegemonic rhetoric, we are also excluding those that don't have" (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

“I think it’s people that are hoped up looking for their dreams. I don’t think the dreams are coming to us” (Pedro, 18 years old, high school junior).

Jose and Juan highlighted the fact that not everyone is eligible for the DREAM Act. As mentioned earlier, Pedro was the only student that did not know about AB 540, the DREAM Act and DACA but had heard of the term DREAMer. He was also the only student that expressed less hope about his education and future.

### *DACAmented*

As a result of relentless mobilization over immigrant rights and unjust deportations by the undocumented youth movement, President Obama made a historic announcement on June 15, 2012 that would change the lives of many. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protects eligible youth from deportation and provides work authorization. This administrative relief and its “DACAmented” label is the newest addition to the multiple descriptors available to undocumented immigrants. When I asked participants about their thoughts on this label, most of them had not heard of it. Below is what they had to say:

“DACAmented? [laughs] I’ve never heard that. Really, DACAmented? I should say that ‘cause we’re not really undocumented anymore. I will say that now, that’s awesome. DACAmented ‘cause yea, now we’re kind of documented but not really [laughs] we’re almost there I really do hope there’s some kind of something there for us and I know there can be, I don’t know we’ll see” (Jazmin, 22 year old community college student).

“That makes sense because *ya no estas indocumentado pero* (you are no longer undocumented but) you’re not a citizen so there you need to create some new label, new definition so DACAmented, I like it. It’s not super creative [laughs]” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

Interestingly, both Jazmin and Martin understood DACAmented as no longer being undocumented. However, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) describes DACA as prosecutorial discretion from deportation and explicitly notes that it does not grant lawful status. Although Jazmin and Martin were fond of the term, Yadira was not.

“No I have never heard that [laughs]...oh wow, I don’t know, I still don’t like it. It’s just I think DREAMer is better and DACAmented is like giving you like I mean people know what DACA means they would know what it is that you’re still undocumented but they’re just giving you like a piece of your citizenship so I don’t know I just don’t like it, I have never heard of that” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

Alejandro also laughed when I said the term and expressed that he does not consider it a word.

“[laughs] I haven’t heard that one, that’s just funny, that’s hilarious, yea that’s like half documented. See that one I don’t see as a term, it’s more of a joke. I feel like people are playing with words” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

Participants’ opinions on the various available labels show that undocumented youth adopt pro-immigrant labels with ease. This practice may also facilitate an identity in which they continue to reject the dehumanization and displacement of undocumented people and instead empowers them as their identity continues to develop. In the next section, I address three forms of identity, ethnic, racial, gender, and class identity and how and if “illegality” discourse affects how each participant made sense of each one.

### **Identity Sense Making**

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I provide participants’ understanding of the sociopolitical discourse and labels on undocumented individuals, and now I would like to address the second part of the research question which focuses on examining how such discourse impacts social identity. To answer this question, the following section begins by discussing how participants make sense of their racial, ethnic, gender, and class identities.

#### ***Ethnic and Racial Identity***

The anti-immigrant discourse did not explicitly influence participants’ sense of their racial and ethnic identity. None of them felt that being undocumented impacted this identity. However, because the majority of participants have lived most of their lives in the U.S., their explanations of this identity was challenging for some who did not know whether to call

themselves Mexican or Mexican-American. Below are some excerpts of how participants responded when I asked them how they identified racially and ethnically:

“Mexican-American because I’m Mexican and American. I’ve been living here for a few years” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

“You mean like what do I consider myself like Mexican or like American? I’m Mexican [laughs] I am Mexican American but [laughs] I had a Chicano Studies class for a day ‘cause I had to cancel it ‘cause I had too many classes but I remember the teacher asking us ‘who considers themselves this or that?’ And I was like, ‘well I consider myself Mexican but you know I was raised here so I don’t have the cultural, well I do have the cultural like you know what’s the word? [upbringing]” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

While Martin rapidly described himself as Mexican-American, Jazmin was torn, calling herself Mexican first and then saying Mexican-American. For both these students, growing up in the U.S. resulted in the acquisition of both Mexican and American traits. When I asked Jazmin what aspect her makes her identify as American she said:

“Speaking the language, English, yea because I was raised by my grandma she has taught me [Spanish]. ‘Cause the difference between my cousins and me is that my cousins are not very welcoming with my aunts, they’re not like, ‘¿hi tía como estas? How are you? They’re very like, ‘hi tía’ and that’s it and then for me I’m like, ‘¿oh hi tía como estas? How are you? I heard you got sick. ¿Como estas?’ You know so I’m very like I think about them in that way and there’s a difference there.”

Jazmin’s sense-making of her racial and ethnic identity is layered by her language identity as a bilingual speaker. In addition, her racial and ethnic identity is further complicated by the assumptions of people she interacts with on a regular basis as is also the case with Alejandro. Both of these students shared with me that some people assumed they were White because of their light skin and in Alejandro’s case, his blue eyes.

“I’m say I’m from Michoacán. Being here in college everyone asks ‘where are you from? What’s your major?’ ...I tell them ‘I’m from Visalia by Fresno but I was born in Mexico.’ That’s my response and they’re like, ‘Oh so you’re Mexican? And I’m like ‘yea 100 percent Mexican’ and they say, ‘No way?’” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

“Yea they think I’m White, they just don’t know...I’m like dude I speak Spanish. Some of them are like, ‘I didn’t even know you spoke Spanish.’ I’m like, ‘come on like of course I speak Spanish’ [laughs]. Yea and they’re like, ‘what I didn’t know that oh my God you’re so White.’ That’s the first thing they always say because it’s just a stereotype I guess like, ‘you’re so white, you’re so white-complected, like wow I didn’t know that.’ So I mean it’s good but I honestly wish people would be like you’re Mexican huh? [laughs] but no. So I don’t really like that [laughs]. I don’t like that compliment but I wish people could go up to me and be like, ‘Jazmin you’re Mexican huh? [laughs] even though you’re White’ [laughs]. Like you know I get that rarely like, ‘are you Mexican descent? Yes I am. I’m actually from Mexico. I’m from TJ you know’ and they’re like, ‘wow okay’ even they still get that reaction of like really?” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

Although some participants’ racial and ethnic identity fell within the hyphen in Mexican-American, most of the participants identified as “Mexican.”

“I’m Mexican. I don’t say Mexican-American because I know I’m not American. And then like I don’t pretend to be American. I know what I am and I am proud of what I am” (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

“I’m Mexican. I was born there yea I’ve been here for 15 plus years I don’t know I still see myself as a Mexican” (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

“I say I’m from Mexico, sometimes I say I’m from Puebla, Mexico. It depends I guess. I think that when people ask me it depends I think I’m stereotypical person so when people ask me that it depends on the people that ask me so I say I’m from Mexico and other people Puebla, Mexico [laughs]. I just say I’m from Mexico” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

While these participants proudly espoused their ethnic and racial identity, Jennifer denounced the use of any labels to describe herself.

“I personally don’t like that question because it just bothers me and I just say I’m Jennifer. I don’t belong in [a label] ‘cause I think of the word Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, as labels, that’s it. A label. Like you’re not a thing, you’re a person. I’m just Jennifer. Why do you care? I was born in Mexico, that’s it. Because how can you say I’m from Mexico but I live here with these customs. I’m Jennifer. I wasn’t born here but it’s just that Latino, Chicano, Hispanic...I don’t like them. So I just say I wasn’t born here, I was born in Mexico. That’s it. I don’t like those words. I don’t like being that. I don’t like being called that. I’ve never been called that but the words just bug me” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).



The stark difference in the previous responses and Jennifer's response propelled me to ask participants about their understanding and definition of labels such as Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicana/Chicano, Hispanic, and American. Below are their responses.

### ***Defining Mexican***

"A Mexican [is] born in Mexico and they see you like someone who's poor someone who doesn't have a job..." (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

"A Mexican is someone that was born in Mexico [and lives there] for many years...In the national media we are not Latinos, we're Hispanic, here in California we're Latinos but it's too broad and some people, I don't know, it's like...oh you're Latino, oh am I? Oh good and they *se la creen o sea...es una identidad que ellos adoptan* (believe it, it's an identity they adopt) just because some people tell them to" (Martin, 22 years old, community college student).

While Giovanny adds the "poor" descriptor to this term, Martin echoed Jennifer's belief that these ethnic labels are imposed on people and people accept them by default. Moreover, Jennifer did not necessarily define "Mexican" and instead shared with me a point that her father makes when people refuse to describe Mexicans as "American."

"Well Mexican is mostly kind of like...America my dad's all like, 'that's kind of dumb you know cause everything is America...North America, South America like common sense, everything is America' so he's like, 'I'm American I don't care what you say I'm from South America' and like he's still Mexican American" (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Blanca described Mexican by alluding to cultural practices and traditions.

"Well I guess Mexican I would say is you follow the traditions you know, for example, I guess the kind of music they listen to, like for example Christmas, *Día de los Muertos*, the language most of all. I guess that's how I see Mexican. Like *mariachis*, *banda*, Vicente Fernandez, all that stuff and American I just see it as I don't know, that's a hard question. I don't know. I don't know how I see American" (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

### ***Defining Mexican-American***

"[A Mexican American is] someone who was born here" (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

“[Mexican-Americans] are people that feel they are half and half. When I was younger, I would be like I’m a 100 percent Mexican. Now I look back and am like wow it has definitely changed, now I say that I’m 50/50 because yea I was born there but two years that’s nothing and I was raised here” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

Unlike Giovanni and Blanca, Jennifer complicated this label by addressing what she perceived to be privileges afforded to those that are described as Mexican-American, and that is, the ability to straddle both U.S. and Mexican societies based on assets such as bilingualism.

“Well it’s just papers...like that you’re born here it doesn’t matter at all because okay so if I go back to Mexico I still have a better opportunity cause...even there’s some companies in Mexico that distribute...internationally and like your language helps you. You could still be big in Mexico, it just takes determination to what you want to do” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Jazmin response also underscored English language skills.

“Mexican-American well someone who’s born in Mexico no, no, no someone who is born here but is American. Noooo, yeah, I mean, someone who’s born here but has Mexican descent like their parents are Mexican I think that’s a Mexican-American *but* [emphasis added] I would consider myself Mexican-American even if I was born in Mexico because I was raised here so I feel like I am you know kind of American, like I do. I mean my grandma even tells me you’re an American [laughs]. She tells me, ‘you know nobody can take that away from you. You were raised here, you speak great English, you know that’s not the best,’ she always tells me, she always thinks I can do better but she’s like, ‘you speak it, you write it, and you’re working here now.’”

As Jazmin began to describe this term, she had a hard time explaining it to me. The varied takes on all the labels used to describe Latina/os show that they are rooted in the lived experiences and knowledge of participants.

### ***Defining Chicana/Chicano***

Similarly to the definitions of Mexican-American, when participants defined Chicana/Chicano, they often also addressed a hybrid identity.

“I would define [Chicana/o] like someone that is second generation or someone that has mostly Mexican ethnicities or roots but he was here and I would explain that as someone *que está en esta situación de que no se siente de allá porque la gente de allá...hablan otro idioma y la gente de allá no nos quiere pero tampoco la gente de aquí* (that is in this situation, where they do not feel they are from over there because the people from there

...speak another language and the people from there do not like us but so don't the people from here) so it's something like *separado* (separate) I would explain that as a Chicano/Chicana" (Martin, 22 years old, community college student)

Martin's response is an example of Gloria Anzaldúa's classical 1987 book "Borderlands/*La Frontera: The New Mestiza*," where she makes the same argument as Martin, Chicana/os are not from there, nor here and find themselves living on the border of both worlds.

Blanca used family members as an example to define Chicana.

"I think Mexican-American sounds a little different from Chicana. Let's see for me Chicana is like my *tías* (aunts) they were born here but they're also Mexican. They are way more American I guess in comparison to my mom, they use Facebook and talk English á the time...they taught their children to speak way more English so I would classify them as Chicana."

Language was brought up by participants often and is an identity explored in more detail in chapter eight.

When I asked Jazmin how she would define Chicana/Chicano, she had some difficulty defining it and her response was framed in question form showing how the availability of multiple labels confuses people, yet gives them the flexibility to shift their identity.

"Chicana or Chicano? Hmm people like Mexican descent 'cause there's a difference between Chicana and Hispanic, right? Chicana/Chicano and Hispanic, Hispanic is all of South America right?"

### ***Defining Hispanic***

The term Hispanic elicited negative responses associating this term with politics used to sort people.

"Oh no, when I hear that word, even my parents say it and Spanish channels say it all the time '*hispanos*' but after Chicano Studies like hearing where it came from, yea I'm really against it" (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

"Um [pause] if you spoke Spanish...if your family ever spoke Spanish in the last few generations, you're Hispanic, if you're not White, you're Hispanic I think so yea it's like broad and it's just for politics" (Martin, 22 years old, community college student).

As a Chicana/o Studies major, Juan has had discussions about all these labels and had a stronger reaction to “Hispanic” more than any other term. Earlier, Martin expressed himself about the term Mexican and stated that he also feels that the use of “Hispanic” is a political one, used to differentiate among a similar group of people.

### ***Defining American***

When I asked Jazmin and Blanca how they defined “American” they both had a hard time.

“American? Hmm that’s a tough question [laughs]. Well to me, well okay my view of an American would probably be someone hard working that’s what I would picture an American to be, I mean the American life the American dream would consist of someone with you know, a job, someone with an education and well someone who becomes successful so that’s what I would view American as, a hard worker. I mean there’s different you know labels like there’s a lazy person, there’s a hard worker but I would consider American to be hard worker because...we have more opportunities here to work and I feel like that’s what an American would be I guess, I don’t know if I answered correctly” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

“I’m not sure I can tell you a definition, but to me like how I feel American or why I feel American is because I’m familiar [with this culture]. My mom always tells me ‘you became American the first time you ate a chocolate chip cookie’ she’s like ‘those don’t exist in Mexico’...I think it’s true, I’m American in the sense that I like the music from here, I like the clothes, I’m in the school system here which is much different from Mexico’s, the politics, economics, I think everything, it has to do with everything. I’m not sure if there is one definition. Everyone defines American in a different way depending on where they come from” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

In several of the participant definitions of these ethnic/racial labels, we see contradictions and difficulty making concrete differentiations among them, resulting in confusion.

Understandably so, making sense and distinguishing among the various race/ethnic labels society uses can be difficult and frustrating as is discussed in the following section.

### ***Label Confusion and Feelings***

In the excerpts listed above, we can see both simple and complex definitions offered by participants about various labels. Engaging participants in a discussion about the evolution of

labels used to describe undocumented immigrants as well as the various ethnic/racial labels, revealed how challenging it is to differentiate terms used to describe a group of people. In my conversation about identity with participants, it was clear to see their identity was based on labels. While “illegality” was not found to significantly impact the identities of participants at the time of data collection, their recollection of the moment participants like Blanca and Jazmin found out about their status, as discussed in chapter six, shows the impact of that moment. Most participants described the experience as life altering because their identity was disrupted. The process of grieving their perceived identity and coming to terms with the “new” identity of undocumented led to periods of depression for many. However, the fluidity of identities resulted in participants slowly accepting their immigration status while working towards eliminating the negative connotations of this term. At the time of data collection, I believe that participants had become successful in resisting the power of “illegality” discourse and like any other youth, were negotiating and struggling with making sense of their multiple identities. In other words, I found participants to adopt an “*I AM* undocumented, but that does not capture *WHO* I am” mentality. Below are excerpts of participants talking about their understanding of the differences between those labels as they relate it to their social identities.

“Mexicans are still considered Hispanic right? You see those bubbles whenever we fill something out, ‘oh what are you? Are you Hispanic?’ but then you always fill out that bubble, but yea Chicano or Chicana I feel like that name is used a lot in East LA like I just feel like oh especially because we have classes there [in school]. I haven’t taken a class I need to take one but I feel like what they focus on is the Mexican culture. I don’t know. I’m thinking of another word a *pocha* do you know what a *pocha* is? [laughs] People that are Mexican or Mexican descent but were brought here and do not know any Spanish but you can tell where they come from and you know they’re Mexican descent or they have the culture of a Mexican yea I don’t know” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

When I asked Jazmin why she thinks we have so many labels and what their purpose is, she said:

“I don’t know because I don’t know if there’s a difference between any of them to be honest. I don’t know honestly, I really don’t know how to answer that because I feel like Chicanos or Chicanas I mean it’s still in the same category of like Mexican-American I would think right? So I don’t know the difference to be honest it’s just another name I guess but I don’t even know, I need to research that cause I don’t even know where Chicano came from like I don’t know much about that I should look at it but I wouldn’t know the difference honestly between Chicano/Chicana or Mexican-American I think it’s the same thing.”

As Blanca continues to make sense of her identity, she also highlighted the influence of others in this process.

“I think my identity right now it’s kind of like what do I identify as, as in like an American, a Mexican, or Mexican-American. Both or one. My family will always joke ‘well Blanca *es 100 por ciento Mexicana*’ (is 100 percent Mexican) and I would be like ‘yea *bien Mexicanota*’ (real Mexican) but I would be like I don’t know anything, just cause I was born there they automatically put me that label. But now looking at it, I don’t know the traditions a lot. My parents haven’t taught us the traditions, they just talk about it. When they came [to the U.S.] they assimilated to the culture, so we don’t celebrate *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), we don’t do things, we just talk about it. I told my brothers, ‘I am just as American as you are’ and they joke around and sometimes they call me white-washed and they tell me ‘we are more Mexican than you.’ It’s always that struggle, what do I identify as? Like Chicana? Society puts on all these labels and I’m like ‘what am I?’” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

Although most participants were still exploring and making sense of their different identities, Blanca and Jennifer had the strongest feelings about labels. Blanca said the following about the immigrant labels:

“I don’t like it. I don’t like being labeled. I never have. I don’t like it. But I have to...AB 540 sounds like codes and numbers. Undocumented it’s, I don’t know. It just...that you don’t have papers and when you say that to someone if they are ignorant, they might take it the wrong way, they may see you as below them...They are ignorant about it and also because of society all those bad things that come with that term and all the negative connotations and...I just don’t like labels. I don’t like it” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

Jennifer’s dislike of labels revolved around ethnic/racial identifiers as noted above, however she did not adamantly oppose the use of labels like “girl,” “student” or “daughter,” saying:

“Well those are common so they don’t bother me because you know it’s like everyday stuff but just those [ethnic/racial] labels that I don’t like calling myself. I don’t like it” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

These labels are discussed in the following section and in more detail in chapter eight.

## **Gender Identity**

Anti-immigrant discourse did not have any effect on the gender identity of participants.

When participants were asked about this identity, specifically what it is like to be a young woman or young man, their answers tended to align with gendered expectations. In other words, typically young men spoke about freedom while the young ladies spoke about the pressures of having to fulfill cultural expectations as well as societal inequalities.

“I think there’s both advantages and disadvantages [of being male]...like my family they weren’t really like protective of me they would let me do whatever I want I guess and let’s say my sister, they don’t let her go out they don’t let her do anything so you see the gendered expectations” (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

“If I was a woman let’s say in my situation, the oldest of five. First of all because of the Mexican culture my dad would be more on me like ‘*ey a donde sales? Que vas a hacer? En donde vas a estar?*’ (hey where are you going? What are you going to do? Where are you going to be?) *me pondria mas cuidado* (he would pay more attention to me) only because of that because I’m a woman...I think it has to do with that, *la cultura* (the culture)” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

In Jose’s case, he recognized gendered differences as well but spoke about being raised differently by his mother.

“Honestly growing up the way I did in my house it was pretty much equal. My mom since we were little kids, once we heard the music playing at 6 in the morning we knew we had to get up and clean...Everything was equal in my family like I know how to cook and I know how to clean and there’s friends of mine I still see to this day, either her or her sister, they have to cook saying ‘oh I have to get my dad’s food ready’...we still see that. Luckily with us my mom was able to show us all how to cook and clean” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

Although the young men tended to recognize the privileges associated with being male, they also highlighted some of the pressures of living up to manhood as Martin shared:

“Well right now one of my focuses is like coming back to school so actually being financially stable that’s one of the things because my dad he already was working when he was 18 and actually I have some friends [in Mexico] on Facebook that are from *secundaria* [middle school] and they already have a family and everything. I don’t want to have a family right now but it’s saying like they already have something you could say stable but me *todavía sigo viviendo con mis padres y con mi papá y con mi abuelita* (I still live with my parents, with my dad and my grandmother) so that’s probably right now being financially stable right now in order to pay for school and actually come back” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

Since Martin had spent the first 15 years of his life in Mexico and has only lived in the U.S. about six years, this may explain his response. In particular, as he compared himself to his school friends, who at his age, are self-sufficient and already have families. The influence of gendered cultural expectations was also evident among the female participants. Jennifer addressed how her family’s lifestyle has shaped her ideas of women’s roles.

“Like my grandma and my grandpa for example, my grandma has to be home and has to clean, wash clothes, it’s really popular that the woman has children and the men have to take care of them [financially]” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Yadira complicated the cultural gendered expectations by adding the societal perspective of women.

“Well we have more possibilities, we have more opportunities, but we’re still a minority. We are still struggling with the gender gap, with the salaries, like for example, men and women performing the same job, men are earning more money than women, still just stereotypical because we are women. Society thinks that we are not able to pursue a higher career like a prestigious career mostly pursued by men. I have experienced that. A lot of people don’t think that I’m gonna be able to become a lawyer because I’m a woman and I’m always facing this struggle or they think I’m gonna get married quick and probably and I’m gonna drop out of school just because of that...I don’t hold those traditional roles and I value the norms that my parents have showed me but I think my role is more egalitarian it’s not so much traditional. I don’t follow the stereotypical perceptions, stereotypical traditions for men and for women” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

Like Yadira, some of the female participants shared similar challenges associated with being a young woman in society. Unequal treatment, lower wages, expectations as well as safety were some of the challenges that were brought up.



“Hmm that’s a great question I love it [laughs]. Well to be honest I’ve had a struggle of going from place to place on the bus, I hate it, I hate it because you do get that guy that always tries to you know, ‘*hi mi amor*’ (hi my love) or like, ‘can I have your number?’ and I really hate it, I hate it so much I can’t even wear a dress sometimes because it feels so uncomfortable to that point where I just don’t want to. I don’t dress down where I’m just wearing sweats or anything but you know like I hate that, that’s why I’m saving for a car ‘cause I don’t want to be in the streets anymore. There’s been times where I’ve been in the street at like 10 or 11pm coming from school and I hate that because you know that’s when guys usually are on the bus at night and usually it’s lonely in the bus so it’s dangerous and it’s just one thing I don’t like...I hate it. I wish I had a car” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

Jazmin’s multiple use of the word “hate” shows just how uncomfortable it is to be sexualized by men on the bus making riding public transportation frightening and unsafe for her.

### **Class Identity**

Although class identity was not found to be directly impacted by anti-immigrant discourse, its impact was more indirect. In other words, most participants described themselves as working class and attributed this to their as well as their parents’ limited job prospects due to their undocumented status.

“I would say working class. I don’t think we’re nowhere near middle class ‘cause if my mom or dad lose their job tomorrow it’s going to affect all of us. Yea my brother and I work but still, we help each other out. We depend on each other” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

“We kind of live pay check to check well not so much me anymore, I’m kind of paying for everything on my own but I’m definitely always concerned about my mom and my stepdad because if my stepdad gets sick or something and his boss is greedy, he doesn’t pay him what he should” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

“[I am] working class just like living pay check to pay check. My parents don’t earn more than a few thousand dollars and we’re a family of 6 people so we’re poor” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

“I would like to say lower class, yea lower class because my dad he’s working many hours and I know he’s making more than the minimum but it’s like not a lot. Without the help of my grandmother and some other people I don’t think we would make it. Thank God I have never suffered the feeling of hunger, thanks to my mom, thanks to my dad, thanks to my grandmother” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

Some of the participant responses to the question about class identity differed in perspective.

Jazmin described her family as lower middle class and explained why.

“[We are] middle class, probably lower middle in between those two cause we’re not poor like my grandma always says, ‘we have a roof, we have beans, we have bread, we have *tortillas* and fruit, we’re okay’ [laughs]. We’re not poor, she’s like, ‘we’re probably richer than the rich [laughs].’ That’s what she says and I’ve always took that like I always laugh because it’s funny because it’s true. I mean if you’re rich yeah you have everything but you might have a lot of debt and we’re comfortable, we don’t purchase anything like that [luxury items], we don’t give extra when we don’t have it ‘cause you know a lot of people do pay more than they’re supposed to. So I would consider us like in between poor but not too poor where we’re like struggling too much cause they have my help and we have family help, our family helps us so much they help us a lot, so I don’t think we’re that bad but I mean it could be better” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

Pedro also echoed Jazmin identifying as “rich” because he and his family have the essentials.

“Well to me, I have a house, I have my family here, we always have food on the table, to me I’m really rich, like looking at my family in Mexico, they are struggling. To me I’m rich” (Pedro, 18 years old, high school junior).

In their responses, it became evident that the younger participants were less aware of their family’s finances. It was not uncommon for the high school participants to not know the salaries of their parents. Jennifer identified as middle class.

“Technically we are middle class. I really don’t think we are rich but I wouldn’t say we are poor either. So we are middle class. Because some days we have money and some days we don’t” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Jennifer’s belief that her family is middle class stems from her experiences with classmates, who often times do not have money to buy lunch.

“[We] don’t have a lot of money but since my parents work hard and have money and have jobs, they give me and my sister like \$20 a week...and some of my friends are like ‘Oh can I borrow a dollar?’ and it like gets to you, ‘like oh my God they don’t have money at all.’ I told my dad and he said, ‘You know what? When your friend doesn’t have any money just give it to her. You could ask me for more but be generous.’”

In conclusion, the anti-immigrant discourse did not directly affect participants’ sense of identity. Instead, this discourse politicized many participants, empowering them to adopt pro-

immigrant identity markers such as AB 540 and DREAMer. Moreover, when it came to making sense of their ethnic and racial identity, many participants expressed confusion since most of them were living in two worlds, one American and one Mexican. In addition, male participants highlighted the privileges of being male while the young women expressed their frustrations over gendered expectations in their homes and society. Lastly, class identity was indirectly affected by anti-immigrant discourse because the financial standing of participants and their families was attributed to their limited employment prospects due to their undocumented status.

## **Chapter 8: The Social Identities of Undocumented Students**

The previous chapter addressed whether or not the sociopolitical context of immigration impacted study participants' identity sense-making, focusing specifically on race and ethnicity, class and gender. This chapter extends this examination and focuses on other salient identity markers that continue to inform my first research question: 1) In what ways, if any, does the larger sociopolitical discourse on unauthorized immigrants and immigration have on the social identity (re)formation of undocumented Latina/o students? In what ways does this larger discourse magnify one's undocumented status?

This chapter provides excerpts that focus specifically on participants' identities as children, siblings, religion, sexual orientation, and student identities and finds that of these identities, their sibling and student identities magnified their undocumented status.

### **Sibling and Child Identity**

Participant *testimonios* suggest that the anti-immigrant discourse did impact their sibling identity but not their child identity. Mentioned throughout chapters six and seven are the interactions of participants with family members, such as siblings and parents. Discussing these interactions was important to help examine the role that siblings and parents had on the identity sense-making process of study participants, many of whom are among the eldest children in their families. Seven of the twelve participants were the eldest child in their family and among these students it was common for them to describe their sibling identity by speaking about being a role model for their younger siblings.

One example of the role modeling was stated by Blanca when she discussed her preparation to transition from her community college back to her four-year university, she discussed wanting to move out of her home so she would not have to commute anymore while

also alleviating some space in her crammed house. However, she talked about the challenges of balancing school and being an older sister to her five younger siblings who constantly sought her out for homework help or to simply play.

“My home, it’s such a tight space, even though we do have a house, it’s a lot of us and I should share with my sister but that’s hard too. I can’t sleep the way I want to and she’s four years old and I have to be careful but she’s the one that pushes me, she threw me off the bed last time. She’s a crazy sleeper. So you know, I have that thing too, its gotten so difficult that my mom had to move the couch to my bedroom just so that I can have my own place to sit down cause I have no desk so she moved the coach so now I lock myself in the room and just in my zone doing what I have to do ‘cause once I start, once I come home, my little sister is like ‘can you play with me?’ and my brother ‘can you help me?’ and I wish I could and sometimes I feel like I’m rejecting them but I tell them ‘you don’t understand, it’s really hard.’ I try to be a good sister but I try to have my own life too (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

In asking Blanca to elaborate on what is her biggest challenge as a sister, she explained her difficulties juggling all her responsibilities to be the older sister her siblings need.

“Now it’s hard...now it’s much harder ‘cause now I’m in college. It’s a whole different world and I don’t want them to make the same mistakes that I have, you know, and that’s why I tell them ‘do this, do this’ even though they will make their own mistakes and it’s gonna happen it’s inevitable but at least not the same ones as I did. I always try to make them go on a better path. They don’t care. They show me they don’t care but my mom tells me ‘oh yea, your brother told me this and that, he looks up to you’ and I’m like, ‘oh so they do look up to me, they do.’

It is not uncommon for Blanca to have to explain to her siblings and parents why she is not home as often and why she cannot participant in occasionally family events.

“They see me every day, they see what I do, sometimes they ask me, ‘why are you so involved? Why are you always working? Why are you this, why are you that?’ And I tell them ‘I gotta do what I gotta do’ and even then, I like being involved, I don’t like being lazy, I don’t like not doing anything. Vacations are fun but after I’m like ‘oh my God. I need something.’ That’s my personality, I just like to be active. I guess being the oldest out of six, it’s hard. Being a woman, being a girl is hard enough and...being undocumented, they don’t understand stuff that you do and being the oldest so yea all those things it’s really hard and for example, I’m like the trial and error kid, if it didn’t work with me, now they know and they [parents] try with the other kids.”

Similar to Blanca, Jennifer is the eldest of three children and she spoke about trying to explain her challenges to her siblings. Although her twelve-year old sister was born in the U.S., Jennifer had conversations with her and found it comforting when her sister assured her that her immigration status will be resolved soon.

“For her [sister], she always tells me, ‘when your 15 you’re going to get your papers.’ She supports me, she tells me not to worry about that. It’s kind of a big deal but not really a big deal. She like encourages me, ‘don’t worry, you’re going to have your papers sooner or later, eventually, you will have them.’ But sometimes I think ‘how about if I never get my papers?’ I always tell her and she says, ‘don’t worry, you’re going to get your papers eventually’” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Although participants like Blanca and Jennifer felt pressured to be great role models, they also demonstrated a sense of vulnerability because of their immigration status. Not only were they a main source of support to their siblings, but their siblings were as well, providing comfort to them when their frustrations escalated.

On the other hand, for Alejandro, being the eldest child among his acquired U.S.-born step-brothers was difficult. His sense of responsibility encouraged him to try to help his brothers with school, but they were not receptive. The fact that they were not doing well in school, yet were receiving money was a constant reminder to Alejandro that he was an undocumented immigrant.

“Every day that I saw them it was like a mirror telling me, ‘look at what you don’t have, look at all this money they’re getting that you’re not getting, look how bad they’re doing in school, look how good you’re doing.’ I have to deal with that a lot because why do they not have to work at all and get so much and I have to work so much and not get. It was just taunting, their presence was taunting. They didn’t realize what they had and I realized what they had because I realized what I hadn’t” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

Not only did participants have a hard time negotiating their identities as brothers or sisters, but they also experienced challenges with their identity as a son or daughter. The anti-

immigrant rhetoric did not appear to impact this identity. Blanca explained that because she is the first born of six children, her parents gave her a lot of responsibilities at a very early age.

“I would take care of the kids, I would iron, I would wash the dishes at 3 years old. I think I was between 3 and 5 but that’s too young because my mom had the kids *seguiditos* (consecutively) so I had to help her. She was tough on me, she was really tough on me and I had to catch up. I had to grow up fast, become more independent, and I think that’s why I am the way I am today because I think like that. I was always taking care of my brothers and sister, always. They tell me ‘you’re not mom why do I have to listen to you?’ and I’m like ‘I’m not your mom but I am your older sister so you do have to listen to me.’ Now that they are older it’s harder ‘cause they don’t want to listen to me, when they were little kids they would listen to me. But yea, all those 3 things, being a woman, being undocumented, being the oldest [sibling] make me feel pressure, mainly pressure or so I think about it that way. Last time I asked my sister ‘do you see me as a perfect sister? As someone that is always trying to do good things for you?’ and she was like ‘No. You make mistakes just like all of us. Why are you feeling like that?’”

Jennifer echoed Blanca and spoke about how as the eldest child she was bestowed with responsibility and trust by her parents.

“My parents taught me obligation...as the eldest, they trust me more than they trust my sister ‘cause I’m older and know more. I need to help my parents out with everything but also help my sister and brother...As the oldest, you have bigger responsibilities.”

Similarly, Martin also empathized with Blanca and Jennifer. He too is the oldest child and has three younger siblings whom he feels he needs to be a good role model. Like Blanca and Jennifer, Martin also assisted his parents with caring for his siblings and doing chores as a child but explained that things are different now that his siblings are able to take care of themselves.

“It was kind of hard at the beginning but right now it got a lot easier because my older brother, the second oldest, he’s 18 he’s gonna be 19 in October so he’s already grown he already goes to college *entonces ya sabe que hacer y todo* (so he already knows what to do). My third brother, he’s gonna be a junior in high school so *tambien no tengo que estar ahí de la manita* (with him also, I don’t have to be holding him by the hand). Probably when I was a senior in high school and my first year in college...it was more responsibilities on me but not right now, it’s a lot less because *ya crecimos* (we are grown).”

Yadira described her sibling and child identity very similarly to the other participants, however, she expressed being a bit resistant to her responsibilities as a sister and daughter.

“I’m the oldest one so I have to take care of my siblings but I’m doing something on Sunday and they [siblings] tell me I have to do this, I have to teach them, I have to cook for them and even my brother, the 17 year old, he’s able to do his own things so he told me to cook for them, I told him, ‘No just because I’m a woman I’m not going to do this for you’” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college).

Yadira’s resistance to taking care of her brothers is not taken well by her parents, whom she also has to speak with regularly to explain her views. Yadira credited the roles of each of her family members to the *machista* aspect of the Latina/o culture.

“My mom’s always pressuring me to do household things or my brothers to do that and just because they’re males, the pressure is never put on them...I think in my family and even I think like the Latino culture has always been like that. I see the males dominating the system, they are the ones who are controlling, who have the power. My grandma was taught to be just a housewife, she was never sent to school so she didn’t even complete elementary and then my mom was the same she just completed elementary. She wasn’t encouraged to pursue something higher, to go to a university, to go to college or at least to get a technical career. Even in my family I still see that my dad’s the one who provides the money, who brings the money and my mom she works but I mean my dad’s the one controlling the money and gives final decisions.”

Sibling and child identities were intertwined and often spoken about simultaneously, however, participant descriptions of each showed that sibling identity was impacted by the larger anti-immigrant discourse while their child identity was not.

### **Sexual Identity**

Sexuality was another identity that was explored with study participants with most identifying as heterosexual. It is important to note that the high school students and male participants in general appeared uncomfortable about my questioning their sexuality and did not reveal much.

“I feel *como un hombre* (like a man), a male, what can I say? I like girls [laughs]. I’m a male, a man, yea, I was born a man, I will die as a man. I like girls. I see myself getting *casado* (married) one day in the future with a woman” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

“Well I’ve never had a girlfriend, that’s the first person I had real feelings for” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).



Martin and Alejandro were very brief with their responses only noting that they were straight and Martin also confirmed that he is a man. When I asked Jose about his sexuality, he responded by speaking about the struggles of the LGBTQ community and the opposition of the church.

“I guess I didn’t realize the difference till after high school, in college. I know church is very against it. Being part of the [immigration] movement you see the LGBTQ movement and they tried to combine it. I feel like we are all fighting for the same cause, equality...to me [homosexuality] was never a big deal to be very honest” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

However, for those that did discuss this identity with me, the answers were reminiscent of the responses about gender identity. In other words, the young women highlighted the challenges associated with establishing equality in their relationships as well as challenging gendered stereotypes within their homes, such as being submissive and dependent, a traditional view of many Latina/o households. In addition, the anti-immigrant sentiments and rhetoric did not directly affect this identity, instead, the “illegality” of participants was only detectible if they were in a relationship with someone who was not undocumented. At the time of data collection, only two female participants, Jazmin and Yadira, were in romantic relationships and discussed their identities as partners.

Jazmin has been in a three-year relationship with her boyfriend whom she met through her cousin and spoke about establishing her independence in the relationship.

“I like the fact that I could tell my boyfriend, ‘I’m independent. I don’t need you to pay for anything. I can tell you right now that I could pay for my food.’ We’re very equal like that and he understands that and I understand that of him. I never tell him, ‘pay for my food.’ I’ve never done that I’m like ‘do I have it or do you got it? Or, can I pay for my food today?’ [laughs] I don’t like when he pays for my food actually [laughs]...I rather take responsibility and he likes that about me and we both enjoy that” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

Jazmin also shared some the challenges in her relationship.

“It’s a struggle. I mean we’re not a perfect couple but to me he’s pretty much perfect like he’s a perfect guy it’s just some things that he lacks you know maybe sometimes he doesn’t want to have a job or he’s not healthy, which is one thing that I really want him you know I really stress it ‘cause he’s a big guy and I tell him ‘you need to get into shape’ nobody tells him and I’m the only support he has so we get each other ‘cause we have similar things, we’re independent, but he lacks cause between me and him I’m more motivated than he is but I know he can do it he’s very smart, straight A guy and he did not go to school for a good two years he took a vacation but I motivated him I told him ‘you need to go back, you’re smart, you’re putting that brain to waste’ and he did what I told him and he’s doing so good in school.”

Related to Jazmin’s concerns over her partner’s health and education, is the frustration of being in a relationship with someone who has ample opportunities at his disposal due to his citizenship status. Jazmin expressed she had a hard time witnessing her partner pass up the opportunity to attend college and receive financial aid.

“There’s always that challenge...it’s that same thing because like I said I have cried to him where I’ve told him ‘you have all these benefits and you’re not getting none’ and then that’s when he finally realized, I felt like that was when I really did realize that he did really love me ‘cause he actually took into effect like ‘okay I have to go to school that’s it.’ I was like ‘oh okay well then yea. You know that I always have support for you. I will push you, I will bug you until you go to school and until you graduate. I will tell him you see you could do it, you could do.’ I would always tell him ‘if I could do it baby come on, you could do it too’ [laughs] and he would be like ‘yea you’re right. Man how do you do it?’ he would ask me that and then now that I got all my stuff [DACA] he’s so happy for me, he’s like ‘ahh look at you. You couldn’t be happier huh?’ and I’m like ‘but you’re still by my side and I’m still by your side. I’m not just gonna use you, I’m not gonna be like oh I got my stuff see you later’...He’d be like ‘oh my God, what if she gets her things and she leave me?’ but I’m not.”

Noted above by Jazmin is a common belief about mixed status couples. A U.S. citizen who dates an undocumented immigrant may be influenced by the idea that their partner is only in a relationship with them in order to become a U.S. citizen. This common strategy for citizenship was something that was recognized by both Jazmin and her partner, hence underscoring the importance and meaning of both of their immigration statuses to their relationship.

Yadira like Jazmin, also felt that gender roles in relationships needed to be challenged, but unlike Jazmin, Yadira did not mention her or her partner's immigration status having any effect on their relationship.

“I think that you don't have to be dependent on a man and the man could also be dependent on you, the woman. There's nothing wrong with that because if the man can't do well, you're not gonna support him their whole life but at least you could support each other just in case he is struggling or he's having difficulties or you could support your husband or your boyfriend.”

Yadira described her five-year relationship as balanced but explained the challenge of communicating her feelings to her partner. Like Jazmin expressed, Yadira also wanted to establish independence and equality in her relationship.

“Actually I think that I make it like that cause he was always paying for me when we were dating, he was always paying for everything and it was like at a point I felt like I'm depending on him so I just decided one day I just decided to pay and he was looking at me like [laughs] I don't know like weird, he was like how could you pay he always was saying that he's the man he has to pay and then I was like no I have to pay too there's nothing wrong with that and I could do that too.”

Though the initial conversation with her partner was awkward, in the end, Yadira said that her boyfriend really admired her for not following the traditional expectations of women and respects and supports her independence which she attributes to the success of her relationship.

However, both of Yadira's and Jazmin's family members expressed concern over their relationships. In Yadira's case, despite her parents knowing her boyfriend, they fear that being in a relationship will derail Yadira's studies and preferred that she finish her education first.

“I don't know they didn't like it because I have been with him for a while. Because I'm studying they think I'm gonna marry him and not finish school so it's kind of like they don't want me dating at all.”

In Jazmin's case,

“My mom, she trusts me, my grandma doesn't it's weird like my mom and I like that my mom trusts me 'cause I tell her 'mom I'm going to sleep over Loui's house' and she'll be like 'okay that's fine just call me' and I do call her but my grandma she's like 'you know

*no te ves bien cuando llegas con tus bolsas* (you don't look right with your bags) people are gonna see you' and usually when I did sleep over my boyfriend's house it's because he's like 5 minutes away from campus and I don't like taking the bus and my grandma doesn't see that."

When I asked Jazmin about the different perspectives between her mother and grandmother, she attributed it to the role of traditional roles and generational differences.

"My grandma she has her old fashioned traditions, she's very old fashioned she gets mad a lot and like us in our generation are more open to do things."

The discussion of sexuality reverted back to gender identity, yet also overlapped by generational differences. As Jazmin and Yadira expressed above, their family's disapproval of their relationships stem from traditional views of young women saving their virginity until marriage and associating boyfriends with derailing their lives. Interestingly, only for Jazmin was her immigration status magnified by her relationship.

### **Culture and Language Identity**

The excerpts above on sexual identity also hint at the cultural identity of participants. Culture and language identity were synonymous and spoken about interchangeably among participants. None of the participants spoke about the larger anti-immigrant discourse shaping this identity. All participants self-identified as either Mexican or Mexican-American and discussed the cultural practices practiced at home. Most participants talked about celebrating Mexican holidays, such as celebrating *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), Mexican Independence Day and continuing Mexican traditions, such as having a home altar and displaying religious icons like *La Virgen de Guadalupe*.

"Like *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) we do it every year, we put an altar for my mom's dad that passed away. It's just like in that day we do it. The Virgin Mary's birthday, I think it is. We do that, we have to wake up like 4 in the morning and go to mass" (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

“We have traditions. We celebrate Mother’s Day, we still celebrate it on May 10<sup>th</sup> instead of Sunday and...[Mexican] Independence Day, we still celebrate it as if we were in Mexico with food, beverages, and family. We try to make something more traditional with *mole poblano* ‘cause we’re from Puebla and we also try to have *tamales* and we don’t try to do something fancy as many try to do. My mom doesn’t like that and I guess we are like the way my mom has showed us to do” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

In Jennifer’s case, her dad was a storyteller and liked passing down family history and enjoyed telling her and her siblings stories about Mexico and the U.S.

“My dad has a lot of pride in the culture so he bumps up the music, the *corridos*. If you listen to the songs thinking about it, you hear what the song is saying like *Los Tigres del Norte* you hear what they are saying, they tell stories and then I remember my dad telling me that Los Angeles was Mexico before and how the Americans pushed us out and brought us down. So he says that we are more American than these white folks, that’s how he says it. We are more American. It just gets me thinking, how are we aliens? We were here first but then you know, stuff happened so America is still American and Mexico is still Mexico” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Moreover, participants also shared partaking in American cultural practices and holidays.

“We celebrate 4<sup>th</sup> of July, Thanksgiving. I guess in a way, it’s just the culture, how we grew up. We combine a little bit of both worlds” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

When I asked participants how they would describe their culture, most echoed Yazmin who said:

“I would define culture as the style of living, beliefs and way of doing things. I live in a very diverse culture where there’s different ethnicities” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

The notion of living in between two cultures was very common. Alejandro shared with me that being exposed to two different cultures was difficult as a child but as he grew up he learned to appreciate both.

“Growing up in middle school was tough enough and then having 2 different worlds in front of you to choose from is tough as well. When I was growing up I was kind of arrogant. I don’t know, I didn’t know who I was, I was playing a fool, I was a kid who didn’t know anything yet, I don’t know, it’s funny how you change through each school and learn to appreciate your culture more” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

Like Alejandro, many participants found themselves struggling to negotiate the pressure to maintain traditional practices and customs and adopting American ones. Some also spoke about resisting traditional beliefs that they feel are wrong. Yadira spoke about the cultural differences she observed in Mexico and in the U.S.

“Well since I was in Mexico, well just in the Latino culture it’s not good for me to be a woman and I think that this is why I’m heterosexual because a lot of people show me that having a partner of the same sex wasn’t right so since you are little you’re learning all these cultural norms and values in society... Actually until I came to the United States I was exposed to more liberal views, I saw more lesbians, more homosexual couples and it was already like my values and norms I have already learned them in Mexico so it would be for me hard to change that and those institutions [referring to school and church] show me too to be like that.”

When I asked Yadira how schools perpetuated such beliefs about sexuality, she said:

“They don’t show you, it’s like a taboo subject they don’t talk about it. I don’t know it’s just a topic that no one wants to talk about because people think that it’s bad but here [in the U.S.] when I was taking sociology classes, I actually learned that I mean people could do whatever they want [laughs].”

In comparison to Yadira’s schooling in Mexico, her education in the U.S. has challenged her to open her mind to ideas and values she would have otherwise not considered.

“Before I wasn’t in favor [of homosexuality] and I was against that but now I think I’m more in favor of that, I mean people could do whatever with their lives, if they’re happy with that why should I care? It doesn’t affect us, I don’t think it affects us and I mean homosexual couples are very respectful and if they respect others’ lives, why shouldn’t we respect them?”

Yadira, Giovanni, and Jazmin spoke about disapproving of homophobia, which they attribute to be a strong belief within the Latina/o culture. Yet, their sense of culture and language identity had nothing to do with nativist discourse and more to do with family values.

Another cultural challenge for participants was the generational disconnect that commonly occurs among immigrant parents and U.S.-raised children.

“I don’t know I think it’s just you know cause we’re very connected by our moms... all my cousins are my age. I have like 12 cousins my age so a lot of them understand their

parents more I guess. It's just like when we're younger we don't really understand them as much but when we're older, we like the Mexican traditions, like *quinceañeras* so we began to understand that you know, being polite is one of the things that is traditional...I don't know how to explain that you know. So like my cousin...she's one of my best friends...she is to herself when family comes over 'cause she feels like they think she is better than them. She's like, 'I would never feel that way about them never, never not because they're from Mexico'...I'm like, 'but that's because they don't know you. You need to approach them too' and she's like, 'oh okay.' Well I mean that eventually changed but at first my aunts from Mexico would be like, 'Ay Kimberly doesn't say hi to me, what's up with that? Does she think she's better?' and I'm like, 'I don't know *tía*' [laughs] you know so it's just that one thing that is a difference for me and my cousins. I'm very expressive...and I guess it's a tradition in my family to approach."

In asking Jazmin what she thinks differentiates her from her cousins; she revealed a big factor is the language barrier that exists in her family and is common among many families in the U.S.

"My cousins are very like, 'I don't know how to speak Spanish.' I'm like, 'Well learn! [laughs]. Tell your mom *hola* [laughs] or something. You don't know how to say *hola* [laughs]?' They're like, 'yes.' I'm like, 'well what's so hard about it?' and yea they took Spanish classes because they saw how important it was, especially for their mom's you know, 'cause it is important, our family is very important as you can tell."

Jazmin credits the maintenance of her bilingual skills to living with her Spanish monolingual mother and grandmother. As the only bilingual person in the home, Jazmin has always been the language broker (Orellana, 2009) and translates back and forth between the adults and their children.

"Sometimes they're [cousins] like, 'what did she say?' I'm like, 'see you need to speak Spanish [laugh]...' They wish they could understand grandma like they understand her but sometimes they'll tell me, 'what did she say? I didn't understand...' But for me...I always had to translate for them [mother and grandmother]. Like earlier today, we went to the hospital but luckily somebody spoke Spanish so I didn't have to go in there and talk but usually I am the translator, like yesterday my grandma's therapist came in and he only spoke English so I had just came in...my mom came, '*mija mija*, I need you to help me. I don't understand what this guy is saying.' I'm like okay so I go and I sit down and then I ended up just speaking for my grandma 'cause I know everything in the house you know so I didn't really need my mom there but after I told my mom like, 'okay *esto es lo que me dijo* (this is what he told me) you know you have to do this and blah blah blah so and then I would translate for him like 'oh can you ask your mom this' and I'm like okay so I would tell my mom blah blah blah you know and it's a lot I think that that happens to a lot of us...I have a lot of friends that do that too and we always talk about that and then we're always like yes I know what you mean [laughs]."

Martin is also the language broker in his home and said that he really likes that he can maneuver between two languages.

“Actually I really like it [being bilingual]. *Me encanta hablar en espanglish* (I love speaking Spanglish) [laughs] even though, *ayer me hizo un comentario un amigo* (yesterday my friend made a comment), we were talking about Facebook, he’s from Mexico and he’s a Spanish major *y me dijo por favor me puedes hablar solamente en ingles o español* (will you please only speak to me in English or Spanish). And it’s funny because it’s the first time somebody tells me that, only speak one language. I like being bilingual *es parte de mi cultura* (it’s part of my culture), that’s the thing, *ya soy parte de dos culturas* (I am now part of two cultures)” (Martin, 20 years old, community college student).

In the excerpts above, Jazmin is addressing one of the many challenges in immigrant households. That is, in most cases, the parents emigrated to the U.S. as adults and raised children in the U.S., despite them being born in another country, as is Jazmin’s case who came to the U.S. at the age of five. Because these children are raised in the U.S. and are taught English in school, relatively quickly, many of them begin to lose their native language skills, often times making it harder to communicate with family members. The loss in language is often times attributed to the widening of a generational disconnect and loss of traditional values and practices. However, many immigrant families make a conscious effort to nurture bilingualism in their children as to avoid losing this important language identity marker. Jazmin explained to me what she believes contributes to the loss of Spanish.

“My cousin doesn’t really speak to her mom in Spanish. I don’t know why it is but I always wondered that too but I feel like it’s just because of school and her brother and sister would always speak to her in English too so they’re the ones we would call *pochos* ...well some of them were born in Mexico but they were raised here and then my cousin she was born here so she doesn’t really talk to her mom in Spanish but she knows a little bit and my aunt knows a lot more Spanish than English. I would always be like ‘why don’t you just talk Spanish to your mom? Why are you talking to her in English?’ and she’ll be like ‘she understands me’ ...and then my other cousins it’s because their parents are second generation so it’s like my aunts kids their kids speak more English. Just like my cousin Alex, say she had a kid that kid is not gonna speak Spanish which sucks you know. I hate that but that’s kind of what happened...it’s just weird.”



When I asked Jazmin why she believed she retained her Spanish, she said:

“Because I’ve been living with my grandma. I think my grandma is a big influence, she’s always like ‘*nunca dejes el español* (never lose your Spanish). Even now she gets mad she’s like ‘*mija* you’re Spanish is not good anymore. What happened?’ and I’m like ‘*abuelita* it’s cause you know school, I’m always surrounded by people that speak English.’ It’s a little bit harder ‘cause you start to lose your Spanish but being home then you know you speak it still but it’s not as good as theirs. I think it’s because I speak Spanish and English like more English now, I’m not gonna lie, it’s a lot more English but it helps so much speaking Spanish...speaking Spanish and English that’s helped me a lot especially with work like they saw that like oh you speak Spanish too that’s really good and like we work at an area that is predominantly White but some people go in there speaking Spanish and they think I don’t speak Spanish and you could hear their accent and I’m like ‘*yo hablo español* (I speak Spanish) it’s okay and they’re like ‘oh okay *esta bien* and then they’ll talk to me and they’ll laugh and say ‘that’s good I’m glad you speak Spanish’ I get that reaction all the time it’s funny [laughs] after a while. But my grandma’s the influence as to why I’ve still kept Spanish and my mom because that’s the only way I can communicate with them but I am losing Spanish and I don’t want to. I want to go to school for Spanish cause I want to speak it forever.”

Participants’ undocumented status was not magnified by their cultural and language identity, however, these two identities were synonymous for participants. It was common that language was used to describe their hybrid cultural identity. Moreover, the race and ethnic identity also intersected with this identity, showing how intertwined race, ethnicity, culture, and language identities are.

### **Religious Identity and Traditions**

Another form of identity explored with study participants was religious identity. All participants shared that they grew up in conservative Catholic homes as in the case of Yadira, who earlier described being taught that homosexuality was wrong. Again nativist discourse was not found to affect the religious identity of participants, however, for Blanca, she found solace in her religious identity during days when her “illegality” became too much to bare.

Yadira described herself as Catholic and explained that growing up she would attend church with her parents but as a young adult, she does not go to church every Sunday anymore.

For Yadira, being Catholic is intimately tied to the values she has learned around sexuality.

“Well for my religion, they [parents] have taught me different values, for example I have to be married before I can engage in a sexual relationship...that’s one of the values and tradition that my parents taught me.”

Like Yadira, many participants were instilled with similar religious beliefs about sex and homosexuality. But as they grew older, some participants have been exposed to different religious beliefs and have been chastised by family for sharing opinions that are not in line with Catholicism.

“I’m more of the kind of person that likes equality you know so the whole like same sex marriage for my grandma it’s like no, no, no, no, I’m just like ‘ah but how can you say that if we have 2 people in our family that are gay how, how grandma?’” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

Similar to Jazmin, although Giovanni was raised Catholic, he does not tolerate the homophobia of the church. He shared a painful incident in which we witnessed his transvestite uncle get kicked out of a funeral ceremony.

“One time I went to church with one of my uncles who is a transvestite and we went ‘cause one of his friend’s died. I felt sad cause I don’t know if it was a priest or a pastor, I don’t know if it was Catholic, he just told him, ‘we can’t have you in here, it’s a sin’ and saying stuff like that and then he kicked him out” (Giovanni, 18 years old, high school senior).

The disapproval of certain elements of the Catholic church made some participants challenge their parents, in particular their mothers, about religion. Jose spoke about him and his brother learning about religion in college and trying to engage their mom in a critical discussion, however, their mother would always end up very angry.

“My brother and I going to college and learning about religion and how the bible is written by man, we would challenge her [mom], we would challenge God and her beliefs.

It was hard ‘cause at the end she would always be mad” (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

When Alejandro tried to speak to his mom about religion, the result was similar to Jose’s.

“I am not religious at all, but I was raised Catholic...I talk to my sister about God, Jesus and everything and she doesn’t like me talking about it and then I talk to my younger sister and she’s like ‘yea I think people should be able to believe in whatever they want’...when I talk to my mom about religion oh she got *sooo* [emphasis added] mad at me. She was talking to me about God and this and that and I was like, ‘why do you always bring up God?’...when I told her that I didn’t believe, she looked at me like ‘what?’...I will never forget this cause this is one of the main reasons I don’t like religion, she said that she felt I had demons inside me” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

The religious beliefs of participant families had a lot to do with their morals and behaviors. Jazmin credits her family, in particular her grandmother for the moral values and traditions she holds.

“I do feel that some of it is how my grandma taught me to be. Like she always taught me to keep to myself, never to be crazy because that looks bad you know but her *creencias* (beliefs) you know what that means right, they’re different than mine, she’s very old fashioned, she’s 90 so you can only imagine when she grew up her values, her morals and all that, but my morals are not of a bad person I don’t think. ‘Cause like I said, I don’t criticize people, I don’t. I don’t like doing it because every person essentially we’re all alike so you know I don’t like doing that. I don’t like being like, ‘oh she’s ugly.’ I don’t even say that if a person tells me ‘oh that person’s really ugly.’ I don’t always look at the bad things in them I never tell them like, ‘oh yea she’s ugly.’ I never do that. I never do that to people I don’t like doing that to people I don’t like it.”

In asking Jazmin to elaborate on this philosophy, she offered a “little confession” as an example.

“Okay a little confession...this is the only thing I could think of off the top of my head. I feel like I’m a good person but I drink and that’s a bad and a good and I feel like when I drink I feel like constantly someone’s gonna take that and tell, but I don’t drink to get super drunk, I don’t do that. I just drink ‘cause I feel like it’s a good drink but I feel like people are like, ‘Eww Jazmin is drinking, she shouldn’t be in a group like that...She’s going against her morals’ or like when I go out with my friends I feel like I shouldn’t be going out because I shouldn’t. I feel like I should instead be like being a good girl like I don’t know.”

When I asked her where she believes these feelings originate from, she revealed the role of her grandmother and mother.

“I think grandma, I think it’s my grandma. ‘Cause you know they [grandmother and mother] tell me [not to drink] but I know that I’m not a bad person you know. I’m not... Usually I do go out and then when I come back my grandma feels like I’ve done something so bad all the time, she always *me regaña* (reprimands me) all the time. She always gets mad but it’s like, ‘Grandma what do you think I’m doing? I’m not doing anything bad.’ Yea I’m drinking but she’s not supposed to know that, but I’m 22. Like the other day my sister came to visit ‘cause she lives in San Diego and we were having a BBQ and you know my cousins drink and they’re like, ‘Jazmin you want one? How old are you? You’re 22 right?’ And I’m like, ‘yea’ and they hand me a beer and I’m like okay just one beer. I didn’t even drink it at all ‘cause of this but my grandma’s like, ‘excuse me? *¿Me pediste permiso para tomar?* (Did you ask me for permission to drink?)’”

As mentioned above, anti-immigrant discourse did not affect that way participants spoke about their religious identity. What did affect this identity was the role of parents and educators, who exposed participants to multiple views that they need either supported or rejected. Nevertheless, for Blanca, religion has always been an important part of her life, and like all participants, her religious beliefs have been passed down to her from her parents.

“Faith has always been a part of our lives. Oh yes, always, always, my mom and my dad. My mom more than my dad but now they are at the same level. Even though my mom didn’t know a lot about religion, the virtues and the morals that my grandmother *inculcó* (inculcated)... stayed with her and that’s what she taught us, the little that she knew. So I remember the first time that we came here to the U.S. we found a church, St. Patrick’s, and we have been there ever since, it has been my home, my second home for like 17 years... I did all my sacraments there. My dad taught at the church, my mom too. They taught catechism... and then now I teach. My sister now got involved, she’s a *monaguilla* (alter helper) and my brothers, they are doing their confirmation so we are all part of it.”

Blanca cites her faith and her church for all the help her family has received since emigrating from Mexico.

“That’s how we have gotten most of our help too, you know financial because they know us, we are a good family and so they’re like, ‘no don’t worry, we’ll help you’ and they help out... Also, not only cause of my involvement but like also for my own spiritual growth and my own person, it has helped me a lot. ‘Cause I remember when I found out like what being an immigrant actually meant you know, the fact that I had to work twice as hard as my friends, it helped me a lot to see that like, I guess, everything happens for a reason and God will never let me down, he will never let me down. He has given me so much up to this point that it’s impossible for me to think that nothing good will ever come out of it so it’s definitely been a big part and that’s where I have gotten my strong morals and values because of that and that’s what I try to teach my kids, the ones that I

teach over there. Trying to make them good citizens you know, moral, with good ethics in society but also in school and that's what I'm an advocate for, education, education, education because I think when you come from a low-income family that's all you have, the power of knowledge of reading, all that. It has helped me a lot so that's what I try to tell the kids and the little that I know that I have experienced.”

## **Student Identity**

As Blanca states in the quote above, the knowledge and wisdom she has learned so far in life is something she passes down to the youth she works with. More importantly, she imparts in them the importance of an education. As equally important was for me to learn about the participants' identities as students. Of all identities explored with participants, their student identity unequivocally magnified their undocumented status and affected their schooling. Highlighted below are excerpts from only two participants that discuss student identity (for a full discussion on educational experiences, see chapter 10).

Blanca's first quarter at a competitive university led her to question the student identity she had developed throughout her K-12 education. Like many underrepresented, low-income, first generation college students, Blanca had a hard time transitioning and also began to doubt her academic abilities. Moreover, as a result of financial challenges and inability to secure enough funding to sustain her through her first year, she had to leave her university temporarily and take some general education courses at a local community college. Because of this experience, her student identity was complicated. She recalls her first quarter at the university as follows.

“At first I liked it a lot but it was hard to transition. I couldn't figure out my identity you know, I felt like sometimes I didn't belong here. I would ask myself ‘why did I even get accepted here?’ I would doubt it, I would have a lot of doubt. My confidence was very low...I didn't have friends, I had no one except for a couple of people in [AB 540 support and advocacy group] but it was just hard. I guess that happens with every college student...So that was really hard trying to balance that.”

At the core of Blanca's doubts was her undocumented status. She felt uneasy about having to take a leave because she did not have enough money for tuition and always struggled with having enough money for fun activities. A student identity appeared to be the most salient identity for all participants and also the one most impacted by the larger sociopolitical discourse on immigrants. When I asked Blanca if being undocumented impacted her student identity, she said:

“I mean as a student, I would say it only impacts me financially, for example, we have to find alternate ways to make it through every day, you know. Sometimes I don't have enough money for food so I would have to make choices, ‘Is it food? Am I really hungry?’ I am not able to go out and have as much fun, even to the movies, \$8 is like oh my gosh \$8 bucks, so yea...now that I'm going to get the California DREAM Act, I am so happy it's going to take so much stress away from me and there's nothing that is going to stop me now. ‘Cause that was the only thing that was holding me back, that pushed me...what more sacrifices am I going to have to make?...money should never be an issue especially in education but it's a reality but now that that's going to be covered I'm just like, ‘from now on there's nothing that can stop me now.’”

Financing the education of undocumented college students continues to be one of the highest ranking challenges for this population. Although the passage of the California DREAM Act is alleviating some of the costs as Blanca noted, it is often still not enough for undocumented students who tend to come from low-income families and are also contributing financially to assist their families. Such characteristic, in addition to being first generation and underrepresented fueled Blanca's doubts and shaped her student identity.

“My high school history teacher talked about affirmative action and he told me that the reason why a lot of universities accepted a lot of Latino students was because they wanted diversity. I never had the courage to ask him more about what he meant and that stayed with me up until my first quarter. I was like, ‘so I was only accepted only because of my diversity.’ I was like, ‘wow’ so that's what brought me down...his comments, that brought me down.”

Also common to the undocumented student experience is having to commute to school due to the inability to pay for school housing as a result of financial limitations and this was Blanca's experience during her first year.

“Commuting was really hard. I know college is really stressful and others would be like, ‘yea it is so hard.’ Now that I think about it, academic wise, the classes that I took, it wasn’t hard. The commuting was what made it harder, commuting 3 hours each day. I would have to wake up at 5:30 in the morning to catch the first bus at 6:00am, to catch the second bus at 6:30am, to make it to my class at 8:00am. And I had to have morning classes because I couldn’t go back home late...because my mom would worry. I had to take the bus in Van Nuys and it’s not a good neighborhood. There’s a lot of older men always wanting to do bad things. So I would get scared, she [mom] would get scared. She couldn’t go pick me up, she had to pick up my brothers and go to the house. So it was, I guess, trying to become independent, you know, more than I already was, even more. Trying to find out where my classes were, trying to find how to blend in, you know. It was tough. I think it was mostly about trying to find myself identity wise, like as an undocumented, what it meant, and also like as a person. I couldn’t understand why [university] was such a great school. My family would tell friends ‘oh yea she goes to [university]’ and they would be like ‘wow we are so proud of you.’ I didn’t get it. After I got out and I got my job, I did tours on the campus and I was like ‘oh my gosh it is a great school. I’m part of this’ so that’s what makes me more excited to come back now that I know everything I’m proud of it. I deserve to be here, this is where I belong. So I’m excited to come back. I know it’s going to be hard but who cares [laughs].”

Blanca's time at community college and distance from her university made her realize that her admission was not a mistake and that she did belong at the university. At the time of our interviews, Blanca was preparing to come back to the university and was looking forward to maximizing her time in college.

Similar to Blanca, Yadira points out that as a result of the challenges she experienced in acclimating to the U.S. educational system, she has molded a student identity based on reciprocity, in which she befriends peers to assist her but also helps them with what she can.

“I always try to look for people who have better positions. Like if they’re the one in the class that could help me...if I need anything I could ask that person so that I could learn a technique to study. Anything that is functional for them, could be functional for me and also not only that, not just for me, but I also could provide knowledge to other students who are in disadvantaged positions, that has always been one of my focuses, always trying to get resources because I know a lot of students are not willing to look for

resources for not even for themselves so I'm trying to approach students and teach them like whatever that I know that could be helpful for them so this is the main purpose of getting these type of relationships with those students who are doing well in the classes, especially as undocumented students, you always think that we are limited in opportunities and just being undocumented makes you think that we have more struggles but we could look for resources, we could do anything as long as we are determined and persistent in doing whatever you want to do."

As an undocumented student, Yadira recognized that she would have to work twice as hard in school in addition to diligently seeking resources. The friendships and networks she had developed at her community college had served her well. At the time of data collection, Yadira was in the process of transferring to a school within the University of California system. Besides successfully achieving her goal of transferring, Yadira's interactions with her community college peers led her to realize how varied cultural values are among her Latina/o peers. For example, she observed that many of her peers had lost the Spanish language. When I asked Yadira if she thought this was necessary to do in order to become successful, she said:

"Yea some people have done that. It's difficult to keep your traditional roles there's always going to be conflict with their values and I don't know how to say like the way you're thinking is different...I think that kind of clash, you have to do everything you have to do one thing or the other *como ponerte entre la espada y la pared* (like putting your back against the wall) but most of the students, based on what I have noticed is that they are second, third generation so they have forgotten probably they don't even know the cultural traditions."

Scholars with an assimilationist framework commonly argue that it is important for immigrants to renounce their cultural roots and language in order to become successful. As the previous sections have discussed, participants did struggle with making sense of and negotiating the hybrid world they are now a part of, but most of all the U.S.' nativist ideals magnified their undocumented status within the context of education the most.



## Intersecting Identities

After discussing the multiple identities of participants and whether the sociopolitical discourse on immigrants impacted each identity, I then asked them if they thought any of their identities intersected. It was important to examine this because intersectionality is one of the tenets of Latina/o Critical Theory. Findings suggest that the young women experienced conflicts with their identities more than the male participants. When I asked Martin, he said “no I don’t think there’s tension and I’m happy for that, like you have no idea.” However, the female participants spoke about how their child and sexual identities clashed as well as their culture and religious identities. In general, most participants spoke about the challenges of negotiating their family’s values, which in many instances were conservative, with the more liberal ideologies they were developing.

“...yea it just makes you feel that way, where you’re just like, ‘aww I can’t drink’ and that’s how I’ve always felt when I’m with my friends. It’s a time when I get to relax you know but my grandma pressures me but I know it’s all for good reason you know and I know that but that also comes back to that one point in my life where I was kind of rebellious because of that, because I thought I was just pressured into too much and it was just cause I didn’t do that bad I was bad for like at least 1 or 2 years you know but I knew all the time, I knew that like no I can’t get in trouble ‘cause I could have easily gotten in trouble with the law and that could have messed me up a lot but I never did, I never ever did ‘cause I know my limits. ‘Cause it comes down to that where I’m just like sometimes I don’t want to do anything because I feel like I’m being watched and it’s ‘cause of my grandma [laughs]” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

In this example, Jazmin addressed the conflicting roles of morals, authority, and young adulthood. Despite being an adult over the legal age limit for drinking, Jazmin’s conservative grandmother has taught her that young women do not drink, however, Jazmin does not agree with this belief passed down from the family matriarch and experienced an internal struggle.

Like Jazmin, Blanca also felt family pressure and shared with me some of the identity struggles she encountered as a new college student.

“Oh yea, first quarter challenges was that I finally understood the college life, my friends were like, ‘let’s go watch a movie’ and I would be like ‘No. I have to be back home.’ It was hard. And up to today it’s still hard. ‘Cause I’m the first one [referring to being eldest child]. And still today they [parents] don’t understand, times have changed since they were kids, since they were young adults, so they don’t understand why I want to do the stuff that I want to do. Right now, I’m struggling with that, that’s my biggest struggle. Trying to find out who I want to become you know what I want and just trying, like yes, I follow my parents teachings but there are some things I don’t agree with and I just want to do my own stuff and it’s really hard because sometimes I feel the pressure because I am the oldest and I am an example for everybody else. People would ask me, ‘let’s go out’ and I was like even if I were 21 and I would go to a club I wouldn’t feel right coming home drunk or having alcohol and having my baby sister look at me like that, I just couldn’t do that, it holds me back. In a way it’s good, ‘cause I don’t need it, you know. I don’t need that kind of pressure. But I mean like going out at night, it’s hard, you know. That’s hard and I think for college students, parents don’t understand. I’m sure some of them do but not completely” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

In Blanca’s excerpt it is clear to see that her identities as a daughter, sibling and student intersect with one another. When I asked her if she felt any of her other identities clashed, she said:

“Oh yea. Well being a woman, that identity, it’s hard now because of college love lives you know. It’s hard to find a good guy [laughs] and my religion has a big, big role into that ‘cause I won’t do certain things you know. I don’t go clubbing, I don’t drink, I won’t smoke, I don’t have care-free sex, you know, stuff like that, I just don’t. It’s hard. That’s what I have been struggling with too...I want to be a better person. For me I want to live a well-balanced life, family or friends trying to balance everything out is always my mission, you know...so I guess being a moral woman in this society. ‘Cause not having the college life that I am living now [referring to community college] is very different from the one here [university]. Here [community college] I don’t know much about it, but from what people tell me, nobody cares, the dorm life is very different...It’s dealing with that, trying to find someone that has the same morals as me and the same values, with family too, and dating.”

In this excerpt, we see that Blanca’s intersecting identities include her gender, sexuality, religion, and her student identity.

Another form of identity that commonly came up to answer the question on intersectionality was the relationships between culture, race, ethnic, and religious identity. It was common for participants to discuss the clash between the cultural traditions practiced in their homes and the American traditions they were adopting.

“I’m Mexican [laughs]. I am Mexican-American but I had a Chicano Studies class for a day and I remember the teacher asking us who considers themselves this or that? And I was like, ‘well I consider myself Mexican but you know I was raised here so I don’t have the culture, well I do have the cultural traditions like *quinceañera*. We don’t do that, well we would but you know money...we are very cultural like that we are traditional but it’s not to the point where I’m very religious ‘cause Mexicans are very religious, I’m not. I don’t know something about the religion, I just can’t. I do believe in a God but I’m not very religious like Catholic or Christian I’m not but of course I respect any religion. I respect my mom’s religion, she’s Catholic so is my grandma but I do consider myself Mexican like we eat beans all the time [laughs] we eat *pan dulce* (sweet bread), celebrate *el Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), we celebrate *Navidad* (Christmas) with *tamales*...I do wish I could be sitting with my grandma making *tamales* you know, but I am a little more American but I do consider myself a Mexican like it’s just, I don’t know, it’s weird but if I were to go back to Mexico for sure they’ll spot me that I’m not you know she’s not traditional ‘cause I speak in between I have good English but I have good Spanish but there’s words in English that I forget that I say in Spanish and Spanish it’s the opposite so I’m always in between Spanglish you know so it always clashes.”

Like Jazmin, Yadira also spoke about her religious identity clashing with others.

“Well I think like religion [referring to Catholicism] beliefs that if you are a woman, you shouldn’t be with another woman...It doesn’t matter...and it’s frustrating because in the Latino community you’re taught to be supportive, submissive and males are to be dominant, independent...in my family at least my dad he’s kind of a little *machista* (male chauvinist) I think he’s definitely *machista* and now too my mom teaches us different roles...cause you don’t want to be like your mom, I especially don’t think that way. I feel like ‘do I have to be like that?’”

Yadira struggled with the clash between her religious, gender, and cultural identities. She even brought up immigration status into the conversation.

“I think just being a woman because I could be a male and I could be undocumented but I’m a male I still gonna have more opportunities, higher salaries, like I’m gonna be the provider and someone has to be dependent on me but just being a male they don’t see you as you’re gonna support your family, you’re gonna probably even support your husband...if you do that they’re gonna look at you like *¿cómo?* (what?)... They’re gonna look at you as stupid because you’re not supposed to pay for a man, they are supposed to pay for you and they are the one’s who are supposed to support you, so it’s just difficult even if you do that, even if you’re able to support your husband it doesn’t look right in society.”

When I asked Yadira about her current identity development, she said:

“I don’t think I’m struggling but it’s just hard for me to be a more independent woman because of my family, you don’t want to contradict them and you don’t want to make

them feel bad but I'm still gonna work on that to make them learn, at least they could understand me the way I am...I feel like if I told on those traditions I don't think I will be able to succeed."

Although Yadira said she was not struggling with her identity, there was evidence to suggest otherwise. It was clear from the conversations with the participants that their multiple identities continued to evolve and were negotiated regularly.

### **Influence of Others**

Throughout this chapter, participant responses hint at how family members, friends, and educators influenced their identities. The role of others played a significant role in the identity development of participants.

"I think in Mexico like every country it's always like so patriarchic so we're always learning that we need to love our country whether we were born there or not, we need to love it... they teach you to identify yourself and your nationality in school because they always make you sing *el Himno Nacional* (the national anthem) and like *la escolta* (military escorts) and *muchas canciones con referencias, eso es lo que me hizo considerarme que soy Mexicana* (a lot of songs with references, that's what made me consider myself Mexican) [laughs]."

Since Yadira has been living in the U.S. for approximately 7 years, I asked her if she thought living in the U.S. was altering her identity and she said:

"I don't know probably I'm gonna contradict myself because I do identify myself as Mexican but I mean I'm living here, this country is the one giving me these opportunities and when I was in Mexico it was a lot harder to do some things so I don't know I still feel that I am that I identify myself as Mexican but also I don't know I just love this culture, I love diversity and probably at some point I'm not gonna deny my origins but I mean just being grateful with this country that I don't know just Mexican-American or something like that."

When I asked Jazmin what role she thinks her mother and grandmother have in shaping who she is, she said:

"Wooo 100 percent, a 110 percent, my mom she doesn't like talking about her problems so I don't know where I get it from [laughs] cause I like to approach somebody and tell them, 'okay this is wrong, this is right, this is bad.' My grandma as much as I don't like to admit it, she's the one who influenced me a lot and she helped me, she taught me how

to save, she taught me how to use my money wisely, what's good and what's but my mom you know she's my mom and she'll always be there, she's very loving...she baby's me a lot but I know my responsibilities and my grandma hates that but my grandma has helped me, they're a balance you know so yea 100 percent they're my influence."

Jennifer spoke about how the responsibilities her parents have given her make her feel grown up.

"It makes me feel like I have grown up because I have to do all the work so it's preparing me, that's growing up. My sister tells me you're going to be a good wife in the future because I know how to cook and know how to do all these chores. So it's like, a person who does more, *vale más* (is worth more)."

Blanca highlighted the role her friend had in challenging her identity.

"I guess right now I would say that I am both [Mexican-American]. I am both but sometimes I feel more American than Mexican because like I look at my friend and he was born here but he was raised in Mexico. We had similar yet different stories so when he talks about 'you know this *banda*, do you know this?' and I'm like 'No' he's like 'what? You don't know anything and you are Mexican' and I'm like 'oh my god yes I'm Mexican' you know but it's always that and he's like 'you don't know this tradition, you don't know that?' and I'm like 'no I don't know anything' so that's when I feel less Mexican and I'm just like, I'm just American and there's points where I'm talking where I teach, I'm trying to talk to parents in Spanish and I'm losing it [language] and I'm like 'mom I'm losing my Spanish' to her I talk to her [mom] in Spanish but outside I don't use Spanish so that's another thing I'm like 'oh my god I'm being less Mexican' so at times I feel more American but I do feel like I'm both I guess. A little bit of both just without the legal status 'cause if I were to go back to Mexico uff no, I think I would be like a *gringa*, I don't know anything. So yea, I guess I'm stuck right now, I'm still trying to figure it out. I'm stuck."

In conclusion, in this chapter we continued learning whether the larger sociopolitical discourse on immigration had any effect on the identities of participants. While most identities were not shaped by nativist ideologies, the student identity was by far the one most impacted. We also learned that participants struggled with the intersection of certain identities and the significant role others have in molding their sense of self.

## **Chapter 9: Social Interactions and Comparisons**

In this chapter, I share excerpts that focus on the social interactions and relationships of the twelve participants of this study. The excerpts provided in this chapter answer my second research question: 2) How does an undocumented status impact social interaction with peers, teachers, staff, and strangers encountered in everyday life? Participant anecdotes suggest that their undocumented status does impact their socialization with other.

The two preceding findings chapters discuss how the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the U.S. impacts the various social identities of undocumented youth. This chapter discusses whether having an undocumented status impacts the socialization of undocumented youth and focuses specifically on the way study participants approach friendships, professional, and familial relationships. I begin this chapter by sharing when study participants decide to reveal their immigration status and how they determine who they can reveal this information to. I then describe participant relationships with school staff followed by their socialization experiences at school, highlighting how participants pick their friends and what characteristics they use to distinguish between friends and peers. The following section revisits the guiding theoretical framework Social Identity Theory (see chapter 4) and highlights the social dynamics and comparisons of study participants in and outside of school. Lastly, this chapter closes with excerpts on what it is like for participants to be in mixed status families.

### **Immigration Views Litmus Test**

In speaking with participants about how or if their undocumented status impacted their social experiences, it was important for me to learn how they determine who they can disclose their status to and who they cannot. Most participants exclaimed that they are generally private

and do not feel the need to disclose their immigration status with everyone, as it is not pertinent to most social interactions.

“Well my mom always told me...if someone asks you where you were born you say here...in the United States and then I would do that, I’ll be like, ‘oh I was born here...’ I usually tell my friends and teachers. There’s I think some kind of thing that they sign that they can’t turn you into the police or something so obviously you know you trust the teachers, but like total strangers, I wouldn’t trust them because you don’t know what their purpose is” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Jennifer’s response captures the focus of this chapter. Participants are strategic about who they tell and generally felt that teachers, counselors and friends are folks to be trusted with this information. However, the commonality among all participants is that it took quite a bit of time before they felt comfortable telling anyone about their immigration status.

“I usually don’t tell people, I do have a lot of friends that I do have to hide it from not because I feel like a lot of people don’t know about undocumented people or immigration in general. Maybe it’s wrong because maybe I should be educating people but I don’t feel like explaining my life to other people” (Daniela, 21 years old, university student).

“I won’t tell just anyone, it’s important to be careful of who you say your stuff to, or who you can trust, a lot of people are just curious but they don’t really care” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

Like Jennifer, Daniela, and Blanca, Giovanni also shared with me that he did not like disclosing his status, but upon entering high school, felt that it was necessary to disclose his status to counselors and teachers in order to apply for college and scholarships. He recognized this was important to ensure he put together the strongest applications possible. Giovanni has also shared this with his close friends and exclaims that outside of these people, he will not tell anyone else, “Well a part of it is I don’t want to tell someone...and they think of me differently so I just keep it to people I know.” In general, the high school students expressed more reservations about letting people know about their immigration status, expressing more distrust of individuals around them and not wanting their immigration status to impact the way others

view them. Pedro said, “If I see you’re a nice person, then I will tell you. I have to feel their love.”

However, study participants in community college and four-year universities, all stated that they were more open about disclosing their status.

“Well I mean the people I usually tell are my close friends...recently I have been telling anyone because I feel like I don’t have fear anymore because I have something to back me up [referring to DACA] but before I would just tell my best friends or my family members, not a lot knew, like my cousins that wouldn’t be around, they didn’t know and I told them ‘cause you know they’re very like, ‘aren’t you working?’ or like, ‘why are you working there?’ and then I explain it to them and they’re like, ‘ohhhh okay that makes sense’” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student)

Having received DACA allowed Jazmin to become more open about disclosing her status.

However, for Yadira, there is a test she uses to determine if it is safe to do so.

“Yes I always talk to them but when people ask me if I was born in the country I say that I wasn’t born [here] that I’m undocumented but they’re certain cases when I don’t see that I need to share” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student)

When I asked Yadira how she knows who it is safe to tell she said,

“When I talk to people, it’s people who I have talked to before so by analyzing the way they think, that’s when I decide if I should say I’m undocumented or not”

When Yadira says “analyzing the way they think,” she is referring to whether she knows individuals views on immigration, particularly undocumented immigration. In the following sections, we will see more examples of the different strategies students use to determine who they can confide in about their immigration status, as well as learning about the social dynamics participants have with school personnel, friends and family.

### **Relationships with School Staff**

Participants reported having positive relationships with some school staff throughout their schooling and were generally not concerned about telling them that they were undocumented. Unlike Jennifer and Giovanni, fellow high school student, Yazmin said, “I don’t



think I have anything to worry about,” when asked if there were any people in school that she would not confide her immigration status to. Her openness with her teachers and counselors allowed her to create a nurturing support group. During her sophomore year, she was presented with an opportunity to go to Europe. Her English teacher noticed that she had not listed her name on the sign-up sheet and approached her after class about it. Yazmin explained to her that it was not that she did not want to do it, but it was because of her immigration status that she could not travel. In Yazmin’s words, the teacher responded by saying, “Oh you know it’s okay, you never know what’s in the future, you know things could change for you.” Sympathetic, the teacher encouraged Yazmin to become part of the club organizing and fundraising for the trip. She told her that despite her inability to participate, she would still be able to contribute to the cause and put this on her college applications. However, of all participants, Pedro, a high school student, reported having very negative experiences with school staff through his K-12 education. The interactions and issues he had were so bad that he no longer expressed interest in learning saying “I will just shut up about all my opinions because I know they are not worth anything to them.”

In Martin’s case, he does not worry about the potential consequences of sharing his status. He shared with me that some of the personnel at his community college were aware of his status through his involvement in supplemental programs.

“When I started college ‘Access’ [program at the school] had its own counselor and he already knew about my situation and *me ha ayudado desde entonces también la directora en ese tiempo* (has helped me since then as well as the previous director) she already knew because she had the list [laughs] but yea some of the professors knew. I talked to some of my music teachers, ‘oh this is my situation so that’s why I’m not coming back next semester but I still want to stay’” (Martin, 22 years old, community college student)

Unlike Jennifer whose mother encouraged her to protect herself by saying she was born in the U.S., Martin described himself as “more open” about disclosing his status. He does not preoccupy himself with worry about what other people may do upon learning about his

immigration status. As a music major, Martin explained that both his peers and teaching staff are very diverse, many immigrants themselves or children of immigrants. This observation made Martin feel comfortable about sharing his status since he knew that his peers and teachers alike have experienced or are familiar with the challenges associated with being an immigrant.

“They were really open-minded because I think it has to do with the music department itself... The director is a White guy... the choir guy *es de descendencia italiana* (is Italian descent) but he was born here, I think he’s probably third generation... my theory class teacher, she’s from Canada but she’s *de descendencia* Japanese (Japanese descent), my piano professor, she’s from Russia and the orchestra director he’s Armenian so yea I think the music program itself is really *variado incluso* (varied, in addition) I think my classes are probably like 2/3 no 2/5 are Latino, 2/5 Asians and 1/5 like others like we have this French lady so yea it’s really diverse the music program itself.”

Similar to Martin, Jazmin a fellow community college student, also discloses her status to those she deems as trustworthy though it took her a much longer time to feel comfortable with professors and counselors. Jazmin shared with me that of her four years at her community college, it was only within the last two years or so that she decided to share this information with teachers and counselors.

“You just have to tell them cause I’m a very honest person but before I didn’t tell them it’s because I felt like it didn’t really mean much or maybe ‘cause I felt I don’t know, I just didn’t tell them but this time I told them, ‘do you have anybody who can help me?, who can you know, reference me or you know can you help me?’ Cause like at that point I was already mad like, ‘man I’m still here you know I paid for my classes, I paid for 3 or 2 at a time ‘cause that’s all I can manage but is there any other help? Are there scholarships out there?’ Is there you know like I tried to apply for scholarships here and there but never [got one] yea it was hard.”

Like Martin and Yadira, Jazmin was also an active member of the undocumented student support and advocacy group on campus. Their group took the initiative to educate the staff at their community college about undocumented student needs, specifically targeting faculty.

“The faculty presentation was about that, that we [students] need to go up to them [faculty] and tell them that we need help that there’s students like us that they need to be prepared for and some teachers don’t know anything, they don’t know, some people don’t even know about Deferred Action, they heard it but they don’t know exactly who to

turn to for help or you know they don't know the references like you can go to this person.”

Jazmin highlighted a few important things that undocumented students have to deal with while at school and they include having to educate staff about legislations such as AB 540 and DACA and also having to explain to teachers what their needs are in order to see if they can make the appropriate referral for them to get the help they need. Like Jazmin, Giovanni is also open about his status with teachers. At the time of our interviews, he was a senior in high school and would ask his teachers and counselors for help with applying for college and finding scholarships he is eligible for.

“Well I will tell them, like every teacher in high school, they will talk about college, and they will be like, ‘oh don't mess up right now ‘cause later in college you will regret it.’ And then I just tell them ‘Oh, I am undocumented’ and they are like, ‘oh, it's okay everything is possible.’

Hearing this from his teachers made Giovanni “feel motivated to apply and to not give up.”

Similar to Giovanni, Alejandro had similar sentiments.

“Not counselors. I never talked to counselors...I told 4 teachers. With teachers is another story, they want to help you. So I noticed that they wanted to teach because they loved it and not just for a paycheck, I was like ‘ok I like these teachers’ and I told them...I got to notice part of their personally, the way they taught...they were okay with it okay saying, ‘I understand.’ They felt for me, they sympathized, they saw how much effort it was and they were like, ‘Dang Alejandro good job, I know it's tough, you made it’ (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

Unlike Giovanni and Alejandro, Jennifer described her relationship with teachers and counselors as “good” but not “close” and said she does not disclose her immigration status to them. About teachers she said, “I'm not like that close with teachers just like paper you know, sports, that's it. Not like personal stuff” and about her counselors she said, “I've never talked to the counselor. Not personal stuff.”

Similar to Jennifer, Juan did not openly share his status with teachers but did write about it in some assignments.

“Not really...I haven’t gotten close with any teachers I mean I’m sure they know because I write papers about it all the time, but sitting down and sharing, no” (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

Fortunately for Daniela, in her time at community college, she found a staff member who assisted her through college and helped her transfer to a UC.

“He like really took to me and he took me under his wing and he said, ‘look you’re gonna do everything I tell you and you’re gonna do really good’ and I was like ‘oh my gosh should I believe him?’ but I didn’t think any of the counselors were helpful and he seemed more prepared than the counselors and I was like yea I’ll do what he tells me.

It is clear that participants had a way of determining who they confide in and who they could not. The relationships that participants nurtured with school staff were instrumental in helping them achieve their academic and sometimes personal goals.

### **Socialization at School: Distinguishing Between Friends and Peers**

Study participants shared their approach to making friends. Most of them strategically chose who to befriend but all agreed that their friends have to be individuals who loved school and had goals.

#### ***Picking Friends***

In Yadira’s and Martin’s case, upon their arrival to the U.S., they befriended peers with similar characteristics to their own. For example, other immigrant, Spanish-speaking students. Surrounding themselves with such peers provided both Yadira and Martin with a sense of familiarity and security as they got accustomed to the U.S. schooling system. Similarly, even though Pedro had been raised in the U.S. since he was very small, the fact that he was occasionally put in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) throughout his schooling, we would find himself with recent immigrants who he befriended and said this about picking friends:

“I don’t want friends that smoke or drink. If you smoke or drink don’t even talk to me, don’t even look at me. Or like people from the streets, like I’ll hang out with them but I won’t hang out with them. My friends are *paisas*, fun loving, wanting to learn about our history, but we can’t”

For the rest of participants who had grown up in the U.S., their selection of friends rested on sharing similar values such as caring about school, being well behaved, and having goals in life. Below are some excerpts about their friendships and the characteristics they seek in friends.

“I tend to go with vibes, I mean if they seem genuine someone I can trust, that would have my back that’s a friend” (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

“I pick my friends on the basis of honesty because I don’t know you don’t have to share everything with me but just don’t lie to me. I trust people fairly easily” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

“*Pues que me calleran bien...mas que nada and que no hicieran nada malo* (Well that I get along with them well more than anything and that they don’t do anything bad) like have good principles yea *bueno cimientos como persona* (good foundations as a person)” (Martin, 22 years old, community college student)

“Well we are all taking the same classes, the same AP classes so we are all very studious I guess and focused in our school work so that’s the kind of people that I hang around with” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

Similarly, Jennifer echoes Yazmin and add this about her friends, “We all come from families that you know, we are the first generation to go to high school, to go to college...we are here for a reason you know.”

### ***Peers v. Friends***

Study participants were able to clearly distinguish between their close relationships with friends and interactions with school peers. The characteristic that was brought up several times was negative or irritating behavior. Jennifer described one characteristic that turns her off.

“I don’t like annoying people. That’s it. Annoying is like if you laugh at everything. If you say a little thing and start laughing. If you’re annoying, no, I will talk to you, you know, but I won’t want to be around you. I don’t pick, like I want to be your friend, I’m just like whatever. I talk to anybody as long as you don’t annoy me.”

Giovanny shared similar feelings to Jennifer.

“But just some people I don’t talk to because they are immature and like I will try to concentrate and they will just be talking and like throwing stuff. Yea and they are also undocumented. . .I don’t like associating myself with kids that are immature, ‘cause like all my friends right now are applying for UC’s and Cal States and stuff like that. That’s the kind of people I like hanging around with.”

When I asked Jennifer if she considered herself mature, she said she does because she knows when she needs to be serious and when she can have fun. I then asked her if she thought her immigration status had anything to do with this and she said:

“Hmm well kind of because I think. . .you’re not just gonna care, you’re obviously you know, you’re going to act sophisticated so if one day in the future they could offer you a job or something.”

As noted above, Jennifer considered herself a friendly person, but when it comes down to close friendships, she shared with me that she only considers four classmates as close friends. When I asked her what distinguished these four students from her other peers, she said the following:

“Because you know that they can keep secrets. Like you want to tell them about something that happened over the weekend with your parents and they will give you advice. One of my closest friends, her parents separated when she was like 6 or 7 and when my parents separated, she was there for me and I would text her like ‘oh my parents are fighting and I don’t know what to do’ and she would tell me to calm down and was there for me when that happened. And she still is, we still talk, she lives in front of my cousin so I visit her often.”

Inclusively, both Jennifer and Giovanny shared that in their close circle of friends, they are the only ones that are undocumented. In Yazmin’s case, she shared with me that many students, including her close friends, do not know what being an AB 540 student means and she has to explain it to them.

“Well one of my friends didn’t know what AB 540 was when you came to do the presentation and she was like ‘oh Yazmin you should do that’ . . .At first she didn’t know but at school somehow it got mentioned and I told her and when you came to do the presentation she told me I should do it” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

Jennifer affirmed that her friends were aware of her immigration status, but they never bring it up unless something comes up. Giovanni's friends also know his status and he describes them as follows:

“Well in my friends I am the only one who is undocumented and they just help me out like when we went to a college fair, they were going around to all the colleges, like without me asking them, they would be like, ‘oh look we brought you this, it will help you.’”

Within the community college and university participants, the majority of them noted that their circle of friends consisted of other undocumented students. This largely had to do with the fact that all but Alejandro were active members of the immigration advocacy and support on their respective campus.

### *Awareness of Undocumented Peers*

The interviews with participants indicated a difference between high school and college students. As displayed above, high school participants were on average more reserved about their status, whereas college students and the support groups and networks they were a part of or knew about made them feel less afraid of disclosing their status. In Yadira and Martin's case, since they both arrived to the U.S. in their mid-teens and were placed in ESL programs, they recognized that the majority of their classmates were undocumented. As was a similar case for Pedro. When I asked the high school students if they had undocumented friends or knew of them, they said:

“That I know of, there's just 1 other student that is undocumented but my close friends are not undocumented. Well I do know another undocumented student from my internship because she also was not able to get her stipend” (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

When I asked Giovanni, he said he knew of two other undocumented students at his school and when I asked him how he knew about them, he said, “I actually found out when we went over

there [Deferred Action information session]. They were there too.” Had it not been for this workshop aimed at AB 540 students, Giovanni would have not known any other students like him. He said, “like everyone I meet, is like, ‘oh yea I was born here’ or like they will be like, ‘yea I am applying for financial aid.’” However, as we saw in Jennifer’s case, just because his peers said these things, does not mean they are true. It is possible that other students, like Jennifer, were simply making statements to protect their privacy. Jennifer said she knew a few undocumented classmates and when I asked her how they knew each other, she said:

“Well you know we don’t talk about it or you know, they talk about, ‘cause the first few days in my Mexican American studies class, they asked, they got us in a line, if you were born here, how old are you? What’s your name? and that’s how I know cause I don’t really ask them.”

In retrospect, some of the community college and university students regretted not knowing other undocumented students in K-12. Blanca expressed that she was not sure if it would have made a difference since there are so many other social issues that are much more important for students.

“I don’t really know, I don’t think it would have made a difference honestly because the people that I did know, we weren’t really focused on that, we were just trying to get through high school drama.”

Alejandro did know other undocumented students at his high school but felt that he was very different from them.

“They weren’t like me, they weren’t outspoken, they weren’t proud of being illegal. I knew that it made me who I am, I’m gonna use it to my advantage and milk it for what it’s worth, they don’t have opportunities. I don’t know how I didn’t fall into that”

### **Social Dynamics and Comparisons**

One of the guiding theoretical frameworks of this study is Social Identity Theory (SIT), which posits that inter-group relations and group memberships influence social identity development (Tajfel & Turner; 1979, 1999, 2006, 2010). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, and 2010), one of the ways our identity is realized is through: 1) categorization and



2) social comparison. This section highlights excerpts from my discussion with participants about social dynamics and comparisons in society and school.

In getting a sense of their perceptions of the social atmosphere at school and in society, I was also able to learn about how each participant sees themselves in these two spaces. From the sidelines, participants were able to describe the ways in which other people are categorized. In the following paragraphs, I focus on the social comparisons of study participants. When I asked Jazmin if she compared herself to other people, she agreed that she does and addressed comparisons around abilities and money.

“Usually it’s more put myself down like, ‘man I wish I can do this,’ ‘man I wish I had the opportunity to do that’ like, ‘wow if she can do it, I’m able to do it. I can do it too,’ like, ‘why can’t I do that? Like why?’...That’s one of the most common comparisons that I always usually do...’cause I’ve done so much. I mean you know there’s people not just girls but you know guys and girls that are in my place [are undocumented], they’re in my shoes...and they don’t do much, they don’t go to school maybe because they really do think that they can’t go to school” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

As we see from the excerpt above, Jazmin compared herself to others based on her abilities. Upon probing to understand this further, Jazmin shared with me that she does not doubt her abilities, but instead sometimes feels restricted on what she can and cannot do based on her immigration status. One of her biggest frustrations is her inability to receive federal financial aid to assist her with her tuition and book costs. When she sees family and friends mispending their money, it frustrates her as she thinks about the multiple ways she would put that money to good use.

“I’m always like maybe they have it bad at home, maybe they don’t get money like I don’t get money so they’re taking advantage of their money you know that’s what I always think but it bothers me, it’s just one reaction that you get like right away but of course I take that into consideration all the time oh maybe you know, maybe they have it really bad at home, maybe I shouldn’t say anything but it is frustrating you know like I said” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student)

When I asked her to explain what she thinks may be going on in the minds of her peers and how she is different than them, she said:

“Because they’re not working and they just don’t know, maybe they’re traumatized so much where they’re like, ‘my parents told me I can’t get a job anymore because I’m undocumented’ or like ‘cause I was like that for a little bit and that’s why I didn’t have a job for a while until I was like, ‘you know what? I can get a job, I can go get a job’ and I go and look I found one at the swapmeet and that’s when I finally said, ‘finally I’m getting my own money’ I did it on time where I was able to save up for school. I went to school cause I could of just made money and just you know gone out or just paid rent here but no like they respected the fact that that money was going to be for school and I went to school and like no one helped me, like nobody helped you know, a lot of people don’t get help until they just stay at one spot.”

Yadira and Martin were two participants who emigrated to the U.S. in their mid-teens.

Having lived most of their life in Mexico and experiencing roughly the last seven years in the U.S. gave them a different perspective than other participants. Yadira shared with me that one of the first observations she made upon arriving was how diverse Los Angeles is. When I asked her how she felt about the opportunity to intermingle with diverse people, she responded with the following:

“Well here in the LA area it’s hard because most of us are segregated. We are always Latinos with Latinos, Asians with Asians and it’s hard to do that [interact with each other] but I still try to. I love to know different people, different cultures be open-minded so you can... understand different people and just being in one culture I think it’s more closed, you just stay with the same thing, you don’t learn anything else or languages, you can learn new things, new phrases and I guess you can learn different strategies to study and different things probably more helpful than yours.”

I asked Yadira to further explain her feelings about segregation and how she feels that impacts social interactions in school. As the leader of an undocumented support and activist group at her community college, she described her concerns over the homogeneity of the group as follows:

“In the club I try to interact with different clubs but Latinos are just I guess the minorities... there are more Asians and I want to do more because I feel like if we stick together then we will be better and help each other. If you go to our meetings you just see Latinos you don’t see any Asians oh last semester there was one Asian girl, she decided to join us but then she just saw Latinos and no other ethnicities so she just left. I think

people don't want to interact with other people. But I actually think that's a good thing to get more knowledge, to get more experience of all of this, you can't discriminate against people, you need to understand them."

Like Yadira, Martin was also amazed at the diversity of people and languages when he first arrived to the U.S. He recalled his first visit to Disneyland and was surprised by all the different people he saw and languages he heard and is one of the characteristics he enjoys about living in Los Angeles.

### *Comparisons at School*

When I asked study participants to describe the social dynamics of their schools, many of them depicted typical schools where "clicks" consisting of jocks and nerds were observed. When I asked them what they made of these clicks, they commonly responded that although group dynamics were noticeable along certain student characteristics and interests, the students at their school were friendly towards everyone. Beyond this, Yadira felt that her schooling in Mexico taught camaraderie and noticed that this was not the case once she started school in California.

"I feel like in Mexico we are more united, we would help each other, and here everyone is competing against each other, you don't see that support anymore it's probably a few people that are willing to support you, who are willing to help you if you need anything. In Mexico, it was great, like you usually go to school then I would usually go to my friend's house and do homework and projects. We had a lot of projects and like for Chemistry, in Mexico you are doing projects, how to mix chemicals and it was interesting. I had a lot of presentations, you had to share your project. Basically your creativity was nurtured in Mexico."

Martin shared an example of a confrontation he experienced with a fellow immigrant high school peer who was also undocumented.

"This guy I talked to in high school because we shared the same experience...we were from Mexico *y le dije* (and I told him), 'oh yea my dad, he had, we had resources in Mexico' *y éste güey está como, ¿que haces aquí menso?* [laughs] *no sabes de donde vengo, tu tienes buena vida allá yo no se porqué te veniste de allá* (and this fool was like, 'what are you doing here stupid? You don't know where I come from, you have a good life over there [Mexico] I don't know why you came over here)."

Giovanny described his school dynamics as:

“I think like now my generation, everyone just hangs out with everyone, like no one discriminates, even like, I see gay people and everyone is like cool with everyone. No one is like ‘oh there’s these people, and there’s that people’” (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

Like Giovanny, Jennifer also felt that high school was less about the clicks you belong to. She concurs with Giovanny that the students at their school talk amongst each other and do not divide themselves.

“I think high school is more about what you like...because each academy is something different because in performing arts you have your performers they’re the ones that are not conceited but they’re the ones that I know like to act and perform and stuff I was supposed to go there. Here in humanities like you can tell there’s so many people...and you can tell in the hallways that...everybody is unique...so I can’t say all of them are the same because they’re not there’s people that you know like drawing there’s some that are here because they got chosen to be here but yea and it’s just who you are, like some of my friends...you know some dance and then they go with friends from performing arts so it’s like that.”

Jennifer did not feel like the students at her school divided each other, but this was not the case in the art classes she took with other fellow high school and middle school students at the California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA). In eighth grade, Jennifer’s love for art led her to participate in a Saturday program at Cal State LA for southern California students, where she not only got the opportunity to take a college class, but also had the chance to interact with diverse students her age from other schools.

“I used to take art classes at Cal State LA and you see a lot of different people that are not the same as you. You have your Chinese there, you have your Whites, you have your Asians, you have your Blacks. There’s a lot of different people that go there and it’s just like you’re the only one that’s you here. ‘Cause 2 of my friends who were like American, they were like, they look different from you, it was different, it was a different experience because it’s not the same thing because you would see one person here, over there, but in their eyes you probably looked different.”

Jennifer describes her year in the program as follows:

“It would be like a 5 hour thing but it was really fun because you got to draw, you got to you know, talk to different people. They would ask, ‘where are you from?’ And it was interesting how they would respond. They would tell you, ‘my parents are from New York, my parents are from you know, my mom is Italian.’ I think that is really interesting when you would ask, how they would answer, ‘oh my parents are from Germany, my mom is German, Italian, my mom is Chinese. I just visited China like 2 months ago.’ I think that’s really interesting. It’s like you don’t have much difference from them, their parents are from other countries, other states.”

The diversity Jennifer experienced was multifaceted and new to her. She noticed she was the only student from East Los Angeles, all of her peers came from schools in the West side.

Jennifer also learned about various ethnicities and she also learned about socioeconomic differences. When I asked her how she felt about the diversity, she said:

“Well it was pretty cool but then again it was kind of awkward because it’s like you don’t fit in... There were no Mexicans there that I knew of because everybody else was like well, there was this other one Mexican girl... I don’t remember what she said, she’s like Mexican and White but yea I thought it was pretty cool but it was kind of awkward sometimes.”

When I asked Jennifer what she thinks made things awkward and what were the differences she noticed, she said:

“Well not that they were conceited... like it’s just that there was not that many differences like one time I didn’t want my uncle to drop me off ‘cause he usually drops me off in a truck and I was like, ‘I don’t want you to drop me off... I rather walk’ so I walked and then in the afternoon I was gonna get picked up by my dad just like 2 other girls were like they were taken home in a truck so I’m like, ‘what was I worried about?’ these people are the same as me, you know, why should I worry?’ I let my uncle drop me off the next day.”

Jennifer’s feelings of embarrassment over being dropped off in a work truck were a result of hearing the parental occupations of her peers, leading her to believe they were wealthy.

“Like most of them, the ones that I knew, their parents are teachers or lawyers or something like that so it was pretty amazing you know and then most of them were like, ‘oh I just like getting dropped off here because you know she’s [parent] busy... I was like, ‘oh I come here for fun not to feel different.’”

Jazmin, who began disclosing her immigration status until a community college student recalled encountering high school friends and peers and explaining to them why she would not go out with them or join them in other activities.

“Friends that I see around, I do tell them now. I tell them like, ‘yea man this is the reason why you know...I’m like this is the reason why [because I am undocumented]. Because like when they ask is when I tell them that’s better. ‘Cause I do see friends from out of high school like, ‘What are you doing at a swapmeet? Why are you still working here? Have you graduated from college yet?’ Or they would be like, ‘Hey do you have an ID? Do you want to go out?’ and I would be like, ‘I can’t.’ I have an ID you know so I don’t have to tell them that and then I’m not like the type of person that lies. I don’t like to lie. It’s either I tell them ‘oh I can’t tonight’ or ‘oh you know what I can’t and then they’ll be like, ‘why?’ and when they ask why I have to tell them, I have to, I can’t lie, I’m bad at lying. I’ll be like, ‘well here’s this that and yadayada and they are like, ‘okay, I see I understand’ but I’ve never gotten a response where they’ll stop talking to me or anything like that.”

Jazmin’s process of becoming comfortable with sharing her status was helped by her DACA approval in which she now has a valid California ID. When I asked Jazmin how her friends responded when she first told them she was undocumented, she said:

“They usually tell me, ‘Really Jazmin? I had no idea all that time. You’re so white, you speak so good, you do so well.’ They always tell me that and it’s never like something like, ‘oh I knew it’s like you know, they’re never like that, it’s always a surprise so it’s like, ‘really, really Jazmin? How do you do it?’ Some people get concerned and are like, ‘oh I feel you I know people like that you know but I usually do get the shock like, ‘what? why? You’re so white looking [laughs] you talk so well.”

Unlike Jazmin, Martin did not have the good fortune of being eligible for DACA so he spoke about comparing himself to those that do, yet still get additional financial assistance.

“I was jealous of a friend because I don’t qualify for DACA and he still got a scholarship for \$500...I was so active with people and was not asking for something back. I had given so much back to my community, to my organization and this guy he was the treasurer...back then I was the historian. He got his Deferred Action really fast and got a scholarship and I got nothing.”

Similar to Martin, Juan recalls that as a high school student, he also compared himself to friends over what he did not have.

“Just clothes, especially at the school I was at, when it was free dress it was time to shine, seeing my friends in new outfits like, ‘oh that’s clean.’ I was wearing the same outfit all the time.”

Daniela also spoke about how she used to compare herself to classmates in high school but expressed that as she got older, she has tried to stop engaging in comparisons though seeing others not taking advantage of opportunities reminds her of her limitations.

“I think I did more in high school and then like after community college I was like no, but actually yea, I do...I compare myself to people that are documented but don’t take advantage of opportunities.”

### *Comparisons in Society*

In addition to speaking with participants about the social dynamics within their respective schools, I also spoke with them about social dynamics in society. Jazmin’s comment above illustrates the stereotypic image people have of undocumented immigrants. Because Jazmin is very light-skinned and speaks English well, her friends did not suspect she was an undocumented immigrant. The fact that these attributes were highlighted by her friends is evidence to support Social Identity Theory. I engaged Jazmin in conversation to learn how she felt about such comments and she said the following to describe who she believes her friends imagine when they think of an undocumented person.

“Yea they think they [undocumented people] are brown, they think they don’t speak English well, they think they are like in front of Home Depot. But it’s not like that, so that’s why I’m saying like I do have a lot of friends now because in high school I was friendly but I was in the middle, I was not like really friendly because of that whole thing [being undocumented] but now it’s like I’ve kept contact with all my friends over there and I’ve kept mutual contact with their friends. I’m a very friendly person now I’m like, ‘oh okay what’s up you need help?’ so like when they find out about [my immigration status] slowly they are finding out, they you know respect me and I really like that that they respect me and I want them to understand how important it is that you know an immigration reform would pass or you know like things like that. It’s annoying when you get that person that’s ignorant and that doesn’t like immigrants and is like, ‘no, no, no, you’re wrong, you shouldn’t be here’ but I never really came across a person like that

‘cause they understand me, they get to know me and that’s very important you need to know people.”

Yadira recalls her first few days in the U.S. and shared the following:

“It was strange... When I went to buy some CDs in Spanish, I mean some people still listen to those artists but within my family that had been here already were like, ‘oh you shouldn’t listen to that music,’ and the way I dressed, it was kind of different, a little bit. Like in Mexico, the pants, the flare, so like that was different. They were looking at me like, ‘oh’ and I was quiet at that time, but now I’m out spoken. I would just stay in my room and help my grandma do the dishes.”

Yadira’s learning curve was a challenge, as she not only felt pressure to acquire the English language rapidly, but she was also learning about adolescent social norms, such as musical taste, and attire.

When I asked Giovanni about his observations of the larger society, he exclaimed that he observes more rigid clicks that are formed around several factors, such as money and race.

“Like rich people or wealthy people could like, they will be like, ‘oh my friends are rich, I’m not going to hang out with poor people.’”

Regarding race, Giovanni said:

“I don’t know. I think Caucasians or White people or whatever, they see us like, not as successful as them because of our race, of where we come from, of our history.”

For Jazmin, not being a legal resident led her to assume that she would be rejected by school peers and members of society. She described herself as paranoid and preoccupied that “they will find out somehow.” She subconsciously assumed that people around her were U.S. citizens and limited her interactions with them. Likewise, people never questioned Jazmin’s immigration status and never even thought that she was undocumented.

“I felt like, I don’t know, it’s just weird, it’s a weird process... I probably thought that they knew [I was undocumented] but it’s funny ‘cause they probably didn’t even know. They probably thought I was just a weirdo like being quiet all the time. I don’t know it’s just weird.”



Jazmin's preoccupation with other people finding out their status is a common one, however, Jazmin was also worried that if people did learn she was undocumented, they would not accept her.

"I just felt like, I don't know, I felt like they were not going to accept me. I really felt that way like I didn't feel like I was accepted because of that. I'm not one of them, I'm not one of them, I'm not one of them, you can't fool me trust be careful who your friends are like after that there was a point where it was like no if they know, they can deport me or if they know they can do this you know."

The quote above shows that being undocumented can lead someone to feel so different from others that they begin to internalize these thoughts and may limit interactions out of fear of serious consequences such as deportation. Jazmin expressed that coming to terms with her immigration status, finding the support of friends and school staff, and receiving DACA has positively impacted her social life.

"Yea it changed a lot. I feel like I'm more confident. I can talk to anyone now like the cool kids that were like the kids I would be scared of 'oh no she can't talk to me cause you know she's cool or whatever' but now it's funny now I have friends that were cheerleaders or like you know that I would picture myself not talking to like you know so...I don't know how to explain it, they're understanding...before it was more like okay hey like someone that was quiet like me I wouldn't approach them but if it was someone that was like really picky, I felt like they were picky so I would be like oh they're not going to like me so now it's like, 'hey what's up what are you up to? Oh cool whatever you know' so it's easier for me now I feel because I don't have to be ashamed of 'oh I don't have an ID or oh I don't this, I don't have that' or you know I have more opportunities now to be accepted I guess."

Learning about the impact of DACA was an unintended finding of this study. In particular, it was clear to see how positively this administrative relief effort changed the lives of participants who had received it. When I asked Jazmin what she observed to be the benefits of DACA, she said:

"Ohhh let's see, well I mean like just having an ID it feels like you belong, you know, it's so weird it's so emotional [gets emotional and voice cracks]. 'Cause you do you get a feeling like of acceptance like before in high school when I found out that I couldn't drive, or I couldn't [gets emotional] it's emotional it really is, it's a struggle you know like finally it's like the most awesome feeling ever, in the group [AB 540 support group on campus], they helped me so much, they help me a lot and that's why I decided to

become one of the members ‘cause I was like you know, I don’t want to just get help from you guys, I want to help others too.”

Having DACA is a privilege that Jazmin recognized. She realized that having a California ID and a work permit afforded her opportunities that other undocumented people who did not qualify for DACA could access and Jazmin expressed this comparison as follows.

“I mean I’m here now and I’m happy about that and we did discuss that in [AB 540 student group] like how a lot of kids [referring to group members] got the DACA and then that’s it, they’re like, ‘okay see you later, bye, already got the DACA’ I think we discussed that last time but you know, a lot of people just like think, ‘me, me, me okay I got it now, let’s go’ but we have to think how many other people also don’t qualify for it you know... There’s a ton of people that didn’t qualify you know, for example my mom. How could I just go against like, ‘oh okay mom I already got my stuff.’ Like what about my mom? Or, what about other people that actually don’t do bad here? I don’t know it’s just a lot of stuff and we’re trying to push that, that’s what our meeting is going to be about Monday.”

### **Social Challenges**

As discussed in the previous section, study participants discussed comparing themselves to others along what they can and cannot do. In some instances, participants who are still protective about their status, explaining to family and friends why they could not do something was challenging as in the case of Jazmin, who learned about her status in high school and had a hard time coping with the news. In retrospect, she shared with me that she remembers witnessing a lot of bullying in high school and she feared that if she told people she was undocumented, that she would be bullied too.

“...that was my fear like people knowing that [referring to undocumented status] and then not accepting me more than how I already was accepted.”

Now, four years removed from high school, Jazmin is no longer worried about being bullied, but instead, tries to avoid having to explain to her friends why she cannot participate in certain activities.

“But now it’s like you know, ‘cause I see it this way, I’m not a bad person, I know it you know I’m not a bad person, they should accept me whether I am or not [referring to immigration status] and of course I still have that fear where people are going to be like, ‘oh you’re not’ but I have that advantage where I have my ID, I’m able to work, I’m like hey, ‘I’m working just like you, we’re the same now. Don’t say we don’t pay taxes because now I’m going to pay taxes and you know what, I’m not complaining about it because now I get to work, now I get to get my own money, now I get to do so many things like you were able to do that I couldn’t do you know so it’s just one thing that I do want to stress is that I hate that there’s so many people out there that chose not to go to college rather just something else or get financial aid and spend it on something that wow like that I could be like, ‘dude give me that money! I need it to buy my books.’ That’s one of the struggles I had so much in school and I would hate it and I cry to my boyfriend and be like ‘cause he was one of them, he was one of the ones that didn’t want to go to college and like until he seen me cry I was like, ‘you know what? why aren’t you going to school? Your brain is so awesome [laughs],’ he’s so smart, I was like, ‘why aren’t you going to college? You’re not in a struggle like I’m struggling, you’re not...I’m like you think it’s cause you know like ahhh I would get so mad at him like why are you? you know like it’s one thing that pisses me off people that just take advantage of that while we’re there just you know watching them they’re like ahhh here’s \$500 for books and it’s like wow I wish I had that you know like but we don’t get that and it’s like I mean now we’re able to get the fee waivers cause we get our classes get paid for that’s like the best ever cause those \$500 that I was saving at the you know I could save for a car now or I could save for a bus pass for a while and then you know so that has changed so much I love it, I love it so much and [laughs]”

Similarly, Martin, a fellow community college student, is challenged by the fact that he is a leader and coordinator of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) workshops at his campus, yet sometimes is taken aback when remembering he himself is not eligible to apply for this administrative relief effort for undocumented youth.

“It’s so ironic because I’m one of the leaders of the clinics we have been having for Deferred Action and I cannot apply to it technically because I came here on July 28, 2007 with a visa and in order to apply [the cutoff date] is June 15 of the same year so [I missed eligibility] by a month and 13 days.”

Being approached by friends who ask him if he has submitted his DACA application has been difficult for Martin.

“It’s funny because the last time I came here [to campus] it was on the first of the month...and I saw a lot of people...and one of the first things they would tell me, ‘hey have you applied for DACA?’ and I’m like, ‘ahhh I cannot apply so...or, like I haven’t

applied' and they're telling me, 'what and you're the one organizing?!' So yea that in a way sucks."

Martin's inability to apply for DACA also limits his sources of income. At the time of our interviews, Martin had taken a semester off school in order to gather the money to pay for his tuition and books. During this time, Martin compared himself to his school peers, who were on track to transferring as well as old friends from Mexico who lead very different lives.

"Well right now my focus is coming back to school so actually being financially stable that's one of the things because my dad he already was working when he was 18 and actually I have some friends on Facebook that are from *secundaria* (middle school) and they already have a family and everything. I don't want to have a family right now but it's saying like they already have something you could say stable so but me *todavía sigo viviendo con mi papá y con mi abuelita* (I still live with my parents and with my dad and with my grandmother) so that's probably right now being financially stable in order to pay for school and actually come back."

Even running common errands can be difficult for undocumented people. Offering to help her family pay for household bills resulted in an uncomfortable moment for Jazmin.

"I was trying to get a money order...and some of the club members went with me so I was like, 'are you sure I can use this [*matrícula*]?' and they're like, 'yea I don't see why not and so we went together to get a money order for my house you know to pay some bills 'cause that's how we pay our bills and we went to...I think it was Walgreens... We went in there and...I was like, 'you guys I don't think they're gonna accept it' and they're like, 'just try it, you never know' and then I was like okay so we go and then I was like oh I want to pay some bills and then he's like, 'can I see your ID and I was 'cause I was gonna pay with my card and they're like can I see your ID and I was like, 'oh I only have this one and I showed my *matrícula* and they're like, 'sorry we don't accept that' so it's like you know like they don't accept that and it's like, 'ahh my God okay like sometimes I feel like it might be for identification purposes but sometimes I just feel like why can't they just accept those like what's like I don't know I just don't know like it sucks so having the ID now I can use it and be like you know can I use this one like I'm still undocumented but I'm like can I use this one here and they're like oh yea sure so it's like kind you know it is like feeling accepted you know and it just sucks it's just one difference like Mexican government issued and then this one is California issued you know so it kinda sucks like the difference of being rejected, for example I got rejected there and then if you have the California ID they're like, 'oh okay' so they just look at it and they don't even be like, 'what the heck?' you know it just it sucks and then there's just more opportunities you know that come along with the California ID."

As we have seen throughout this chapter, there was a profound effect on Jazmin when she was issued a California ID. As she shared in this example, though she always used her Mexican *matrícula* as her form of photo ID, she worried that people would automatically assume she was undocumented and reject their service, like what happened at Walgreens.

### *Discrimination*

Embedded in the phenomenon of social comparisons are biases that escalate to overt practices of discrimination. Giovanni had a few stories of discrimination.

“Well one time I went to church with one of my uncles who is a transvestite and we went ‘cause one of his friend’s died. And I felt sad ‘cause I don’t know if it was a priest or a pastor, I don’t know if it was Catholic, and he just told him, ‘we can’t have you in here, it’s a sin’ and saying stuff like that and then he kicked him out. And I felt like that’s really messed up.”

Another story from Giovanni focused on racism.

“When I was in elementary I had a White friend, and when I went to his house his mom’s like, ‘cause like it was me, I was the only brown-skinned Mexican, I guess you can say, the rest were light-skinned but they were still like Mexican American or whatever, but that certain boy at his house, he was White and his mom I guess was racist and she let every White or light-person go in the house and told me ‘oh no you can’t come in you are going to dirty the house’ and I was like, ‘okay.’ Well I didn’t know but now that I think about it, that was messed up.”

When I asked Jennifer if she had ever experienced discrimination, she said:

“Um. No. I wouldn’t say like because I’m Mexican or anything. No, but just you know probably cause boys tease girls, ‘Oh you’re darker than us.’ Just like that but not like anything else. It’s funny ‘cause those guys now just see you and say hi and all of a sudden you are my friend now. It was stuff that happened in elementary, it doesn’t really happen anymore, it probably stopped around 6<sup>th</sup> grade ‘cause everybody is like your friend now. It’s funny ‘cause they were the same color. I don’t know what they were talking about. Either they liked you or they don’t like you at all and messed around with you.”

Although Jennifer notes that she does not believe she has been discriminated for being Mexican, when I asked her if there have been other experiences of discrimination, she shared an example of witnessing her father and her being discriminated for their musical tastes.

“You know my father is someone who’s out there. He’s not just going to sit there. He bumps up his music [Mexican]. When we are in a White neighborhood, they just look at you like, ‘what the hell?’”

Yazmin shared with me that her parents have shared with her a few examples of times in which people in public places, like grocery stores, will talk in English about her parents, assuming that they do not speak or understand English.

Moreover, many undocumented people are taken advantage of by individuals in power, such as employers who often times threatened immigrant workers with deportation. This realistic threat causes many undocumented workers to endure unlawful working conditions, such as low pay, long hours, no breaks, etc. and this is exactly what happened to Jazmin, who was working at a clothing stand in a swapmeet for nine hours with no lunch break and got paid \$50 a day. It took for her to be a reliable, diligent worker for a year for her to get a \$10 increase. Jazmin could not take a normal lunch break and was instead instructed to eat while still on the job.

“My boss left for a month to his country and you know I was there on my own so I had to do everything still \$60 he didn’t raise it, lunch was the same, no breaks, you know after a while you’re like man you know I am saving up money but still that’s not fair you know like so I got tired of it and you know finally this opportunity came [referring to DACA] and then I just recently quit about two weeks ago so I applied so many places that 3 places were able to call me back.”

Jazmin felt that she was discriminated against when a new girl had been hired and started at \$60 a day, a pay that it took her a year to receive.

“A year for them to increase my pay after I had already helped them work and I was by myself but what got me really mad was that they had hired a girl from the same race and they started her off at \$60...she’s pretty, she was really pretty, attractive, really nice I had nothing against her but because she was the same race I felt like they really did give her you know \$60.”

When I asked Jazmin if she spoke to her boss about this situation, she said:

“I didn’t [confront them] and then what happened was that one of the workers that didn’t work there anymore...he had already quit ‘cause he didn’t like the job either, he told me he knew that I was mad...and I was just like, ‘you know what? whatever I’m not going to

say anything, I'm going to quit soon...' So I was like whatever I'm just gonna go along with my day..."

Recognizing that Jazmin was visibly upset, her boss assured her that he was not going to pay his new employee more than her, though he did start the new girl at \$55, more than what Jazmin got as a new employee. Not only did Jazmin feel like she was discriminated for her race, but she also felt this way about her gender.

"I worked there for 2 years I helped my boss so much I did a lot at his shop, sometimes it wasn't fair that he paid me \$60 and he started off the new guy...he still started him off at \$60. I trained him and I didn't get extra and I did the same job that he did even more than he did. I felt like maybe it was because I was a girl sometimes I was like, 'maybe it's 'cause I'm a girl and they think that 'cause their religion [described boss as Arab] is a little you know, like they don't like when women work, they would tell me that all the time, 'oh we don't like when our women work, we provide for them' so it was like, 'ok so where do I stand? Why the heck am I working? So, what, I don't deserve as much or what?' You know so I did feel that but like I said, I'm not the kind of person that's rude to someone that's rude to me. 'Cause they would offend me sometimes and I would just keep quiet and be like okay yea I would keep it to myself I wouldn't tell them, I wouldn't confront them you know and it really sucks because two weeks ago that I quit I didn't get a response from him, I didn't get a thank you for all your help, thank you for helping me for these 2 years that I needed you for like a year that you know that I had to go on vacation and you know you stood here every day opened and closed, nothing."

Though Jazmin was already upset to have parted from her job without the acknowledgement she wanted from her boss, she was more upset to see how her boss had changed his tune once she informed him that she had gotten her work permit.

"It's funny to see the difference 'cause I was very honest with him, I told him I got my stuff, I got my work permit now, he completely changed, he started acting like, 'oh you want a break? You could have a break if you'd like so when I told him that I was quitting he kind of got like a whiplash, he's like, 'oh shoot, what do I do?' Right when I told him, in front of me he got his phone book where he has all the girls numbers that go in and ask for a job and he's like, 'oh who should I call?' but nothing like, 'thank you Jazmin.' While he was like doing that I was like, 'thank you so much Ali for all your help you have truly helped' 'cause he did, he helped me with you know getting by with school and everything, he gave me the opportunity to work there."

## Mixed Status Families

All study participants were in mixed status families, meaning their families consist of members who are undocumented, permanent residents, U.S.-born citizens and/or naturalized citizens. These distinct classifications afford people with different benefits. For example, an undocumented person has limited legal protection, a permanent resident is able to do international travel but has no voting rights, whereas a U.S. citizen has access to all the benefits of citizenry, they can vote and have full legal protection. Being in a mixed status family did negatively impact some participants like Alejandro who gets frustrated by all the benefits his stepbrothers get to enjoy.

“Every day that I saw them it was like a mirror telling me ‘look at what you don’t have, look at all this money they’re getting that you’re not getting, look how bad they’re doing in school, look how good you’re doing.’ I have to deal with that a lot because why do they not have to work at all and get so much and I have to work so much and not get. It was just taunting, their presence was taunting. They didn’t realize what they had and I realized what they had because I realized what I hadn’t.”

Blanca also shared that she sometimes would get so frustrated over her immigration status she would mistakenly take it out on her siblings.

“Now it’s okay, at the beginning when I was really confused, I felt like I had such a big burden. I would always get it out on my siblings, ‘well you have papers’”

For the most part, participants were not negatively impacted by being in mixed status families, instead they found their situation as a perfect opportunity to educate family members, particularly younger siblings who are often times disconnected from the struggles of undocumented immigrants.

“Yea he hears but he doesn’t really understand anything and so he knows I was doing that [applying for DACA] but I guess he doesn’t really understand. He knows why we go all the way to Utah. He knows we can’t travel to Mexico. We can’t travel out of the U.S. He knows we are undocumented. He knows he is the only one that is documented. He just knows but he is not really familiar and we talk to him about it.”



Jennifer spoke about being a role model not only to her two siblings but also her extended family.

“Well they [U.S.-born younger brother and sister] look up to me so obviously I have to get somewhere so I don’t have that much time...I do have high expectations [to meet] you know...because two of my cousins got pregnant and they both live in the same house like all of them...and she said it drives her nuts...she says they have high expectations for me” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Jennifer highlighted a few things about her family relationships. She notes that both her siblings and extended family members look up to her. Not only because she is a great student and is goal-oriented, but also because she encountered many more hurdles than them as a result of her undocumented status.

Jennifer comes from a divorced family and has a four-year old brother who she says she does not see much because he lives with her mother, however, she described her 12-year old sister as a very quiet, reading enthusiast, tomboy, who bottles up her feelings. Although her sister does not share much with Jennifer, she says she confides in her sister and tells her everything she is thinking and feeling. Inclusively, she shared with me a few stories of how she and her sister have very deep conversations late at night about life, hardships and more. Although they rarely talk about how their immigration statuses differ, her sister is sympathetic and encouraging,

“Well my sister was born here and so is my brother. Sometimes they will joke, ‘oh you’re gonna be taken out of the country, you’re not from here and I’m gonna stay here.’ You know it just gets to you like I thought she liked me, her and I have a very good connection to each other so we talk about it sometimes...” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman)

I asked her what was said those few times that they talked about immigration and Jennifer said:

“She always tells me, ‘when your 15 [years old] you’re going to get your papers.’ So she supports me, she tells me not to worry about that. It’s kind of a big deal but not really a big deal. So she like encourages me, ‘don’t worry, you’re going to have your papers sooner or later, eventually, you will have them.’ Because sometimes I think, ‘how about if I never get my papers?’ I always tell her and she says, ‘don’t worry, you’re going to get your papers eventually.’”

Similarly, in Martin's case, he too is the oldest sibling in the family and also feels a great deal of responsibility to be a good example for his three younger siblings.

“It was kind of hard at the beginning but right now it got a lot easier because my second oldest brother, he's 18, he's already grown and he already goes to [community college] *entonces ya sabe lo que tiene que hacer y todo* (and he already knows what he needs to do) my the third brother, he's gonna be a junior in high school so *tambien no tengo que estar ahí de la manita* (so I also don't have to be holding him by the hand). Probably when I was a senior in high school and my first year in college, I was like we should do this, there were more responsibilities on me but not right now, it's a lot less because *ya crecimos* (we are grown)” (Martin, 22 years old, community college student).

Like Martin, Giovanni also feels a responsibility to his family. He has a cousin who is also undocumented and finds himself sharing information with him.

“I'm like the nerd and I try to help him out and tell him ‘fill it out and you could go to college.’ Before my cousin used to tell me ‘oh I'm going to join the army, I'm going to join the army’ but I found out, or I saw somewhere but I don't know if it's true or not, but that to join the army you have to be a citizen as well and I was like, ‘oh maybe they won't even get you so why not just apply and now he wants to go to college.”

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates that participants' undocumented status does impact the way they socialize with friends, family, and school staff. Moreover, their undocumented status is also something that continually triggers comparisons between themselves and those that surround them.

## **Chapter 10: Educational Experiences**

In this chapter, I share excerpts that focus on the educational experiences of study participants. The anecdotes provided in this chapter answer my third research question: 3) How do social relations with peers, teachers, staff, and strangers influence academic experiences and outcomes? In the three preceding findings chapters I discussed the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the U.S. and the effect that these discourses had on the participants (see chapter 7) as well as various identity markers prevalent in the life of participants (see chapters 8 and 9). The third question builds off research questions one and two which explored how the anti-immigrant rhetoric and their identity sense making is influenced by peers, teachers, and family. This chapter, in return, examines if and how these people impact their educational experiences.

I begin this chapter by sharing Yadira's and Martin's experiences within both the Mexican and U.S. educational systems. I then discuss participant experiences throughout the educational pipeline and focus specifically on general challenges and challenges they attribute to their undocumented status. Subsequently, students shared their decisions about higher education, and their access to resources, such as counseling and scholarships, and the challenges they had in the process as undocumented students. After I share some of their recommendations and I close the chapter by describing participant sources of motivation and aspirations to overcome the challenges they encountered.

### **Mexican vs. U.S. Education**

Of the twelve participants, Yadira and Martin were the only one's that experienced both the Mexican and United States educational systems. Yadira and Martin emigrated to the U.S. at the age of 15 and thus had a lot to say about their educational experiences in both countries. In the excerpts below, we see how their school peers and teachers impacted their education.

Yadira described the differences she noticed from her schooling in Mexico and now in the U.S.

“When my mom decided to come here [the U.S.], I was in my first semester, in I think it’s high school yea *la preparatoria*. When I came here I actually noticed the difference, in Mexico...it’s a lot of more work, so when I came here and started taking math, for example, science, it was super easy for me. It’s basically like a repetition of everything I learned over there. I felt frustrated sometimes because it’s like you’re repeating the same thing, you are not learning anything that you already don’t know and even in high school and I guess college too, you still have to repeat those algebra classes.”

Yadira’s experience is not uncommon. Many immigrant students who migrate to the U.S. in their early teens also find themselves in courses that they already took in their home countries, particularly in the fields of math and science. The only difference, however, is that these content areas are often times taught in English.

“Education, I think is one of the best things about Mexico. I think here is like the language, the universal language and you have to learn it, I think that was the difficult part to learn English, because I had never been exposed to the language even in Mexico, they teach me like the basics colors, numbers, things like that, yea you need them but they don’t teach you how to form sentences something like that. And even like I guess the conversations are different” (Yadira, 22 years old, community college student).

Upon settling in Lynwood, California a predominantly Latina/o community, it took Yadira a whole semester to enroll as a 9<sup>th</sup> grader at her local high school. During the semester she was not in school, she informed me that she stayed at home and helped her uncle, dad and grandmother with chores and work. This allowed her to acclimate to the U.S. prior to resuming her education in a new system. Yadira recalls her first day at school as follows:

“I didn’t know a lot of things around here and I guess when I started going to school and I started to meet friends and I started to talk to people was when I felt more comfortable. The first day of school I was scared because I thought no one would speak Spanish but then when I was in the bilingual program, I noticed that actually all of them spoke Spanish and most didn’t know English. So I felt comfortable [laughs].”

The fact that her classmates were also Spanish speakers helped Yadira with her transition. She explained that since all of them were transitioning from middle school to high school, and that all of them felt just as awkward as Yadira.

Yadira began her high school career in the bilingual program at her high school, she did one year in the English Language Development (ELD) program as a sophomore, and excelled to a level that then allowed her to take “regular” classes with her non-English Language Learner (ELL) peers her last two years of high school.

“At the beginning, the first year, I was enrolled in the bilingual program. I was taking classes with teachers that were speaking in English and Spanish but then they put me in the ELD program with ESL learners. So I started there to learn more the tense, vocabulary, like more things and then from that I decided to move to regular classes ‘cause I wanted to learn, I wanted to be exposed to the language so I can learn words. And I was in the bilingual program there was still a lot of students that were still speaking Spanish, so I thought it was the same thing, I was not gonna learn so I wanted to move where everyone spoke English so I can learn.”

From the quote above we see that the fact that her peers and teachers reinforced the use of Spanish in the classroom, made Yadira feel like she was not advancing her English skills, thus leading her to want to move to English-only classes. When I asked Yadira if it was difficult for her to transition into “regular” classes instructed solely in English, she said:

“I think the hardest part was just that you couldn’t communicate with a lot of students, some of them spoke Spanish and you could talk to them for a little bit but they didn’t have the knowledge to speak in Spanish as well. So I just think I learned faster. Yea it kind of forces you to learn the language. Or else I wouldn’t be able to communicate with people and I think I also developed more because I had to read a lot of books and even if I didn’t get it, I just read it and tried to pronounce the words and whatever you had to learn, it wasn’t that difficult. I just related everything to things I have learned already in Mexico. I just think the hardest part was that to communicate with others.”

The interactions Yadira had with her peers in the English-only classes were starkly different. Hearing their limited Spanish skills forced Yadira to learn English that much faster in order to

improve her communication skills. In her senior year, Yadira began to take honors classes and prepare for college.

“Not until senior year that’s when I started to pick more friends like that because I wanted someone to help me. In senior year I joined the honors society that’s when I saw the difference and importance of regular classes to honors students and here I decided to do that.”

As Yadira’s English proficiency improved, she stated that so did her friendships. By the time she was a senior, she discussed how she began to feel more comfortable befriending peers in order to seek their help with class content. On the other hand, Yadira said that being in honors courses made her realize the privileges she gained access to that her friends in the bilingual program were not able to easily access. When I asked Yadira about some of the differences she observed between her regular and honors classes, she said:

“The interaction with faculty, the honors classes were shorter, you have more chance to critique, even if you don’t want to participate there were only like 12 students so you had to do it because you have to speak. And we have a chance to talk to teachers and have a higher level of critical thinking and you are forced to do that. So I was used to that, I worked when I was in regular classes, it was like nothing, we would just sit and in honors classes was where we had...strict work, harder work, more homework. In regular we didn’t have that much homework.”

In the excerpt above, Yadira is hinting at the instructional quality and low teacher expectations faced by the ELL students at her school which she dodged by successfully mainstreaming. By the end of her high school career, Yadira said that she made a lot of friends and became a leader on campus, starting a club with her friends. Out of a graduating class of 500 students, Yadira was one of the top 20 students in her class. This remarkable accomplishment is something that made her quite proud.

“That was exciting ‘cause at that time I already had a lot of friends. I was also part of a club, we actually created one...so at graduation we were really excited we were graduating and we were gonna start college and that was pretty exciting. That was awesome and actually [laughs] we were part of the top 20 students so 2 of my friends and I so that was amazing. I came here, I actually enrolled in 10<sup>th</sup> grade [referring to regular

classes] and they came, 2 guys, not even girls, 2 guys who came when I was in 11<sup>th</sup> year and we were helping each other and got to learn more and we were in the top 20 so we were really excited because everyone was like ‘you are amazing, you are so smart even if you just came to this country.’”

Yadira’s success in high school is attributed to her persistence and determination, but also largely to her network of supportive friends who were instrumental to each other’s success.

As Yadira transitioned into community college, she continued to pursue her love for math and observing that some of her peers struggled with the content, she decided to use her gift for math to help others through tutoring.

“I actually thought of majoring in math so I can help a lot of people. I wanted to use my ability of math to use it to help other students...I used to work in the EOPS program for a year helping students who were struggling with math.

Recognizing how influential her high school friends were to her success, Yadira wanted to give back by helping her college peers.

Like Yadira, Martin completed most of his schooling in Mexico. In Mexico, his favorite subject was engineering and Martin believed he would follow in his father’s footsteps.

“Yea you could say it was kind of in my blood, and the thing is that I’m a fast learner *agarro las cosas muy rápido* (I pick up things really fast) so because I can when I moved from Chihuahua to Guadalajara...*entré a una escuela secundaria técnica. Entonces la idea de que cuando entras a la secundaria técnica es de que* (I enrolled in a technical middle school so the idea is that when you enter a technical middle school) you’re gonna get some type of degree, some people get it in *caligrafía* (calligraphy), some other people got it in engineering...I came in the half of the program because it was you could say a 3 year program but I finished like in a year and a half. I caught up to everybody else in a few months, so yea I got it really fast.”

Upon migrating to the U.S. and settling in Lynwood, California, he entered 10<sup>th</sup> grade. When I asked Martin to recall his first day at school, he said:

“Because Lynwood has a good number of first [generation], well I consider myself as a first generation student...and second generation would be people already born here so when I came there were probably a group of...I’m guessing 70 in total *que eran del programa bilingüe* (that were in the bilingual program). It was an ESL program so when I

came in I knew that I wasn't the only one like that and it was people that I could relate to and make friends with.”

Martin and Yadira attended the same high school and were in the same program, thus leading to similar experiences. When I asked Martin to tell me more about his experiences in this program, he shared with me that the program consisted of recent immigrants none of which had been living in the U.S. longer than three years. He exclaimed that their recency was what was used to classify them and place them into courses where they maintained their Spanish language, but this also kept a lot of peers from acquiring the English language. About his experiences in this program, he said:

“We would be taking classes with Spanish-speaking teachers...it took me 2 years to technically graduate from that program and some people would last probably like 6 or 7 years because they would feel comfortable with it like, ‘oh I make friends, *las clases son fácil* (the classes are easy) and I think that was one of the things that *mi papá nos puso en la mente de que* (my dad ingrained in our minds to) always keep going, keep growing *nunca* (never) get stuck on something.”

In the quote above we can see the role that Martin's teachers, peers and dad had on his educational trajectory. While Martin appreciated that he could speak to his teachers in Spanish, he was not fond of the fact that they spoke Spanish the majority of the time. As he notes, this greatly limits the amount of time it takes ELL students to mainstream. Similarly, Martin felt that his ELL peers became content with “easy” classes and did not want to be challenged which is not the type of education Martin wanted. His dad's advice was influential in assuring his English proficiency that allowed him to take courses instructed solely in English.

Martin's conscious effort to not become complacent led him to petition to take “regular” classes his senior year. He was enrolled in an economics and government class with his non-ELL peers.

“I took those classes by myself because that program *ofrecían las clases* (offered the classes) but I actually told them, ‘oh I don't want to take those classes’ and I took those



*clases en clases regulares* (classes in regular classes). A lot of people were already taking English classes but government and economics, were the classes that everybody would take together and I didn't want to take them and actually people told me like months after well, actually years after that *de que pesaban que yo era presumido de que ya me creía* (they thought I was conceited) I'm like, 'Really? For that?' because *ya no queria las clases* (I didn't want our classes anymore)."

Unlike Yadira, the fact that Martin moved on to regular classes made some of his ELL friends assume he thought he was better than them. Shocked by this, Martin knew he was doing what was needed to help him get into college. Like Yadira, Martin also noticed stark differences between his ESL classes and the regular courses he took.

"By 12<sup>th</sup> [grade] I said, 'oh I just want to take a regular class.' I didn't need to take English 10 because I already had the credits...but I just wanted to give it a try and so I asked my counselor if I could take *ingles* 10 with regular tenth graders and I think it was something between honors and regular classes so I took that class and I noticed right away how like *en una way me sentí traicionado porque desde el 10 estaban diciéndoles del colegio los* (in some way I felt betrayed because since 10<sup>th</sup> grade they were talking to them about college and the) ACTs and SATs and all that stuff, I'm like 'what? I didn't know anything about that.' I felt betrayed by my counselor because it was one counselor for *el programa bilingüe* (the bilingual program) and he knew about our situation...I got so surprised that I was barely learning things and 10<sup>th</sup> graders that already got information even from last year so I got disappointed like I didn't know and actually from there I started telling people oh hey you should...I'm doing this like that."

The quote above highlights the positive impact Martin's English teacher had in informing him about college while we can also see that the negative impact his counselor played as well.

Moreover, upon finding about college requirements, Martin made it a point to share this information with his friends in the bilingual program who were not getting this information from their teachers and counselors. The lack of access to information about college, scholarships and courses required for college is not uncommon for students classified as English Language Learners (ELLs). In California schools, it is common for these students to remain in ELL courses where they do not get college credit and rarely meet with a counselor who can advise them about their post-high school plans.

## Educational Challenges

Although most participants have been schooled solely in the U.S., they have also encountered many challenges similar to those of Yadira and Martin. For example, because their native language is Spanish, both Yazmin and Jazmin were also placed in bilingual programs when they started school.

Jazmin's earliest memory of school was kindergarten. The first thing her mother did when they arrived in the U.S. was enroll her in school. She was in a bilingual program through third grade.

"I think it was a bilingual class 'cause I remember them talking to me in English [laughs] and I didn't know what they were saying but I would play with them but yea I was confused that's one of the first emotions that I had like I was feeling confused but then eventually I got used to it."

Challenged by the language barrier, Jazmin did not let her frustration over not understanding her peers get in the way of their play time. When I asked Jazmin what it was like to learn two languages, she said:

"Well I began learning some English because my mom used to take care of my little cousin who would only speak to me in English and I don't know [laughs] how we communicated but eventually I began to get his English so he taught me to speak English so my English was getting better and it was like I was bilingual *spanGLISH* you know I was like 'oh mom *me das un* (can you give me a) pancake' [laughs]. At school it stopped being a problem. I loved school. I've loved school ever since I started school [laughs]."

In this excerpt we can see that Jazmin's English-dominant cousin was significant in helping her acquire the language and helping her in school. When I asked her about her transition to middle school and high school, she described it as follows:

"Middle school was scary to me, I was a nobody [laughs]. I would keep to myself a lot, I didn't have friends...I had friends but I don't know how to explain myself...I was already completely English speaking...I was nervous the first day then eventually it became easier and easier. I was in AVID in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and then graduated to El Rancho High School and then from there that's when I learned that I was officially

undocumented. I knew that we were from Mexico but I never knew the politics behind it.”

Some of Jazmin’s challenges were that she felt like a nobody in middle school at first and as school became easier for her, upon her transition to high school is when she learned about her immigration status which became a big challenge for her.

In Blanca’s case, she matriculated into a four-year university after high school but due to financial challenges as a result of inability to get financial aid, she left after her first quarter and enrolled at her local community college until she could gather enough money to go back to her university. She described the differences among both colleges as follows:

“The first day that I was in community college, on my Facebook profile I had that I was a proud [university mascot], I had that I go to [four-year university] and I hadn’t taken it out. So when they [high school friends] saw me at community college, they were like, ‘what are you doing here?’ they were like all confused and I had to explain ‘well I’m taking time off and I’m coming here because of financial circumstances’ and they were like ‘okay.’ My friends till this day have become very close, we met by accident. We knew each other in high school but we never talked. I asked him a couple of weeks ago, ‘what did you think of me when you first saw me?’ He was like ‘when I first met you I thought I saw you as an equal.’ And I asked him ‘what do you mean as an equal?’ He said ‘well think about it, people who come to community college are not as smart as someone who goes to [a four-year university].’ That’s what he told me. He said ‘that’s how I see it. We have been, I guess, we didn’t have enough potential or motivation you know or whatever the reason was. I saw you as an equal but once you told me you went to [a four-year university] I looked up to you. You told me your story and I couldn’t really understand why, you know, and I knew that it was hard but I looked up to you.’ So I don’t tell people anymore.”

The quote above draws attention to common beliefs held about the higher education systems.

Blanca’s friend believes that students attending a community college are not as smart and motivated as those at a four-year university. When Blanca confided in him about her undocumented status and her need to take time off, he no longer viewed her as an “equal” although his respect for her deepened. As a result of this conversation, Blanca decided to stop

telling her classmates she was undocumented, influencing the interactions and her overall experience at her community college.

“It feels weird, like ‘oh yea I go to a [four-year university]’ ‘cause they look at me like ‘oh, so you are better than us?’ so I don’t tell people anymore but at the beginning I would say ‘yea I go to a [four-year university] I am just taking time off’ and I would get different responses some good like ‘oh okay.’ But yea, it’s different no one stays on campus, everyone would just leave. I haven’t been involved because I don’t feel part of the school I’m just like ‘it’s temporary, it’s temporary.’ I keep telling myself it’s temporary so I’m not involved in the school. It’s like high school, kind of, the teachers, they are always telling us what to do and based on my experience at a [four-year university], that’s not how university is and they would always tell us in class ‘in university they won’t tell you what to do’ and in my head I’m like ‘well don’t do it. Don’t tell us what to do. You are going to get us used to it.’ It’s a lot of different things. We only have lectures and over here its lecture and instructions, the material is much easier, it’s not that challenging which made me get a little bit more lazy but you can’t blame me, that’s just the classes that I am taking. So yea, it’s the environment, it’s just different, everybody is talking about where they want to transfer and I’m already there. I’m just working on getting back. It’s more different. It doesn’t feel like my school. It doesn’t feel like I belong there.”

Not only did her community college peers make Blanca feel uneasy, but so did her instructors, whom she compares to her high school teachers. Her peers, instructors and overall environment made Blanca want to return to her university as soon as possible.

As a high school freshman, Jennifer shared with me that she has always loved school and described herself as a B-average student. Her favorite subject is history and although she was not in the performing arts academy at her high school, she developed a passion for acting.

“I did a play about growing up. It was a monologue. It was about growing up and like even though your parents are not together, they see you growing up and how you are becoming a better person and moving on like not being in the same place, working hard on what you want, on your dreams, going to school ‘cause that’s the most important thing right now and how your friends, even my dad says, friends don’t help you, they are just there. A real friend doesn’t get involved in things, your friends, they help you with homework, help you when you are sick those are the real friends that you should look out for.”

Jennifer's family life influenced her choice for her monologue. We see that her parents are positive influences that help her with school and who also caution her about her friends, whom her parents believe can sometimes have a negative influence.

Like some participants, Yazmin started school as an English Language Learner and shared with me how her mother has always been an advocate of education.

“I started learning English in preschool, I never went to school over there in Mexico. I started school here, in the United States in preschool and I was in the English for Spanish language speakers class, I was in the non-English speaker class in elementary school and so my mom she would always put me in after school programs, English, summer all those programs so that I would learn English, well better. Now I'm taking AP literature. I wouldn't like going to summer school as a little kid but now I can see why she took me to summer school.”

Like Jennifer, Yazmin credits her mother for paving the way to her educational success. As a high school junior, Yazmin described school as “hard” but has maintained a 3.5 grade point average. At the time of our interview, she was enrolled in advanced classes like trigonometry, AP U.S. History, AP literature, physics, and an administration of justice course. In her administration of justice course, Yazmin was learning about college and being exposed to the applications for community colleges, the California State University system, and the University of California system. In addition to learning about college and beginning to prepare her applications, this class also exposed Yazmin and her peers to different career opportunities via guest speakers and field trips. She learned a lot about the legal field from attorney guest speakers and field trips to Los Angeles law firms and courthouses. Yazmin is also an active member of the business and Junior Achievement clubs at her school which she described as follows:

“Business club was for the trip to Europe, which was for fundraising and learning how to finance and Junior Achievement is where business people come and help you make your own business as a group. Our business is making things out of recycled t-shirts.”

As she talked to me about her extra-curricular activities, Yazmin shared her excitement over the thought of being able to travel to attend the national competition for her business club should they make it that far as well as other opportunities.

“I’m excited that if we actually go [business club national competition] now I’ll be able to go and our administrative justice teacher gave us an application for a law camp that is in Washington DC. Now that I have my social security number and have everything worked out, I can actually apply. If DACA didn’t pass, I wouldn’t be able to participate in what my classmates are participating in.”

President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) had a direct impact on Yazmin’s educational experiences because it made her feel that her chances of being able to pay for college were greater.

As mentioned in chapter nine, Pedro, a high school student, expressed the most discontent with his educational experiences. Throughout his schooling, he shared that most of his teachers have had very low expectations. Moreover, Pedro disclosed that he has faced a lot of discrimination from numerous teachers based on the relationships they had with his older siblings. He recalled an incident from middle school that really scarred him.

“They had low expectations, like *como nos trataban* (how they treated us) like one of my teachers that I had for science, I was all friendly introduced myself and I asked him if he knew my sister and he sent me outside and switched my class”

Pedro expressed a desire to learn about his history and actively sought to enroll in the Chicano Studies class he knew was offered at his high school. When he asked the counselor to be enrolled in it, she told him she thought that class would be too hard for him. Unhappy, Pedro enrolled in the regular history course but described his behavior as follows:

“In history it was more I didn’t want to learn about their culture, I was more into my culture. Teach me something I want to know about myself, my experiences, my culture”

## Undocumented Challenges

When participants were asked about their biggest educational challenge, most expressed similar challenges that usually revolved around finances and the challenges that they encountered being undocumented as this presented a plethora of obstacles to secure steady employment, as Yadira explains:

“At the time that I came, I wasn’t allowed to apply for financial aid so I had to work in order to pay for my tuition, for my books, for everything, so that’s one of the obstacles. Another one is like getting a job, and usually you can get a job but like low wage, no benefits, and sometimes face discrimination. So you have to deal with all of that. With like the immigrant community, well I personally think it’s a stereotype, because when I first came here a lot of people were trying to discourage me from going to college because I was undocumented and I was not going to make it [gets emotional].”

The lack of financial assistance available to undocumented students is cited as one of their biggest barriers (Perez, 2011 & 2012). Like Yadira, many undocumented students resort to jobs with low wages, often times making it harder for them to complete their education. When I asked Yadira to elaborate on who the people discouraging her were, she said:

“Friends, family as well...my grandpa, my cousins, just people that would know the way around. They kept telling me ‘how are you gonna make it? How are you going to go to law school if you are undocumented?’ If you’re working, it’s hard but the discouragement just did the opposite, it encourages me.”

The lack of support Yadira received from friends and family pushed her towards her dreams even more. Not only did Yadira have to deal with her family making her feel discouraged at times, but she also encountered professors that made her doubt her academic abilities.

“When I came here I was trying to meet with faculty so they can help me improve everything, my writing, speaking skills, everything. I always try to go to faculty and tell them that English is my second language so I would like to get some help if I’m struggling with something I don’t understand so they can help me. In one class, my English 103, the professor, when I told her that, she was...always telling me that I didn’t improve my writing, that my answers were wrong...even when I was going to the writing center, with people who would check if it was right, she would still tell me the same thing. She made me feel like I couldn’t improve but then I started to, and that was in the honors program, because I’m enrolled in the honors programs. She made me think I

didn't improve so I decided to change, I dropped the class, so I got a "W" so I decided to take the class with another professor and that's where like I saw the difference, actually I think that helps me prove that she was being biased about it because the other professor, I think is the hardest professor... I just challenge myself because I wanted to see if it was really me or it was the professor who was doing that but I continued the class and it went well and I was still going to the writing the center and I was continuing to visit her during her office hours and I did good."

The quote above shows the power professors have over the academic self-esteem and trajectories of their students. Yadira did not let one unhelpful professor get in her way of advancing her academic skills. Her persistence helped her get admitted into the honors program at her community college.

High school students Yazmin and Giovanni talked about the frustration of not knowing whether they will be able to get any financial aid or scholarships to help them pay for college.

"Well in school it just makes me feel like I'm not gonna be able to get financial aid like the other kids. Like today in 5<sup>th</sup> period our teacher started talking about the UC's and like Cal States and she started giving us information and she's like 'the most important thing is the FAFSA'... I'm like aww I don't need to worry about that 'cause I can't even apply for that and she's like 'oh FAFSA... you need to apply you know it's free money' and the first thing I need to worry about is getting in and then it's the money part" (Yazmin, 16 years old, high school junior).

Yazmin's experience addresses a very common experience for undocumented students. Luckily, Yazmin knew that she should not submit a FAFSA application even though her teacher told her she should still apply. Unfortunately, misinformed teachers and counselors sometimes misguide undocumented students, putting them and their families at risk for deportation. Giovanni echoes Yazmin's sentiments:

"I like high school but like when you talk about college, like yesterday or the day before, they handed us a flyer about a McDonald's scholarship and I tried to sign up and they said no cause I wasn't born here. And like every time that they tell me 'oh, you are not eligible for this,' it sucks" (Giovanni, 18 years old, high school senior).

As a graduating senior, Giovanni shared that he often feels discouraged and frustrated exclaiming, "you don't have to go through everything that I go through, like I have to sign so



many papers and go through so many things...and that is difficult for me.” Similarly, Jazmin spoke about her biggest challenge being not giving up.

“Trying not to give up cause there’s been times that I wanted to give up or I’m just like I’m tired of it you get those tears where you’re just frustrated you just don’t want to deal with it anymore...like that one case with the kid that committed suicide because he just couldn’t. I could have been one of them you know but no I never gave up and because I was like I am the I’m the youngest here I’ve always grown up with older people and I’m like I am the face of this family and I need to be something. I need to better myself.”

Blanca recalls how she felt when she learned she was undocumented.

I found out in high school. It didn’t put me down it just never did. I guess the way that I have been raised, my parents have always told me ‘there are no limitations you know, whatsoever, nothing and everything is possible’ they have told me, ‘look at us, we’ve made it this far, what makes you think you can’t?’ so that always stayed in the back of my mind, always, like I’m just gonna do what I have to do within my power and the rest leave it up to God. So that’s what I did.”

Blanca talked about her emotional state when she elaborated further about the challenges of being undocumented when she stated that:

I would fall into depression it was like junior year when I was seeing my friends getting their license and getting jobs and I would be like ‘I can’t work, I can’t get a license’ and that’s when, I guess the peer pressure you know, influences, that’s when it really, really brought me down and also because junior year is a critical year for college so all that pressure of doing well and being a good sister and all that, it just caught up and I went into like a major, major depression that year and slowly through my mom’s therapy, because of her help and kind of like my own, I kind of gained confidence and I was like, ‘no it shouldn’t matter. Like I’m alive’ I would always be like, ‘I’ve done so much and I’m going to apply to college next year.’”

Blanca’s story is a common one. She stated that her parents were the major reason why Blanca kept pursuing her goals of a college education. Blanca’ said that her hard work paid off and she fondly remembers the scholarship she received as a high school student:

“I remember a \$250 scholarship, I couldn’t believe it. Out of my entire track...I was the only one. So it was a big accomplishment but then I ended up giving the money away to my parents ‘cause we were going through financial difficulties so I was like, ‘I don’t need it’ and I really didn’t need it then so I ended up giving it to them.”

Blanca commented that her love, admiration and appreciation for the unconditional support of her parents led her to selflessly give them her scholarship money without hesitation.

Jazmin also remembers the feeling of learning the limitations that her immigration status would impose on her education prospects.

“I lost hope to be honest. When I was in high school and I found out about my status, I was like ‘I can’t go to college. How am I going to pay for it? My mom doesn’t work, how’s she gonna pay for it?’ Until my senior year I finally found out okay maybe there is help out there, maybe I can get a scholarship, maybe I can talk to my counselor. I waited till senior year to talk to my counselor and like actually tell her ‘you know what? I’m undocumented’ and yea I told her ‘I’m undocumented’ and she told me ‘there’s a lot of kids here that are undocumented’ and I was like ‘What? Are you kidding me? How come I never knew this?’ and that’s when you kind of get angry and you’re like ‘ah my God, I could have done something or I could have asked you earlier.’”

Upon learning about her immigration status, many students like Jazmin, feel shame and keep their status secret for some time. When Jazmin shared this information with her counselor, she regretted not having done it earlier, especially when the counselor told her that she was not the only one. A number of the participants stated that having school staff that is aware of the challenges of undocumented students is vital in helping them stay in school. The mixed feelings Jazmin had after she learned about her status led her to change her behavior. She stated:

“I don’t know if it was because of that [learning she was undocumented] I did kind of rebel a little but not too much because I knew my grades were important but I began to be like ‘ehhh whatever, I’ll do it tomorrow.’ But I always worried about my grades. I never had F’s. Probably the worse grade I ever got in high school was like 3 B’s out of my whole 4 years but I did rebel a little bit, I was like ‘uhhh whatever’ cause it comes to a certain point where you’re like ‘I can’t do anything. What the heck? What am I going to do after high school? What’s gonna happen?’”

Besides recognizing that her attitude about school had been altered once she learned she was undocumented, Jazmin also shared with me that her family’s socioeconomic status limited her from participating in extracurricular activities.

“I was not involved in like clubs or anything like that not because of my status but because of money I always thought ‘no my mom’s gonna struggle with that, no, I can’t

do that' you know, that's what it was like, I always thought about my mom... I was not the kind of student that would be like 'mom I need new shoes, mom I need this, mom I need that,' I always knew that my mom struggled and I knew that I couldn't do that so you participating in school and stuff you do need money so that's why I wouldn't do it."

For Yazmin, she stated that her exposure to different opportunities through her criminal justice class led her to interact with important people throughout the city of Los Angeles.

However, upon hearing about internship opportunities that interested her, she was always concerned that she would not be able to participate because she was undocumented but she always inquired at the end of presentations. Yazmin has found that people are still unaware of undocumented students and she finds herself explaining this to more people than she would like.

"So there was this man who came to tell us about how you can intern in the courts over the summer and my counselor brought him and she told me, 'walk him down the stairs and get his things out of my office' so I asked him if you were AB 540 can you still apply or be in the program and he said 'what's that?'"

After explaining what an AB 540 student is, the man told Yazmin that she would not be able to participate in every aspect of the program because they required a social security number but encouraged her to apply if she was interested and he would help her find a way to incorporate her despite her limitations. Feeling a bit discouraged, Yazmin decided not to apply for the internship.

### **Deciding About College**

Existing literature on undocumented students suggest that approximately 80,000 undocumented youth reach the age of 18 yearly of which roughly 65,000 graduate from high school (Oliverrez et al., 2006; Passel, 2003; Passel & Cohn, 2008). However, of the 65,000 students, it is estimated that only 13,000 enroll in U.S. colleges/universities nationwide (Contreras, 2009). In this study, it was important to learn about study participants' process of choosing their college and university. Below are some of their responses.

With the exception of Pedro, the high school students all wanted to go to college. Prior to our first interview, Giovanni had already applied for college and submitted applications to UC Irvine, UC Riverside, UCLA, and UC Santa Barbara, Cal State LA, Cal State Long Beach, Cal State Northridge and Cal State Fullerton. When I asked Giovanni how he picked these schools, he said, “well I looked for what I want to major in and I saw the programs they had.”

Yazmin shared with me that she would be applying to Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA and USC and had begun her search of Cal State Universities. Jennifer also expressed interest in USC and UC Santa Barbara. The rest of the participants all shared how they decided for the college/university they were currently attending. Below is Jazmin’s story.

“I would go online and google things...I got so frustrated I was like ‘oh my God, wait, I have to go to college? Where do I go? How am I going to do it?’ I began to talk to my sister she started asking me ‘what college are you going to Jazmin?’ and I’d be like ‘stop asking me. I’m not going anywhere’ and then she’s be like ‘what do you mean? we can help you’ and then I was like okay there’s that help then I was like okay I’ll figure it out cause I never wanted her to help, I never wanted her to choose my college so I began researching and I’m like I’m going to [Eastside College] I’m pretty sure they have some kind of help for my situation and I didn’t even think [about the community college closer to her]

In talking more about how she went about selecting a college she said that:

I was like [Eastside College] they have to have something there for me, it might be cheap, I don’t know [laughs] for some reason I thought it was gonna be cheaper than anywhere else and to me it was a lot more easier to get there because I had gone there before because of going with my mom to where my grandma had to go to a doctor and I remembered going and I’m like oh this is the campus...oh I know how to get there and it’s just one bus so I was thinking convenience for me too so I began researching and I was like ‘okay I’m going to [Eastside College] that’s where I’m gonna go, but how am I going to pay for it?’ and that’s when I asked my sister ‘please I need this amount, can you please help me out?’ and she was like ‘yea of course I’ll help you out’ and then my other grandma who just passed away she helped me, and then my brother helped me, so I was like ‘ah thank God’ but I don’t like that I’m the kind of person that I’m like no they can’t be paying for my college and that’s when I was like okay I need a job and that’s when I got the job [at the swapmeet]”

Jazmin' stated that her decision to attend Eastside College was influenced by her sister who kept asking her about post-high school plans. She stated that the financial help she received from her family members helped her get on her feet until she found a job. I asked Jazmin at what point in high school did she decide to go to college and she said:

“It was literary the last 4 months or 3 months of high school where I was like ‘oh my God I need to go to college.’ I was never really pushed cause I really didn’t think I was gonna go to college I was like no I’m probably gonna have 2 years off...I was just thinking about money you know I was like no we don’t have money for that how am I going to pay for it?”

Although Jazmin was never encouraged by her teachers or counselor to go to college, she stated that she regrets her finding out about her status impact her GPA, and taking courses that would make her a more competitive college applicant.

“I did have like a rebellious time at high school where I didn’t do as well...I never got Fs I never got Ds but Cs like where I was like oh my God I’m getting Cs and I didn’t get a 3.0 I had a 2.80 I think almost so close until this day I’m like ah if I would have not rebelled like that I would have probably been in honors, I always tell myself that and I was like man see I was so dumb ‘cause it was a phase that I had you know where I just hated everyone, I hated the fact that I couldn’t do things, it just sucked and I was just like oh I’ll figure out everything and I have no future kind of thing but then I snapped out of it and I was like no Jazmin, no you have to get it together, you got to get up, you gotta hold your head up high, you need to do this. That’s when I was like okay I can do it, but like I said, I didn’t plan for college I was just like okay I need to go and then I was like I know I can get through it and I took myself there...”

Similar to Jazmin, Martin also had to figure out his college plans on his own and his decision was largely due to his immigration status. Martin shared with me that most of his peers in the bilingual program aspired to get a college education but all spoke about how financing their education would be a huge barrier which led many to opt for work and studying part time at a community college.

“Everybody knew that it was about money, everybody...so I think the goal for everybody was to graduate, get a job and go to school part time. And everybody knew that we were not going to make it to USC or Cal States so it was community college because money wise.”

However, Martin did apply and was accepted to Cal State Long Beach and explained why he chose not to attend. He said:

“The thing is that with me in high school, I applied to some schools and then *la cosa es que* (the thing is that) I didn’t know what to do. Nobody told me ‘okay once you’re a senior, you gotta think about what you are gonna do for the rest of your life, for the next year.’ I actually felt like teachers already wanted to kick us out from schools. That’s the feeling I had.”

Like Jazmin, Martin also stated that he did not receive much guidance from his counselor and teachers. He informed me that the lack of information and support led him to turn down his admission into Cal State Long Beach and he ultimately decided to attend community college.

“*El problema es que mucha de la gente de ese programa quieren seguir estudiando pero la cosa es de que* (the problem is that a lot of the people in that program want to continue studying but the thing is that) they get stuck with like...for example I came here to [Eastside College] because...my teacher told me ‘oh you should go’ and actually when I was looking at packets I saw that they had the ESL placement program, so I felt more comfortable but I was like ‘should I take the regular English or the ESL?’ and I took the regular but I felt more comfortable thinking ‘oh there’s more people like me over here’ but actually [laughs] when I came here the ESL program was more for the Asian community...and I think *una de las cosas que me hizo* (one of the things that made me want) to keep going here is that I met friends since the first day of school and I felt a connection, I could relate to someone. I think that’s why a lot of the people that went to community college after they didn’t feel welcomed because they got used to *el grupito* (the high school group) and going to classes not knowing everybody, not talking to anybody. For example, I had this friend we graduated from the same group *del programa bilingüe* (of the bilingual program) in 2010 and we’ve been going to [Eastside College] since...*una vez me la encontré aquí* (I ran into her once) and...she told me ‘*me sentí tan sola en [Eastside College],’ la única gente que* (‘I felt so lonely at Eastside College’ the only people) she would talk to was high school friends that would come to [Eastside College] and I think that’s why a lot of people didn’t keep going to school or just like take 1 or 2 classes *o no le echan ganas* (or they don’t try).”

As Martin explained in his story, there are multiple reasons why ELL students have a difficult time pursuing higher education. For example, the lack of information and mentorship from counselors and teachers, limits how students select a college or university. In Martin’s case, his teacher suggested he go to Eastside College and upon doing his own research, Martin found out

they had an ESL program which made him feel like this was the right school for him. Fortunately for Martin he stated that he connected with his peers early on, which assured that he felt connected and maintained his retention. However, as he shares above, community college can become a very isolating experience for many students, especially ELL students who are not used to taking classes with different people. This shows how teachers, counselors and peers influence the educational pursuits of students.

The four-year university students had different pathways. Blanca enrolled at a university immediately after high school. When I asked her about her college applications and decisions she stated that she applied to 12 schools in total, consisting of a mixture of UC's, CSU's and private universities across the country. Blanca said that she was admitted into nine of the twelve she applied to, and had the intent of moving away from home. She explained to me why she ending up staying at home and commuting to a university close to her.

“I just didn't end up leaving home because financially it hit me, 'wait, I don't have money, I don't qualify' but my hope was that through private colleges it would kind of be like 'ok we'll give you money' so that's why I applied to more private schools and in the end none of them offered me money whatsoever so it was only because I applied to my own scholarships and got \$4,000 and that's when I went to talk to my college counselor and I was balling my eyes out so he sat down with me and said 'you're going to hate me, but you are going to have to follow my advice.' He said, 'take these \$4,000 dollars and pay for your first quarter at [Los Angeles University], pay out of pocket, don't worry, we will help you out. Once you go in and finish your first quarter, you are going to withdraw and go to your local community college, whatever one you want' and then he's like 'hopefully by the time, a year passed by a grant or law comes into effect and you'll be able to get money' and of course I hated him, I was like 'how can you be telling me that, all my hard work' he had initially told me to go to community college and then transfer, and I was like no, I guess my pride was just too big that I was like no but it's a good thing because then I wouldn't have to start all over again. I worked so hard that was the thing that I always told him, 'you know how hard I worked. I'm not going to let that go to waste' so that's when he presented alternatives and that's been the plan ever since.”

In Blanca's case, she stated that her college counselor's advice made a huge impact on her college plans. As mentioned earlier, Blanca said that she did follow her counselor's advice and at

the time of our interviews, she had completed one quarter at the university and took a leave of absence and was taking classes at a community college.

## **Educational Resources**

As the previous sections of this chapter have demonstrated, the resources available to study participants played a key role in their educational experiences and outcomes. This subsection is divided up by access to counseling and information and scholarships.

### *Access to Counseling & Information*

For many participants, access to counseling and helpful information was a challenge. In the case of the high school students, Giovanni, a graduating senior, expressed his frustration about not having a helpful counselor. Jennifer, a freshman at the same high school said she did not know her counselor. When I asked both students if their counselor or teachers had spoken to them about California's Assembly Bill 540 and the state DREAM Act, Giovanni said no. Instead, he stated that he was informed by his cousin and did his own research. Jennifer, on the other hand, said:

“I think some of my teachers have talked about that. My English teacher was talking about how if you're undocumented, a law passed for undocumented students [referring to DACA] and she said ‘if you guys have any questions talk to me or other teachers.’”

Similarly, Pedro did not know about the California A-G requirements for college nor had anyone spoken to him about AB 540, the California DREAM Act, or DACA. He said his teachers nor counselor ever reached out to him and gave him any information about college or beneficial laws.

When I asked Giovanni if he was getting help finding scholarships, he said:

“Well they haven't talk to me about scholarships that I could to apply to or where to apply or anything. They just told me there are some out there but that's it.”



Yazmin, on the other hand, had regular contact with her counselor whom at the time of data collection was already helping Yazmin fill out college applications even though the deadline was nearly a year away.

“It was just practice but our counselor helped us start the UC application so she has us starting it now.

Yazmin exclaimed that she had a “pretty good” relationship with her counselor whom she confided her immigration status. She considered her counselor very helpful in providing with her information, advice and resources. Below is some advice her counselor and teacher gave her.

“Yea to apply for private colleges and that’s also what my other teacher told me, to apply for private colleges well my English teacher, she told me because of the financial aid, they provide more help and stuff like that.”

When I inquired about the resources she received from her counselor, Yazmin said:

“Resources not for scholarships, she offers resources for all her students and the things that she offers sometimes you need a social security number so that’s what she offers but she offered me last time health care for undocumented students. She was asking if I had healthcare because there was this thing through Kaiser giving it to us for free.”

These excerpts show the pivotal role positive relationships with counselors and teachers play in the pursuits of higher education for undocumented students. The lack of information and helpful counselors resonated among the community college and university students as well. Most of the participants noted the little help they got as high school students and how that continued to be the case in their respective college and university.

In Martin and Yadira’s cases, they both went to the same high school and stated that despite having a counselor just for the bilingual program, he was not helpful to either of them. Instead both of them received information from their English teacher who had built in college information to her curriculum. Yadira described the teacher as very supportive.

“She just kept telling me that I have to continue my education, it doesn’t matter what college. She would say I will always make it if I wanted to and she just told me about the

affidavit for AB 540 students to pay as a residents and just told me to get involved because that way I would know what to do, where to go and to apply for scholarships, any scholarships that I could.”

Had it not been for Martin petitioning his desire to take a regular English course during his senior year, he would have not learned about the SAT’s, how to fill out an application, and helpful legislations. When I asked him if he had gotten this information from his counselor, he said:

*“La cosa es de que como que nunca tubo esperanza en todo el grupo (the thing is that he never had hope in the entire group) oh like probably you will make it in community college well I think it was the idea that he never pushed us nada más quería empujar que termine (all he pushed was that we finish) high school and that’s it. So yea and actually I didn’t know about AP classes until senior year.”*

The fact that Martin and his peers felt that their counselor did not have any hope for them says a lot about the challenges many undocumented students face; with both parties had established very low expectations for each other. When I asked Martin when he learned about AB 540 and other legislations, he said:

“We knew about it probably from junior year and I’m pretty sure by senior year we already knew about AB 540 and we knew that it was gonna be more accessible to pay but still, I think back then the unit was \$26, so yea we’re talking about less than \$500 probably per semester but we were thinking it was still expensive.”

Fellow community college student, Jazmin, remembers registering for her classes. She stated that had she attempted to pay, she was told she owed \$1,500. When she asked why she owed that much she was told that it was because she was an international student. Shocked by this assertion, Jazmin did not know how to respond. Being referred to as an international student was weird for her to comprehend. Fortunately, the attendant asked her if she had attended a California high school for at least three years and Jazmin said yes and was then given the AB 540 affidavit. Jazmin recalled the instructions she received during orientation.

“They did tell us in orientation the first day of school after taking the assessment tests to go see a counselor right away but I didn’t do it. I was like ‘how hard could it be? It’s just picking out classes and they’re giving us all this information, I can do it.’ I’m like that, I was like no, for me it’s like bothering them that’s how I feel, I feel like I’m bothering them. That’s how I am about a lot of things all the time so I didn’t [go see a counselor] and I did mess up a few classes that I didn’t even need you know but I learned that the 4<sup>th</sup> semester, I finally went and saw a counselor but until then I was like oh okay so these are the classes I need to take okay but I was on the right track I wasn’t taking like dumb classes that I absolutely didn’t need but they were like extra maybe like my own interests...”

Like Jazmin stated above, one of her main reasons for not seeking out counseling is that she felt she would be bothering them. It is also likely that Jazmin did not think she needed to see a counselor because she rarely saw her counselor in high school.

At the time of our interview, Yadira was in the process of deciding what university to transfer. She had been admitted to UC Riverside and UC Berkeley and was denied from UCLA, even though it was her first choice. She said that she petitioned the UCLA decision and was eventually granted admission. When I asked her about her application process, she spoke highly of the transfer center at her school.

“You don’t see like a specific counselor like whoever is available to see you. I actually looked for help and I asked some of the professors to look at my personal statement and I went to the transfer center and they kind of helped me with the UC application. They actually try to provide you with information about universities, they also offer workshops for students who are interested in attending a four-year institution and they kind of guide you through the transfer process and they also help you with the requirements to apply for UC or Cal States or any other institution.”

Unlike Jazmin, Yadira had no problem seeking help from counselors and professors because she knew these people were the ones that had the information she needed to succeed.

Both Martin and Jazmin discussed three programs at their community college, EOP&S, Puente, and Adelante. They both stated that these programs afforded students who were low income, first generation college students items like book rentals. Had it not been for a program representative who asked Martin a series of questions about high school and his family’s

situation, he would have not benefited from these services. Not only did he receive information on supplemental programs but was also informed about the AB 540 advocacy and support group on the campus. He told me:

“The lady that was working there gave me this flyer about this organization here...and I was like okay cool I started seeing something *y dije okay no era el único, esa es la cosa no era el único* (and said okay I was not the only one, that’s the thing, I was not the only one) so I felt more comfortable. The Adelante program back in those years...was a pretty good program because they would put you in a group of like probably less than 20 people and you would be taking the same 2 or 3 classes per semester and you could be taking 2 more classes so it was kind of like the right step for me because I made friends since the first day. People were really cool to talk to and it was a group but the next level it wasn’t, like you see them probably like every other day but still like you make friends and you started connections. You find someone that you could relate to and have the same struggles. I met this friend, he was AB 540 but *estaba en esa época estaba arreglando su documentación* (he was in the process of getting his residency) so he already got everything right now, we could relate a little bit” (Martin, 22 years old, community college student).

Having supplemental programs is important, but much more important is the outreach.

According to participants in my study, program representatives need to make sure they are making connections with students such as those that occurred with Martin and the Adelante program representative, who ended up learning that Martin was undocumented. Fortunately, according to Martin, this woman was well informed about the resources on her campus and was able to provide Martin information about the support and advocacy group. Martin said that program and the group really impacted his education. He became an active leader in the AB 540 club and pushed campus administrators to do more for their undocumented student population.

By default, this helped Martin broadened his networks of allies.

“The thing is that some services became available for us starting 2013, we could apply for EOP&S because it is a state funded program so that was something new for us...there’s still scholarships for students but one of the things required to apply was *poner el número del seguro social* (to put down your social security number) so Oscar [a powerful administrator] changed that to the student ID so that made a lot able to apply.”

When I asked the university students about their access to counselors, Blanca said:

“Always. But more with the college counselor. With the academic counselor it was just to see how I was doing so I didn’t really meet with her a lot like other kids but it was just to check my schedule, high school senior requirements you know all of that. But more with my college counselor.”

Blanca was one of the few students that learned about AB 540 from school personnel due to her participation in an assistance program and she had this to say about it:

“I owe a lot to them because it was through them that I found out about AB 540 and I even had my own mentor. They would provide college mentors and every month they would come in and talk to us about grades and how we could do better, what classes to take, I took a lot of college classes, I took 3 college classes and it saved me a lot of money now. I’ve had counselors, mentors, teachers help me.”

Daniela shared that her access to good counselors and resources as a high school and community college were slim. She often interacted with people that did not know how to help her and showed no desire to. At her community college, she was discouraged from taking courses she knew would help her transfer. Similarly, Juan also did not have good counselors as a high school and community college student. In high school, he credits his friend for helping him learn about college.

“My friend from Nigeria, he was able to guide me through it, what I could do, and I talked to his parents about it too. I was fortunate enough to have friends who were willing to help, who were really caring. Another friend helped me with all my college applications, community college and UC, his mom mentored me though the process”

As a community college, Juan recalled a negative encounter with his counselor.

“The crazy thing is that he was Mexican and he was from Guanajuato too and after that I was like I really want to transfer out, I want to get into UC Berkeley, he looked at me like ‘are you serious? Ok it’s going to be really hard.’ He was trying to discourage me.”

### *Finding Scholarships*

Funding their education was one of the leading concerns that all participants expressed and that is heavily documented in the literature on undocumented students (Contreras, 2009; Perez, 2011). Without the financial means, many undocumented students cease their education

after high school or it takes them a very long time to get their desired degree due to periods of non-enrollment in order to save up for tuition and related expenses.

“When I was in school there wasn’t really a lot. After I graduated, that’s when everything happened. When I was there, the most I could do was through scholarships. So that’s all I did” (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

The quote above captures a very important point, and that is the point in the educational trajectory of each participant mattered a great deal regarding funding higher education. Blanca graduate from high school in 2011 when the AB 540 had been in effect for ten years and the California DREAM was passed that summer. As she mentioned, as a high school student, she was largely limited to funding her education through scholarships with no residency restrictions. The four high school students interviewed for this project had more opportunities for funding their education, thanks to the California DREAM Act and DACA. However, as was discussed above, many of them did not receive information on such legislations or scholarship opportunities at their respective schools. Yazmin was the only high school student who said that she regularly communicated her with counselor about college and scholarships and also received mentorship and assistance from some of her teachers.

Interviews with the community college students revealed that they were their main resource. In other words, all four community college students, Yadira, Jazmin, Jose and Martin, attended the same school and were part of the support and advocacy group for undocumented students. Recognizing the limited sources of information, the group stated that they took the initiative to not only educate other undocumented students on their campus, but to educate the faculty and staff as well. It is not uncommon for undocumented students to take time off from their studies in order to save enough money to pay for school-related expenses such as tuition,

books, and housing and this is exactly what happened to Martin who was active on campus but was not enrolled consecutively.

“That’s why I didn’t take that many classes so I could...work for one semester and I would go to college. I couldn’t take classes but still some of my music teachers let me sit in their classes so I would come to campus.”

When I asked him his strategy for finding funds to pay for his education, he said:

“That’s the thing, I always have this plan, like all this is gonna happen or something and it never happens that’s why I was expecting like oh yes *alguien va a ver que soy un* (someone is going to see I’m a) good guy and I’ll go to spring semester and it didn’t happen so I cannot expect just to have more plans so I’m working through different ways.”

Fortunately, people do recognize Martin’s need and leadership and his main source of funding are scholarships from individuals and organizations he works with closely. His commitment to the student club has led to strong relationships and networks with powerful people. Martin has established a relationship with the vice president of student services at his school who is impressed by the leadership skills of students like Martin who successfully ran an advocacy and support group on campus. Martin stated that the vice president regularly reaches out to the club to inform them about transfer events and scholarship opportunities and also offers to provide students with loans from a funding source strictly for undocumented students.

“Actually because I’m really involved *el vice alcalde* from [undocumented support and advocacy group] we have a really good relationship with him...he’s a pretty cool guy and he actually is gonna give me a scholarship...and because I’m also really active with the Deferred Action clinics, one other organization is gonna give me a scholarship *también* (too) but until November the lady even told me like you don’t even have to apply we’ll give it to you.”

When I asked Juan how he found out about college funding, he said his friends would always give me resources.

“He was able to tell me about scholarships for undocumented students and he also told me that if I applied to a private college, they would help me more”

Blanca found scholarships from several websites and her participation in a leadership program.

“They had a big fat book of scholarships and I just looked through them and whatever I wanted I applied for or Fastweb, all those websites and programs too, I did the Chicano/Latino Leadership program in Sacramento. I did [outreach program at a university] which helped me a lot too...I did so much compensating for what I, back then I couldn't do, back then there wasn't a lot of aid out there.”

As Blanca pointed out, while she was still in high school there was little financial resources for undocumented students as there were support groups. It is important to note that three of the four high school students did not have a support or advocacy group on their campus, with the exception of Yazmin's school. However, all the college students said that they were at least aware of a club on their respective campus, with a large majority of them being active members. When I asked the participants why they decided to join the club, they all mentioned that it was as a result of not having the necessary support and knowing other students during high school. As a high school student, Blanca said that she heard about the group at the university she would be attended and reached out to them prior to matriculation.

“My friend told me about the group and I was like ‘yea let's do it.’ I was just trying to get in contact with some group at [the university] so I wasn't so lonely, at least I would have a place to eat or hang out so that's where I met them and I've been with them ever since. Even now that I'm not enrolled, through Facebook, I keep in contact, and events and stuff like that.”

### **Student Recommendations**

All participants were asked if they had any recommendations for their current school and general recommendations that they believed would help improve the educational experiences of undocumented students in particular. One of the high school students said the following:

“I think that teachers should talk to their students more ‘cause I feel like in the beginning teachers were like I don't know if it was because it was a new school, and I feel like



instead of teachers helping students more I felt the students helped students” (Giovanny, 18 years old, high school senior).

When I asked Giovanny to elaborate on his answer, he said he wished teachers got to know their students on a personal level better, as well as provide more individualized help on class material, like offering after school tutoring or implementing a structured after school program.

Most of the recommendations from the college students also were directed towards their K-12 education. Most of them were grateful for the leadership and advocacy of the undocumented student club they now frequented, but each stated that they wish they had a club at their high schools. Jazmin, Yadira and Martin were active leaders on their campus and spoke about what they are doing to improve the experiences of undocumented students on their campus.

“I seriously wish there was some of kind of program that would help undocumented students, especially in my high school. I wish I had that. I wish I had that help I just never looked for help until the last 4 months of high school but I wish they would had like some kind of club or I wish I would have thought of it or something but I was honestly scared, I didn’t think anyone else was just like me that’s when my counselor told me, I was like ‘what? there’s students in my grade that I might know’ and I couldn’t be too angry ‘cause I didn’t want to say anything, why would they want to say something, you know...so I think yes if there was an opportunity to go back which I want to, I want to tell them [club] like ‘you know what guys, you need clubs out there that can help undocumented students.’ ‘Cause it’s so hard like oh man I wish I had that help in high school I mean I got it in college kinda late but it still helped me so much like specially with everything it gets you, it gives you knowledge on the immigration reform or things that you just didn’t know that you know now like that you need to know like scholarships or any kind of opportunity or benefit that you could get. So yea especially like elementary, maybe you start them earlier so that if they do know [about their status], which I doubt, I doubt kids that are young, they don’t know the politics behind that” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

When I asked Jazmin at what grade level she thought it would be good to start talking about immigration and begin a club, she said:

“Kids is like they’re never gonna know until later so I guess maybe middle school would be a good time, I think middle school...’cause elementary I would want to say they need to know as soon as possible but they don’t know the politics behind it, they don’t know

so I think maybe like middle school would be good for a club that you know supports kids that are undocumented.”

As discussed above, the undocumented student support and advocacy group at the community college initiating workshops aimed at providing professors and staff with information about undocumented student struggles and resources was an important source, according to the participants. Jazmin stated:

“I think maybe when they have those meetings that all the teachers have they should have some kind of ‘do you know what AB 540 is?’ so that teachers know that they’re gonna get involved with students that have obstacles. We did a staff presentation where we told them ‘you know not a lot of you guys have been able to help us because you guys are not aware of our situation or of what we need.’ When we did that presentation, after some of them were like ‘wow we had no idea how much this affects you guys’ and they all requested a copy of the PowerPoint so like by that we just kind of helped for them to be more knowledgeable of that situation...I think it’s very important for a teacher to know that and some don’t really know that, they don’t know how to approach someone or they don’t know how to even go about it, they’ll probably be like ‘oh you know I don’t know much about it but I can tell you who to go to’ which is still okay...I told one of my teachers, I wrote an essay...she did read it because she replied and said ‘I had no idea good luck on everything you do. If you ever need help please contact me I’m always all ears and I’m open to give you any advice’ so I think it is our job to tell them too but they need to know also” (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

Yadira’s recommendations for high schools were the following:

“I think they could have offered more college fairs, fieldtrips for everyone because most of the fieldtrips are just offered to those people who are in the honors, in the national honor society or those people who are in regular classes but there’s not a lot of opportunities. I think they should provide more resources for every single student in high school and teachers also need to be more informed about schools, about universities and they should give that information to their students.”

As far as community college, Yadira recommended that they offer more workshops aimed at transferring to 4-year universities.

“Like transfer workshops, how to write your personal statement...so I think they should do that in high school for high school students and also for AB 540 students they should provide more resources because not a lot of AB 540 students are encouraged to pursue higher education, on the contrary, they put a lot of limitations on AB 540 students and now that there are a lot of changes in the law like AB 130 and AB 131, they should be informing about those laws. They just need to open more workshops or more

opportunities to every single student and that's why I decided to join the honors program because the honors students were the one's who were receiving every single event opportunity to present at honors conferences and a lot of things, fieldtrips and even UCLA library cards they offer in the honors programs so you could actually have access to reading at the UCLA library.”

These student recommendations underscore the important role that school and college staff can play in enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of students, especially those that are undocumented. According to the participants, educators at all levels of the educational pipeline must be informed about the needs and challenges of their students and must be knowledgeable of resources that can help if they cannot.

### **Sources of Motivation**

Thus far, this chapter discussed the numerous educational challenges and triumphs of the study participants. The fact that all the participants have not given up on their dreams despite their challenges says a lot about their resiliency. Therefore, I asked all participants about their sources of motivation. Most cited their families and sometimes friends and teachers.

“My family, mostly my family, who struggled to get here to get a better job” (Pedro, 18 years old, high school junior).

“My family, my little brother and sister I have to set an example, especially break this cycle of Latinos not going into higher education” (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

“My parents and myself...and teachers and friends. Well my mom always tells me like, ‘Even though you were not born here you could become someone, you could still go to school. Don’t let just ‘cause you weren’t born here stop you.’ And my dad tells me the same thing. And me, I just tell me myself like, ‘If I want to be something, I’m gonna do it.’ I am happy that my friends don’t treat me like, ‘Oh we are gonna go do something that involves you have to be a citizen,’ they’re not like ‘oh you can’t go.’ They will... inform me about stuff and teachers always tell me ‘cause I have always had good grades, they tell me, ‘keep it on and in the future you will be something. Don’t let being undocumented stop you.’”

Giovanny stated that he is motivated by all the key individuals in his life, his parents, friends and teachers. He shared with me that their positive comments are what he resorts to when he feels down.

“My dad when he was small he stopped going to school after I think 7<sup>th</sup> grade to help the family, he wanted it, he told us that he wanted to continue high school and finish high school but his dad said we don’t have the money right now... ‘cause they are a big family... he has around like 11 brothers and sisters... so you don’t have the money to go to school, cause you send all of them... so he always has this like wanting to learn more so he tells me ‘I couldn’t finish high school, you have a greater opportunity here so you outta finish high school... you have to work hard for yourself so you don’t end up in that position of being somewhere you don’t want to. So you have to finish high school, go to college. That’s it.’ And then my mom is always telling me ‘you should do your work every day, you have strong abilities.’ ‘Cause there was a point where I was barely passing and she was like ‘*échale ganas todos los días*’ (try your best every day)...” (Jennifer, 14 years old, high school freshman).

Many children of immigrants, like Jennifer, feel an immense sense of responsibility to fulfill the visions their parents have for them. Jennifer’s parents, like many immigrants, have limited schooling as a result of financial hardships which led them to work at a very young age.

Knowing their parents yearning for an education, motivates children like Jennifer, who stated that she wanted nothing more than to make her parents proud.

“There were times it [undocumented status] brought me down. Junior year was a difficult part where it really brought me down... the labeling was what brought me down but things always keep me going. I was always writing in my dairy... my bucket list, goals that I had so just seeing the stuff that I wanted to be, it never, never, once occurred to me how my status would impact that. Never. It was just me as a person, what do I want? How do I make myself a better person? I want to be a teacher or I want to do this or I want to do that, of course career wise it did kind of, it was hard because I don’t have a social security so how am I going to find work? So in that case, yea it did, it was tough but I think what kept me going was just knowing that there’s more, there’s more to life than 9 digits. There’s more to life that being a citizen. That doesn’t define you as a person. My mom would always tell me, ‘you’re status doesn’t define you, that’s just a reality.’ We will find out who you are, your faith, your morals, your values, what kind of person you are. That’s more important.’ You don’t introduce yourself by saying, ‘I’m an immigrant, I’m undocumented’ or ‘I’m a U.S. citizen’ no one says that. My mom has always been there for me. My mom would really, always, push me through everything and I owe a lot to her. And even though she’s undocumented too but being a student is

different so she didn't understand completely but she tried to. She would always give me advice and her faith too" (Blanca, 19 years old, university student).

According to Blanca her undocumented status itself has been a big source of motivation. Her mother has been instrumental in helping her recognize that her status does not define her.

Similarly, Jazmin's mom was also her source of inspiration.

"I could have given up a long time ago but it's my mom, she motivates me [laughs]. Because you know my dad passed away when I was 9, it was a struggle with my dad, my mom didn't tell me until now...my dad had a drinking and smoking problem so that messed him up a lot that's what caused his death...so as soon as that happened...I knew that I had to take responsibility for my mom 'cause I was the youngest my brother and sisters were older and getting married you know and I was the baby so I was like no one's gonna take care of my mom, I will and also my grandma...I just have to people to look out for and I do as much as I can at home like even working, I have to put some of my money in for the house or the bills...my grandma...she's one of the motivations but my mom is number 1 because she's the one who decided to come here and because of her I'm here you know and I'm already working and of course I'm not going to ignore her and be like okay I'm leaving no, no, no. I'm gonna help her, she's been my motivation forever like for the longest..." (Jazmin, 22 years old, community college student).

The stories shared in this chapter clearly portray the influence that individuals such as family, friends, teachers and counselors have over the educational experiences and outcomes of undocumented students. Being undocumented presents more roadblocks, however the participants of this study are determined to accomplish their dreams.

### **Aspirations**

All study participants were asked about their aspirations and where they would like to see themselves in five years. Below are some of their responses.

"I really want to give back to the community especially undocumented people because I know the hardships I can help them by providing services they can't afford, I feel like through law I can provide those services, if not law it will be public policy" (Juan, 23 years old, university student).

"I would like to continue working for unions, I am aiming for AFL" (Jose, 25 years old, community college student).

“Ideally it would be good to be a translator for the courts, I want to be a translator because I like speaking Spanish, some rates are as high as \$150 an hour, you just talk, ideally when I’m like 30, I want to be a Spanish professor at a CSU” (Alejandro, 18 years old, university student).

Jazmin stated that she will be transferring in a year and aspires to attend Cal State Los Angeles or Cal State Long Beach to pursue studies in art graphic communication and then UCLA for a Masters degree in art.

“I’ve been a computer geek ever since I could remember ever since I laid eyes [laughs] on a computer so I’m gonna do something that I enjoy...in the spring I’m qualifying for social and behavioral science degree and I’m really glad about that I really like that so I want my back up also to be like human resources or I want it to be anything in the psychology field ‘cause I like it a lot like I realized that but I really do like computers a lot. I like computer programs like all of that so I’m really going into that.”

As for her career, Jazmin said:

“Well I’m not sure yet I feel like I need more help on that. I need someone to be there for me and tell me ‘okay Jazmin you could do this or you can do that’ because a lot of people don’t know a lot about the art field especially in Eastside College they’re just like well you could do this and that but they don’t really tell you this is a good school for art or you know you should take these classes instead of that one, they don’t do. What I have to do more now that I’m taking my art field classes all of this semester that’s coming up, I’m gonna be talking to the professors a lot more like I need to talk to them and I need to tell them my situation because they need to know I realized that’s important for them to know so I need to tell them that and then cause I really like the art fields I know I can do something with it. What I would like to do essentially is lay out something for like an album cover or to work for a good magazine, it’s like...publishing, all that stuff. That’s what I want to do I want to have my office where I’m like creating things...but we’ll see how that goes.”

Jazmin realized that she is going to be in school for a long time and does not mind. She said that her experiences in high school and community college have also taught her about the importance of being open to disclosing her status to school staff. She said that she now realizes that this is risky, but it can also open a lot of doors for her to accomplish her dream.

Yadira said the following about her aspirations:

“I just want to study sociology but I also want to go to law school. I’m still undecided right now, for sure, I want to do immigration law but I also want to do criminal. I like

most of the subjects of law, but for sure, for sure I want to do immigration. It's because I feel like if I focus on immigration, I can help others, like all of the people that are in the same situation that I was. I'm still undocumented but, and I think that's one of the reasons because I know how difficult it is to move from one country to another. I want to do it pretty much to help others through obstacles. I want to help them. Oh and one thing, I know that lawyers...charge a lot, but I don't want to do that. Well actually I want to do that, work with the upper class, I will not have the necessity to charge the working class. So that's my plan [laughs]."

Like many professionals, Yadira said her aspiration to become a lawyer is rooted in her experiences. She stated that she hopes to use her story and her education as a source of empowerment for others with hardships.

Like Yadira, Blanca said that she is also thinking of entering a helping profession as a result of her experiences.

"Teaching. Yea. Teaching. Counseling. I love kids, I always have. I just like, I guess for my own experiences, I always see the issue of how broken families, it's very hard to have good people. But with strong families, come strong individuals so that's what I want to do. I want to counsel families. When there is no strong foundation, it leads to gangs, prison, teen pregnancy, not doing well in school and that's what I see. They [her students] tell me about all their problems and all this stuff and I'm like family, family, family. It all goes back to that. How we are raised, you know, single families, no mom or dad or divorced...that's what I want to change, I want to focus on families and elementary school kids...because I don't think that as parents and as teachers, I think sometimes they don't motivate students enough to realize their full potential and once they get into middle school, which is a pivotal point, they are like 'oh, I don't care' or 'I can't do it, I'm too lazy' and that's how they go to high school and college and that depends on whether they want to go to college or not. So that's what I want to do, I don't know what careers, I don't want to be stuck in a room, that's what I know. I want to be out there meeting with people, meeting with families being active."

The high school students also stated that they aspired to establish careers in helping professions.

Giovanny said:

"I want to be a social worker. Well first when I was growing up I always wanted to be a doctor. Like I always want to be, like I feel like my need in this world is to be someone to help people who don't, who can't and I want to be a doctor to help out people, no matter their race, or rich poor or whatever and then I wanted to be a psychologist and now I just want to be a social worker 'cause like my friends' kids, they had babies and they need help and stuff like that and I have seen kids in streets. Like the other day, I was walking and this little boy was crying at the bus stop and I was by himself. I went to go talk to

him and was like ‘Are you okay?’ and I sat down with him and he was like ‘oh my dad was hitting me and he was drinking’ and I was like ‘oh well you know there is always help’ and he was like ‘my fear is I don’t want to be taken away from my mom and my dad.’”

In five years, Giovanni said that she hopes to be finishing school and getting a job to help his family. In Jennifer’s case, she has a few ideas of the types of careers she will enjoy.

“I would like to become a therapist or a lawyer or something that gets me into the 3 branches of government. I want to work in the Supreme Court. A judge is what I want to become. I like this whole debating thing whether a person is right or wrong. It just gets you more involved with everyday life and what people go through.”

In ten years, Jennifer hopes to be:

“Working for myself that’s where I would like to be, have my own apartment or house because my mother always taught me that you have to work for what you want ‘cause no one is going to give it to you. So you better work hard for it...she says that when my mom and dad separated, my mom left with nothing...so she says work for your life that way if you ever separate it will be easier, you will have your house to go to, you will have everything.”

Jennifer said that her mother uses her separation as an opportunity to give her daughter a good lesson for the importance of education and self-sufficiency. As far as college goes, Jennifer said:

“I would like to go to UC Santa Barbara or I want to try a college out of state but I haven’t really looked into any colleges. I just remember the ones around here...like USC and UCLA, I would also really want to go there.”

When I asked Yazmin what colleges she was applying to, she said:

“UCLA, USC, UC Berkeley, Cal State LA, Occidental, Stanford, the ones in California. I want to go to Berkeley but financially, I don’t know.”

When I asked her what she is interested in studying, she said:

“Journalism and law. My interest is immigration law, you know they tell me, people in immigration law don’t win a lot. I just kind of knew because in the public council, the lawyer that came said they do a lot of fundraisers to get their salary and my editor she works at USC Annenberg through the health department. She is like a big journalist that has been all over the world but now she is at USC and she teaches people how to be better journalist. She already knows that I am interested in law and journalism and she asked me what type of law and I said immigration or civil law and she told me immigration law they don’t win a lot.”



Yazmin's first choice in the law profession is immigration, partly due to her personal experiences and all the stories of injustice she has heard.

"I want to do environmental law. I don't really want to do civil law. I want environmental law or immigration law. Well immigration law inspired because of the lawyer that I met [helped her with DACA application]. She told me once I got DACA, now you need to get your social security number and this is where you need to go, and she was kind of telling me and because of my own personal background, so that's one of the reasons that got me interested a little and seeing that many undocumented people, not just Mexicans, but all undocumented people, they don't really know their rights. Like a journalist, she came to talk to us in our internship about how she was in New York once and how they have this jail just for Native Americans and she was there and they're mostly there because they don't know the city and they get drunk and drive and get in jail, they are used to getting married and having kids at a young age and then they go to jail at a young age and she said that many of them it's sad because they don't even know why they are there and don't even know how long they are going to be there. So she was interviewing them and she sat down with someone and she asked him 'do you know why you are here?' and he didn't know and she asked him 'do you know how long you are going to be here?' and he said 'yea just 12 weeks' not knowing that he was actually going to be there 12 years and she didn't know whether to tell him or not and she told him and he just broke down. So there's a lot of people that are not getting their rights."

Martin's educational journey has made him think a lot more about his next steps.

Although he always thought he would become an engineer, his passion for music has exposed him to opportunities within the arts.

"In a way I kind of wanted to do something related with engineer but like not. I like it but I know people tell me that's where the money is but like no. I began to play guitar like I think a year ago, since my junior year so I'm like I'll go for it. I want to be a music major so for the UCs and the Cal State applications I will put music major."

When I asked him what institutions he was applying to, he said:

"Probably Cal State Northridge or Long Beach but I would really like to go to *este colegio que se llama* (this college called) Berkeley College of Music, it's in Massachusetts, it's a private school. I would really like to go out of California or even going to UC Berkeley."

In conclusion, this chapter highlights the critical role peers, teachers, counselors and family have on the educational experiences and outcome of undocumented students. Each of this

individuals had either a positive or negative effect on their schooling and college choices. Moreover, emphasized in this chapter is the importance of funding for undocumented students. Most participants spoke about the challenge and frustration of not finding enough scholarships to help them pay for college. As they move through the educational pipeline, participants also shared recommendations they believe will be helpful for current undocumented students as well as the staff working with them.

## **Chapter 11: Discussion and Reflection**

In this chapter, I reflect on the purpose of this study, its findings and implications for theory and practice. The research questions this study aimed to answer were:

- 1) In what ways, if any, does the larger sociopolitical discourse on unauthorized immigrants and immigration have on the social identity (re)formation of undocumented Latina/o students? In what ways does this larger discourse magnify one's undocumented status?
- 2) How does an undocumented status impact social interaction with peers, teachers, staff, and strangers encountered in everyday life?
- 3) How do social relations with the aforementioned individuals influence academic experiences and outcomes?

### **Purpose and Inspiration of Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand if and how anti-immigrant discourse and ideologies impacted the identity, social interactions, and academic experiences of undocumented Latina/o students. The limited research on this population explores such factors, but often independent of one another. I became interested in exploring whether there was a relationship among all factors. In other words, does "illegality" dialogue influence one's sense of identity? In turn, does being conscious of one's "illegality" impact their social interactions and relationships? Consequently, does one's social interactions affect their educational experiences?

The inspiration for this project was my personal challenges, professional work experience and pilot study on undocumented youth. As discussed in this dissertation's prologue, I am a former undocumented student who was significantly impacted by my immigration status. Learning about my "illegality" at the age of eleven led to confusion and fear as a result of my inability to fully comprehend the sociopolitical landscape in the U.S. in 1994. In California,

Proposition 187 was introduced to regulate access to social services for “illegal aliens.” The threat, as expressed by my mother, was that I would be deported to Mexico, a country I had no recollection. The thought of being separated from my family, friends, and community paralyzed me in fear and substantially altered the way I socialized in and outside of school. Moreover, my personal challenges throughout the K-12 public education pipeline propelled me to work with underserved and underrepresented youth.

Commencing as an undergraduate, I began working with Latina/o immigrant families and children and upon building a trusting relationship, learned about their immigration statuses. I quickly noticed that I shared many similarities with the youth I worked with on a regular basis. They too experienced shame and were fearful of disclosing their immigration status. This identity marker had looming power over their sense of self and shaped the ways they socialized with peers, adults, and authority figures in general. Moreover, the high school youth whom I worked with often refrained from expressing their interest in post-secondary education as a result of their belief that they would not be able to pursue these goals. This internalized belief molded their educational experiences, often resulting in disengagement and depression.

As I moved on to my graduate studies, I continued to work with this population through my mentorship role within UCLA’s Academic Advancement Program (AAP) which is committed to fostering the development and success of students who are historically underrepresented in higher education. I was employed for seven years within the Graduate Mentoring and Research Programs (GMRP) unit of AAP where I mentored undergraduate students interested in pursuing graduate and professional studies in the field of education. Upon the recommendation of our unit’s director, I took the initiative to augment my student work load by serving the AB 540 undergraduate population. Upon adding the AB 540 Graduate Mentor

title, I reached out to students, staff and faculty campus-wide to inform the UCLA community that they had an ally and resources within AAP. During my appointments with AB 540 students who aspired to continue their education post-UCLA, I continued learning about their personal and academic challenges. Just as I had learned from the high school youth I worked with as an undergraduate, undocumented college students continued to have the same challenges, however, I noticed a stark difference in which most of the college students began de-powering and rejecting the “illegal” label and were active leaders in the mobilization for reform such as the DREAM Act. This development propelled me to conduct a small pilot study.

In preparation for this dissertation, I conducted a small pilot study in which I served as a participant observer within an English as a Second Language (ESL) level one course at a Los Angeles high school. The students in this course had not been in the United States longer than one year and constantly referenced their ethnic identity by making comments about their “Mexicanness” and wearing clothing with ethnic symbols, such as the Mexican flag. Furthermore, these students were physically and socially segregated from the rest of their peers. The classroom was in a bungalow located near the sports field, apart from school buildings. I learned that because these youth were recognized as ESL students, they would finish high school as a cohort and take courses with a handful of teachers, rarely having the opportunity to intermingle with other students. In two focus groups, students shared that they were conscious of this isolation and spoke about the ramifications toward their social and academic lives. When I probed them for recommendations, they collectively recommended the integration of a buddy system where they would be paired with a non-ESL student to practice their English. The isolation and structure of their ESL program impacted how they experienced U.S. schooling. The findings of this pilot study shaped my desire to move forward with pursuing a dissertation on the

topics of identity, social interactions and educational experiences of undocumented Latina/o youth and the sociopolitical discourse which influences them directly and indirectly.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I first briefly recap the two theoretical frameworks that guided this study, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit), and integrate them into a discussion of my findings.

#### *Social Identity Theory*

Conceptualized by Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010), Social Identity Theory (SIT) posits that inter-group relations influence social identity development. Grounded in social psychology, this theory examines how individuals behave due to their association with certain groups and examines the role of both group and individual identities. Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) argue there are four interrelated processes that individuals undergo:

- 1) Social categorization: infers that the presence of two distinct groups is enough to trigger bias favoring the in-group because the presence of an out-group provokes competition and discrimination.
- 2) Awareness of social identity: is defined as an individual's self-image as derived by the social groups he/she perceives to belong to.
- 3) Social comparison: refers to the idea that intra-group membership leads to perception of the same social categories, emotional investment and social consensus regarding the evaluation of their group. However, the presence of an inter-group results in comparisons among different social categories. One's own group evaluation is determined by social comparison of other groups.

4) Search of psychological distinctiveness: Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010)

argue that the presence of the three tenets above lead to three assumptions.

- a. Individuals strive to maintain and enhance a positive social identity.
- b. Social group membership is associated with either positive or negative connotations. A positive *social identity* is based on favorable comparisons between the in-group and similar out-groups.
- c. Consequently, according to these evaluations, social identity may be positive or negative. When *social identity* is negative, members will strive to leave the group for a better one or will work towards making their group more positive.

Moreover, Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1999, 2006, 2010) argue that there are at least three variables that influence group differentiation in social situations:

- 1) People must internalize their group membership and must subjectively identify with the group. It is not enough that others impose such labels on them.
- 2) Social situations must allow for group comparisons based on relational attributes.
- 3) The out-group to which we compare ourselves to must be perceived as a relevant comparison (we cannot compare ourselves to every single group). Some measures include similarity, proximity, and situational salience.

Although Social Identity Theory thoroughly explains how social interactions shape *social identity*, it falls short in critically addressing the origins of such conflict. It discusses power, prestige and marginalization at a surface level and does not deconstruct the ways in which these factors have been institutionalized and legitimized in society as discussed in the introductory chapter. Additionally, Hurtado et al. (1994) argue that SIT is limited in discussing historical structures that set a foundation for social identity formation. Furthermore, the premise of this

theory lays ideologies of meritocracy and individualism that are problematic and clash with the reality of immigrant communities. Moreover, their conceptualization of *social identity* does not unpack the nuanced complexities of the numerous social identities that make up the self as well as the complexities that arise from them. As a researcher, it was important for me to understand how these multiple identities intersect and negotiate the prescribed identity of “illegal.” I argue that undocumented youth are socially categorized, which is a macro-social characteristic, but my study aimed to examine how undocumented youth compare and interact with others leading to their social identity (re)development, which is the micro-social characteristic that was under investigation. Using SIT as a guiding framework, I supplemented some of the shortcomings with Latina/o Critical Theory.

### *Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit)*

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework originating in legal scholarship which investigates the marginalization of people of color in law (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001) that is used to theorize and examine the ways in which racism and other forms of oppression impact the lives of people of color and places at the center of analysis their lived experiences (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). CRT has branched out into various disciplines such as Education (see Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Within education, CRT examines the ways in which racism, classism, sexism, etc. impacts the socioacademic structures, practices and discourses of students of color. Moreover, stemming out of CRT is Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) which specifically places at the center of analysis, the lived experiences of Latina/os and factors that are relevant to them such as race, ethnicity, language, culture, phenotype, and immigration status that may be overlooked by the predominance of the Black/White binary of racial discourse (Perez Huber, 2009). Like CRT, LatCrit use narratives, counterstories and *testimonios*



(testimonies) as sources of useful information that address real issues within the everyday lives of Latina/os. What constitutes reality for each individual is socially constructed and therefore CRT and LatCrit acknowledge that there are multiple realities in existence (Pizarro, 1998). Both CRT and LatCrit ask questions such as: How do institutional practices maintain racial, ethnic, gender and class discrimination? How do students of color resist such structures? CRT and LatCrit aim at answering these questions and more using five tenets:

- 1) The centrality of race and racism: refers to analyzing the intersectionality of gender, class, language, culture, phenotype, surname, immigration status, and sexual orientation among more and how they result in discrimination.
- 2) Challenging dominant ideology: refers to questioning a set of beliefs set to justify racism. An example would be questioning societal status quos and empowering those that are seen as “other.”
- 3) Centrality of experiential knowledge: refers to questioning whether there are sources that are not validated, such as the lived experiences of people of color. Emphasis is placed on listening to the perspectives of those who are too often silenced and/or marginalized.
- 4) Commitment to social justice: refers to the idea of working hard to endorse a solution to all forms of marginalization of people of color.
- 5) Using a transdisciplinary approach: refers to applying the knowledge of various disciplines, such as ethnic and women studies, law, history and sociological studies to better understand the experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefaniec, 2001; Solórzano and Yosso, 2001).

## *Discussion of Findings*

### *Multiple Identities*

The first research question I examined, “In what ways, if any, does the larger sociopolitical discourse on unauthorized immigrants and immigration have on the social identity (re)formation of undocumented Latina/o students? In what ways does this larger discourse magnify one’s undocumented status?” was answered within chapters seven and eight and informs both Social Identity Theory and LatCrit Theory. The student excerpts in these chapters demonstrate that the larger sociopolitical discourse of undocumented immigrants and immigration simultaneously does and does not directly impact their social identity, depending on what identity marker is being discussed. The social markers that were explored were race and ethnicity, gender, class, sibling, child, sexual, cultural, language, religion, and student identities. Participant excerpts demonstrated that their undocumented status was more salient to some of these identities and less with others.

For example, all participants agreed that there exists a strong anti-immigrant sentiment in U.S. society. However, both Spanish and English news sources were identified as sources for both pro- and anti-immigrant news. High school participants associated English news to anti-immigrant information such as deportations and I.C.E. raid whereas Spanish news were described as also sharing anti-immigrant views more as a preemptive measure, yet providing regular information on resources and helpful legislation such as DACA. Relatedly, the participants talked about the fact that anti-immigrant sentiments were linked to Republican ideals whereas pro-immigration views were linked to Democratic ideals. However, when I asked participants if the negative sentiments they heard affected them directly, they all had varied responses. For the most part, most participants expressed disappointment over how immigrants

continue to be criminalized. As they expressed their personal reactions to the various terms used to identify undocumented immigrants, some participants directly identified themselves by using “I” while others spoke about immigrants in the third person using terms such as “immigrants” and “they.” This confirms the presence of the four interrelated tenets of SIT: 1) social categorization – the mere recognition by participants that there exist pro- and anti-immigrant groups and ideologies, 2) awareness of social identity – in addition to their developing race, ethnic, gender, class, etc. identities, participants were aware of the imposed “illegal” identifier. Interestingly, recognizing their “illegality” resulted in both acceptance and rejection. In other words, all participants shared examples in which they embraced and rejected this forced identity, 3) social comparison – the everyday challenges, fears, and limitations resulting from an undocumented status led participants to engage in comparisons. Participants compared themselves to people with similar people, such as individuals of the same race, ethnicity, age range, and socioeconomic status. For example, most participants were in mixed status families, thus a constant source of comparison were their U.S.-born siblings, and 4) search of psychological distinctiveness – the criminalization of an “illegal” identifier propelled most of the college students to seek and build community with other undocumented youth, which led to embracement and empowerment. The emotional investment, unified identities, and struggles was the driving force behind the now national youth movement that has mobilized the country to pressure city, state, and national policymakers to pass legislation benefitting undocumented youth.

When it came to their identity markers, participants did not overtly state that their immigration status impacted their racial and ethnic identity. While participants self-described themselves as “Mexican,” or Mexican-American,” none of them referenced their immigration

status when discussing this identity. However, evident in participant definitions of various ethnic, racial descriptors is the confusion that many people struggle with to differentiate or sort a pan-ethnic Latino population.

Like race and ethnicity, the discussion of participant's gender identity was also not directly impacted by their immigration status. Instead, the participants stated that this identity marker was influenced more from cultural and familial expectations. For example, it was common for the young women to describe their gender identity by their responsibilities at home, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings. On the other hand, the young male participants spoke about a sense of responsibility and the necessity to work. In comparison to the male participants, it was evident that the female participants had a harder time negotiating their gender identity. Particularly the community college and university female students struggled with compromising with family members over equality in the household.

While participants' consistently stated that their class identity was not explicitly connected to their immigration status, there was an indirect link. The majority of participants described themselves as working class and attributed this to the low wage jobs they and/or their parents are limited to as a result of their immigration status. Despite their limited income, participants acknowledged that they were fortunate for simply having all the core necessities—shelter, food, and clothing.

Additional identity markers like being their parents' child, sibling, sexuality, cultural, language, religious and student identities were explored in chapter eight. Many of the participants were the first born and thus the eldest child and sibling in their families, and stated that they felt an immense sense of responsibility to not only be a great son or daughter, but also being an older brother or sister. Their immigration status was yet again not directly cited as they

described their identity but instead was prominent as participant shared the challenges associated with being a son or daughter and a brother or sister. Recognizing that their emigration to the U.S. was a result of seeking a better life, participants overall seemed as if they were motivated to “pay back” their parents for all their sacrifices while simultaneously setting a good example for their siblings. This motivation propelled many participants to be good students and active leaders in their communities and schools yet they faced numerous challenges as a result of their immigration status.

According to the participants, their sexual identity was also not directly impacted by immigration status per se, but manifested itself in the romantic relationships of participants. The few participants that were in a romantic relationship at the time of data collection spoke about being in relationships with partners who were not undocumented and the disputes that would arise over frustrations about privileges and opportunities, hence another example of the applicability of Social Identity Theory. Moreover, an additional challenge associated with sexuality identity was establishing equality in relationships. For example, asserting a female’s independence was convoluted with the same type of challenges as gender identity whereby female participants felt that within their households and relationships, they were expected to be dependent.

Cultural and language identities were interrelated and often talked about in unison. Most participants described their culture by their practices and traditions, such as celebrating Mother’s Day on May 10<sup>th</sup>, celebrating the birthday of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, having a home altar to commemorate family members that have passed away, and eating traditional dishes like *mole* and *tamales*. All participants were bilingual in Spanish and English and expressed how they felt about the integration of American culture and the English language into their lives. When it came

to language, participants discussed the challenge of not losing their Spanish skills. The prevalence of English was cited as one of the reasons contributing to the generational gaps that often times exists between children and parents.

A religious identity was only present for a few participants and like cultural and language identities, this part of the participants' identity was also one which participants discussed as a process of negotiation. For example, most of the participants identified themselves as Catholic and some expressed their dislike of the conservative views of the church, such as homosexuality. Moreover, for one participant, Blanca, this identity was at the forefront anytime she became disheartened because of her immigration status. She stated that her faith helped her cope and reminded her of all her blessings.

The last identity marker discussed was student identity. In comparison to the previously mentioned identities, participants' identity as students was explicitly linked to their immigration status. Participants cited the multiple ways in which their immigration status impacted their educational experiences. As discussed in chapter six, some of them always knew they were undocumented while others found out sometime during their K-12 education. This awareness made participants attentive to the differences between their "legal" peers and themselves. For example, all the students spoke about the difficulty in finding scholarships (see education section.)

The explorations of the multiple social identities of participants embody the centrality of the race and racism tenet of LatCrit Theory. As mentioned above, beyond the process of exploring and confirming their identities, participants regularly spoke about negotiating the intersectionality of more than one identity.

### ***Social Interactions and Relationships***

The second research question, “How does an undocumented status impact social interactions with peers, teachers, staff, and strangers encountered in everyday life?” was answered in chapter nine. The student excerpts in this chapter demonstrate that an undocumented status does indeed impact the way these participants approached their friendships, professional, and familial relationships. Discussions of interactions with strangers were found to be insignificant and not impacted by the immigration status of participants. Moreover, underpinnings of both Social Identity Theory and LatCrit are applicable to these findings as I explain below.

*Testimonios* revealed that participants had a strategy for deciding when and to whom they can confide their immigration status. Trust and immigration views were cited as the most important factors. When it came to close friendships, all participants shared that their close circle of friends were aware of their immigration status because of the presence of trust. Most participants explained that they were the only undocumented student in their circle of friends but always felt supported and understood. Although their friends were not undocumented, they all were aware of immigrant struggles as they were children of immigrants themselves. Conversely, the interactions with school peers were described differently. All participants acknowledged that they had more to lose as a result of being undocumented and were therefore very cautious of the company they kept. When I asked them how they distinguished friends from peers, they described their peers as annoying and irresponsible and preferred to associate with serious, goal-oriented, studious youth like themselves.

Unlike peer relationships, participants expressed having more trust for school staff such as teachers and counselors. However, similarly to relationships with peers, the high school

students tended to be more private of their immigration status, only disclosing this information to counselors and teachers they identified as helpful and encouraging. The community college and university students addressed the importance of disclosing this information to key staff to receive the appropriate help and resources.

All participants were in a mixed status family and described how this dynamic impacted their familial relationships. None of the students described negative experiences within their family, in contrast, being an undocumented immigrant often times emerged as a teaching moment. Most participants and their parents were undocumented while their younger siblings were U.S.-born. This difference, as expressed by participants, was often difficult for younger siblings whom learned about immigrant challenges from the border crossing and deportation stories of their family. This disconnect in some cases led to participant comparisons. For example, some students shared they experienced being saddened by the fact that their citizen siblings were able to travel to Mexico to see family members while they were not. The privileges of their U.S. siblings and friends, such as having a driver's license, receiving financial aid, and traveling were sources of comparisons. Moreover, the common denominator within the factors of comparison was money. Class identity was prominent when addressing comparisons. This shows that participants categorize the people around them, from peers, teachers to family, and either form part of their intra- or inter-group as argued by Social Identity Theory.

### ***Educational Experiences***

The third research question “How do social relations with the aforementioned individuals influence academic experiences and outcomes?” was answered in chapter ten. All three questions build off each other and this last question specifically addressed how the social relationships and interactions of participants impacted their educational experiences. Most participants shared



stories of challenges associated with language, race, ethnicity, and class. Many of the participants started their education in bilingual programs and recall the difficulty of learning English and struggling with language barriers between their peers and themselves. A significant challenge for some participants was learning about their immigration status, typically during their high school careers.

Upon learning that they were undocumented, many participants experienced depression and became disengaged. Participants expressed that they ceased putting their best foot forward when they learned that their immigration status limited their prospects for college, scholarships, and financial aid. The tenets of Social Identity Theory and LatCrit Theory were visible within the discussion of educational experiences. Again it was common for participants to engage in comparisons while in school. Most noted that their schools consisted of visible cliques, such as jocks and nerds. Participants like Yadira and Martin, learned that the expectations of ESL students was lower and less rigorous than their counterparts in AP and honors tracks. Some identity markers such as class were prominent within participants' student identity. For example, it was common for participants to speak about how their limited income impacted their ability to participate in school events. Moreover, participants linked their immigration status to the employment opportunities of their parents and themselves. As is common with a lot of immigrants, students shared stories of being taken advantage of by employers and co-workers. However, these same challenges and negative experiences were what motivated all participants to reach high levels of schooling. Most participants expressed interest in pursuing helping professions such as law and social work. Participants aspire to help others with similar experiences to their own but most of all are motivated by the sacrifices and hardships of their parents, who emigrated to the U.S. so that they could have a better life.

## **Implications for Theory, Practice and Policy**

The findings of this study not only inform theory but also educational practices and policies. The high school participants were much less informed about legislations impacting undocumented students. They knew some information but could not identify the law by name. For example, all participants were asked about their awareness and knowledge of California's Assembly Bill 540 and DREAM Act as well as Deferred Action, however, none of the high school students were able to tell me the benefits of each while the community college and university students knew intricate details of each. When I asked the high school students if their counselor or any teacher had talked to them about these laws, most said no. This troubling finding highlights the importance of educating school staff, counselors, teachers, principals, so that they accurately inform students who may disclose their immigration status to them. In addition, most of the participants in college retrospectively addressed that had they known this information in high school, their educational trajectories may have turned out differently. Therefore, it is necessary for educational institutions to improve scholarship resources, workshops on immigrant rights and legislation, offering a tuition payment plan, setting up affordable housing, offering book scholarships, and professional development for school staff.

On a larger scale, the policy implications of this study underscore the importance of passing the federal DREAM Act which will give undocumented students access to federal financial aid as well as passing comprehensive immigration reform so that undocumented immigrants can be fully integrated in society. The record number of deportations must cease and the only remedy is the passage of immigration reform. While one of the most supportive states, California's recent passage of Assembly Bill 60, which grants undocumented immigrants with a driver's license, was the right step, yet has limitations. The original designs of these licenses

were flagged by the federal government for looking strikingly similar to the regular licenses of citizens. As a result of stricter laws that went into effect post-9/11, the federal government ordered the California Department of Motor Vehicles to redesign these licenses so they were distinguishable. Although a legitimate government identification, these marked licenses continue to be a reminder of “unlawful” status whereby police officers and others who check ID become aware of the cardholders immigration status. Any regulation directly targeting undocumented immigrants must be conscious of the potential consequences to this population, such as the continued marginalization and vulnerability to deportation.

### **Researcher Reflection**

The process of completing this dissertation was one of the biggest yet most rewarding challenges I have ever encountered. From the onset, I anticipated difficulties such as obtaining consent from the institutional review board to recruiting students. In the conceptualization phase of this study, as I had done with my pilot study, I aimed to focus this dissertation solely on high school undocumented students who had not been in the U.S. longer than three years. The stories I heard from the youth in my pilot study were heart wrenching and I became overwhelmed by the thought that most of these students would likely not attend college as a result of their perceived limited English skills and lack of resources and support at their high school. Moreover, knowing that they were ineligible for AB 540 and the California DREAM Act was heartbreaking. My goal for this dissertation was to focus on a specific group of undocumented students whom I did not find a lot of research on, and that is recently arrived undocumented youth tracked into English as a Second Language courses.

I carefully thought through my recruitment strategies and began emailing teachers and principals at multiple high schools within Los Angeles County and offered to be a resource to

them and their students in exchange for the opportunity to recruit their students. While a lot of my emails went unanswered, those who did respond were understandably weary of my objectives typically rejecting my proposal altogether or requesting the appropriate clearance. This then led me to pursue what I thought would be an absolute barrier to my work, receiving approval from the Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD) Committee for External Research Review. I was cautioned by experienced researchers whom explained to me that LAUSD was very selective of the projects they approved and that given the political and sensitive nature of my research, it would likely be rejected. I applied anyway and began to prepare a backup plan. Fortunately, LAUSD approved my study and expressed interest in learning what the district can do to help the undocumented students within their schools. However, upon targeted recruiting of this population where I shared my migration story and challenges as a former undocumented student, I was unsuccessful. In retrospect, I now realize that given their recency and vulnerability, students were likely uncomfortable and/or did not trust me. Worried, I realized that I would have to expand the eligibility for my study.

In the reconceptualization phase of this study, I decided that I wanted to speak with undocumented youth throughout the pipeline in order to explore the progression of undocumented youth identity. I therefore decided I wanted to still speak with high school youth but also students in community college and four-year universities. Although recruitment was still difficult, I was able to recruit twelve students in total and establish relationships with many of them. An unanticipated outcome of this process was the emotional investment I developed. Interviews brought me to tears, infuriated and humbled me. My emotions were evident to participants who often asked me how I coped with the weight of their stories and all the immigration problems we discussed together. At the end of our final interview, some participants

thanked me for doing this project. These unexpected comments are meaningful. My desire to document the voices of undocumented youth led me on an unforgettable journey that I will cherish for the rest of my life.

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