Testimonios of Undocumented Students in Higher Education: A Critical Latina Feminist
Phenomenology

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Doctor of Education

In

Educational Leadership

by

Ana Maria Barrera

San Francisco, California

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Testimonios* of Undocumented Students in Higher Education: A Critical Latina Feminist Phenomenology by Ana Maria Barrera, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership at San Francisco State University.

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Testimonios of Undocumented Students in Higher Education: A Critical Latina Feminist
Phenomenology

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2019

This study of five undocumented Latina students focused on the lived experience of navigating higher education in the context of the political climate in the United States. A Critical Latina Feminist Phenomenology lens gives voice to undocumented and describes the use of *testimonio* as a methodology to create a space for critical reflection, healing, and transformation. Two main *trenzas* (themes) collectively describe the phenomenon: (a) *identidades políticas* (political identities) and (b) *de comunidad* (of the community) that when woven together create a *nepantlera* consciousness; a space where undocumented students use their voice for political agency to create change in their communities while navigating higher education.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this dissertation.

Chair, Thesis Committee

Date

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Este logro es para ti, Madre, por ser la soñadora original sacrificando todo para un mejor futuro.

Para mi familia, thank you for all the love and support in this journey. Ahora, hay una Doctora en la familia!

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Chapter One: Purpose of Study

I am undocumented

But undocumented is not who I am

These politicians manipulate words so well people are convinced I am an illegal act

No longer human, no longer a woman, no longer a sister or daughter

I am seen as nothing more than a political controversy

My status is taboo to you, you don't understand me, and therefore you hate me

You hate me because you're confused why I speak English so well

You're confused because my name is not Maria and I can't eat spicy food, because you know...that's what a "real" Mexican does right?

And No I don't clean houses like my mother but even if I did I'd be proud because

It was my mother who told me as long as you're not stealing there is nothing to be ashamed of!

You're upset because once you talk to me you realized I'm not stupid and I can feel the same things you feel

I can love, I can cry, I can scrape my knee and bleed the same color red you do and you've realize we breathe the same air and we love others with hearts, something we both have

You've even realized we both like the same things!

But this is still too much for you to accept

Part of me wants to make you feel horrible, as horrible as I feel every time the lack of a 9 digit number has stopped me from doing things you don't EVEN think twice about doing

Part of me feels so sad for you I want to cry because I know you don't understand, I know if I wasn't Undocumented I probably wouldn't understand either

I forgive u because I know you are the product of a system that doesn't want me

The product of a system that has taught you to dehumanize me and lies to your face when it says its here to protect you and illegal immigrants like me are a danger to you and your job

It is not your fault you've been taught to think of immigrants with a negative connotation

Damn, I am so tired of defending my parents' decision to bring me to this country

I'm slowly losing patience!

But most of the time, I feel hope

Hope that you will see me as you see others

I hope you see you have the strength to save my people

And by save my people I mean save OUR people

You need to redefine what undocumented means to you

Let the word fill you with motivation of brave migrants who risked everything and I mean everything to give those they love a chance the world denied them

Let it fill you with the memory of those who tried but didn't make it and all that's left of them is bones in the desert with no name, no grave, and no dignity

Let it sink deep in your thoughts that these borders are man made and let it remind you that man is not always right

Let it help you see us, let it help you see me

(Janet, undocumented college student)

Introduction

September 5, 2017

Dear Mentor,

Today I am saddened by the current administration's decision to rescind the DACA program. This decision affects hundreds of thousands of people who were brought to the U.S. as children. In our campus community, this decision brought about doubt and uncertainty among Dreamers. They question whether they should continue their education and they worry for their safety and that of their families.

As a campus community we came together to offer support for our students- a healing circle, a safe space for Dreamers to express how they feel and for us to offer our support and letting them know that they are not alone. These students are vulnerable yet resilient. We came together at the Dream Resource Center after the healing circle and created posters for the rally at the federal building. Some included "No Human Being is Illegal" and "You cannot deport the Dream".

As immigrants, we feel for our communities are deeply affected by this decision. This decision is punishing those resilient young people who were brought to this country as children and who have contributed to their communities and to society. They are my people, my community and I stand with them in this fight. Being at the rally today reminded me why I am here. My greatest motivation to succeed is the reminder of the sacrifice my mother made to journey to America, leaving Guatemala to cross the border in hopes for a better life. I was two years old and my sister three, when my mom left Guatemala. We lived with my grandma, *Mama Yoya* in Guatemala until I was seven. My

mom had returned and this time with a Green Card. She returned for us and my sister and we came with her to America as residents of California in November of 1992. I remember starting second grade being excited yet nervous to be in a new school. I remember my mom telling us *como decir*, “*hola, me llamo Ana*” *en Ingles*. My mom encouraged us to learn as much as we could. We ended up teaching her English and helping translate for her.

I am here to contribute to my community just like these young immigrants are striving for. We strive for a better future for our families. I want my mother to not have to work as hard cleaning houses to provide for us. I want a better life for myself and my family here and in Guatemala.

These bright young immigrants face educational, legal, economic and social barriers. I have been working with colleagues to institutionalize support for our students and I am glad the efforts of the students and the campus community brought forth the establishment of the Dream Resource Center. My research interest lies in bringing to light the lived experiences of undocumented students and focusing on the strengths they bring. They are part of a system that is meant to exclude them and we see this when we examine the intersectionality of race, racism, language, culture, and immigration status on their educational opportunities.

I remember when I was sitting in your class and becoming fascinated in the topic of motivation. With your guidance, I strived and reached my full potential as a student

and as an individual, despite my own barriers as a Latina in academia. You taught me to go at my own pace and to use my skills as resources. You showed me that you cared about my success. I wouldn't be where I am today without your guidance. In that first class, you showed interest in me personally and asked me to be part of your research team. Through this experience I began to explore the needs of my community and assisted you in translating documents into Spanish and speaking to the parents of the Latino youth involved in your research. This led me to pursue a Master's degree and completing my thesis in the area of culture and physical activity behavior among ethnically diverse college students. I began to explore this concept because the current literature was lacking in the experiences of Latinos regarding acculturation and health. I noticed there was a lack of culturally relevant practices aimed at increasing physical activity for lifelong wellbeing among this population.

Now, here I am pursuing my doctorate degree, which I had never imagined was possible. All my accomplishments were far away as a dream until they became a reality. This is the hope I have for my community, who have aspirations for a better future. Thank you for believing in me!

In solidarity,

Ana Maria Barrera

The reality is undocumented immigrants¹ are at the center of immigration discourse and policies at the federal, state and local level for several decades impacting undocumented students' access to higher education (Trivette & English, 2017).

The results of the 2016 presidential election in the United States instantly aroused uncertainty and anxiety for undocumented students, particularly Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students. The DACA² legislation provides undocumented youth opportunities to seek legal employment and pursue higher education where they can earn a college degree and pursue more stable careers (Gonzales et al., 2014). Under the current administration in the United States, DACA is at risk of being discontinued, limiting the opportunities undocumented students have in pursuing higher education and legally settling down in the U.S. (Nguyen & Kebede, 2017). Recently, Hagan, Sladek, Lucken and Doane (2018) highlighted the results of the American Psychological Association's annual survey, *Stress in America*, indicating that 50% of adults rated the 2016 presidential election outcome as a significant source of stress and this rate was higher for college students and those below the age of 35.

The current study reviewed and reflected on the historical benchmarks on political climates and policy developments for undocumented populations in the United States

¹ 'Undocumented immigrant' refers to anyone residing in any given country without legal documentation. It includes people who entered the U.S. without inspection and proper permission from the government, and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid.

² This immigration policy allows young people who were brought to the U.S. as children, temporary relief from deportation. And to be eligible for work permits.

since early 1980's which was tied with the current political climate and undocumented students' challenges and adversity encountered in accessing higher education. This review helped identify further research areas. The aim of the current review and research is to illustrate the barriers and facilitators in accessing and navigating higher education by collecting undocumented students' lived voices to develop a better understanding of their experiences within higher education.

Overview of Policy

It was not until 1982 that the United States Supreme Court noted that elementary and secondary education is a fundamental and protected right of students through the case, *Plyler v. Doe* that provided undocumented students' right to an education through high school (Kim & Diaz, 2013). At the federal level, *Plyler v. Doe* case did not address access to postsecondary education for undocumented students.

In discussing the legal rights of immigrants in the United States, Johnson (1996) asserted that the use of the term "alien" or "other" to describe immigrants reinforces anti-immigrant sentiment, ultimately affecting how the U.S. responds to immigration and human rights issues. The term "alien" continues to be regularly used in immigration discourse. Although other terms such as immigrant and undocumented exist, "alien" is a term that masks the privilege of citizenship and justifies a broken system that limits the rights and harsh treatment of immigrants. In effect, the term "alien" serves to dehumanize people and legitimizes the mistreatment of immigrants.

Discrimination against immigrants exists through federal and state laws that are disproportionately disadvantaging immigrants of color. Johnson (1996) stated that race has been the factor influencing the social and legal construction of “alien” as the term has become increasingly associated with immigrants of color. “Illegal alien” implies criminality and thus suggests that those under this category do not deserve protection, rather deserve punishment.

The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) prohibited undocumented immigrants from accessing any post-secondary education (Oliverez, Chavez, Soriano, & Tierney, 2006). Such legislation prohibits states from granting in-state tuition to undocumented students. Furthermore, Section 1623 of the IIRIRA uses such language:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law, an alien who is not lawfully present in the United States shall not be eligible on the basis of residence within a State (or a political subdivision) for any postsecondary education benefit unless a citizen or national of the United States is eligible for such a benefit (in no less an amount, duration, and scope) without regard to whether the citizen or national is such a resident (Illegal Immigration Reform And Immigration Responsibility Act, 1996).

Perez (2012) argued for a need to reform current immigration and educational policies that restrict undocumented students from fully integrating into the American society. Policies at the federal level continue to inhibit undocumented students from the

opportunities for educational attainment and success. Access to higher education for undocumented students was first addressed at the federal level in 2001, through the DREAM (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act. If passed, this law would allow undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children to become permanent residents provided they attend college or serve in the military. The DREAM Act was also introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2006 in an attempt to amend the IIRIRA Act of 1996 as well as the Nationality Act to cancel the removal and adjust the status of college bound immigrant students (Oliveres et al., 2006).

The realities of undocumented students pursuing higher education has added a new dynamic to discourse in education (Chavez, Soriano, & Oliveres, 2007). With no national legislation, states have taken measures to further restrict and criminalize undocumented students.

Restrictive federal, state, and local policies and practices impact undocumented students' access to higher education and the policy implementation climate where a gap exists in knowledge and practice among institutional agents (Nienhusser & Espino, 2017). Part of the challenge in implementing policy is the power and knowledge in the undocumented student policy discourse (Gildersleeve, 2017). In examining the language and text of laws related to undocumented students, Gildersleeve (2017) noted the importance of the linguistic constructions of humanizing and dehumanizing of these policies. In-state tuition policy is written to apply to all students and all residents but such policies use the terms "illegal", "unauthorized minor" to "undocumented". This language

leads to the construction and production of the “alien student”. Undocumented students must become compliant with federal regulations resulting in the federal government having a stake in the consequences of the policy.

Despite the federal government’s power over immigration, state laws related to immigration has increased (Lee, 2011). According to the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) lawmakers in 49 states enacted 206 and 263 resolutions related to immigration in 2017. In California, 91 laws and resolutions were enacted. California has taken measures to assist undocumented students to continue their education beyond high school.

Few states have advocated and succeeded in passing laws that extend the rights to higher education to undocumented immigrants. In California, Assembly Bill 540 enacted in 2001 allowed any student, including undocumented students who meet certain criteria to pay in-state tuition at California’s public colleges and universities. This bill was codified as section 68130.5 of the California Education Code which states:

Notwithstanding any other provision of law:

(a) A student, other than a nonimmigrant alien within the meaning of paragraph (15) of subsection (a) of Section 1101 of Title 8 of the United States Code, who meets all of the following requirements shall be exempt from paying nonresident tuition at the California State University and the California Community Colleges:

- (1) High school attendance in California for three or more years.
- (2) Graduation from a California high school or attainment of the equivalent thereof.

(3) Registration as an entering student at, or current enrollment at, an accredited institution of higher education in California not earlier than the fall semester or quarter of the 2001–02 academic year.

(4) In the case of a person without lawful immigration status, the filing of an affidavit with the institution of higher education stating that the student has filed an application to legalize his or her immigration status, or will file an application as soon as he or she is eligible to do so.

The undocumented students' fight to attend California public colleges has largely revolved around the classification of state residency for purposes of calculating tuition and awarding of state educational grants (Seif, 2004). In 1994, the chancellor of the CSU system declared undocumented students as non-residents for tuition payment.

California's AB 540 has increased access to higher education for undocumented students, but the lack of federal aid has made it financially difficult for a large percentage of these students to move beyond a high school education. Only 49% of undocumented high school graduates attend college resulting in a large gap in educational access and equity (Gonzales, 2010).

Knowing the exact number of students who enroll in AB 540 is difficult to gather due to the California State University and California Community Colleges not reporting this data. Current data indicates an estimate of 5,000 AB 540 students were enrolled in the UC system, 75 percent of the 10,036 of those enrolled in the CSU system were AB 540 students, with the largest number of AB 540 students (59,732) were enrolled in California Community Colleges (Macias, 2016). AB 540 has been partially successful;

allowing undocumented student to access community colleges but failed to make higher education affordable to most undocumented students (Abrego, 2008). Southern (2016) found that although in-state tuition policies reduced tuition rates and opened resources for financial aid, financing higher education remains a challenge for undocumented students. Their undocumented and socioeconomic status pose a challenge for undocumented students to access higher education and financial aid (Serna, Cohen & Nguyen, 2017). Furthermore, implementation issues can create challenges in providing support for undocumented students and thus limiting their access to resources and services. Lack of support leads challenges for undocumented students as they navigate higher education on their own.

Undocumented students face similar challenges as other low-income students of color, but also experience unique barriers to accessing higher education due to their immigration status. Undocumented students face financial, academic, and socio-emotional barriers that impact their aspirations of obtaining an education and limits their opportunity for upward mobility through education. Undocumented students are often the first in their families to attend college and face academic barriers due to their prior educational experiences in attending low performing schools and having limited college preparation courses (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Gonzales et al., 2015). Once on campus, undocumented students report high levels of anxiety, stress and fear due to their documentation status with the greatest concern being the possibility of deportation (Munoz & Maldonado, 2012; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Education can humanize the dehumanizing policy discourse by understanding the experiences of undocumented students (Huber, Malagon & Solorzano, 2009). Institutions can serve as communities that foster a welcoming environment, and thus, contributing to the cultural wealth of undocumented students (Serna, Cohen & Nguyen, 2017).

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is give voice to the lived experiences of undocumented students navigating higher education. The study examined how undocumented students make meaning of their experience in accessing higher education and navigating their academic success in higher education under the current immigration political climate. Low-income students of color, including undocumented students, have demonstrated the ability to engage in social action with the aim of challenging inequities and transforming institutional structures that reproduce injustice and inequality (Yosso, 2005). Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortez (2009) contended that resilient undocumented students draw on specific personal, family and school resources to become academically successful and combat various stressors as well as social and institutional barriers.

To this end, the following questions guided this research:

Research Questions:

1. How do undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in higher education?

2. How do the experiences of undocumented students impact their academic success?

This phenomenological inquiry, as part of uncovering meaning and giving voice to undocumented Latina students' lived experience, articulated the impact of their lived experiences on their social and academic development as they navigate higher education. Using the lens of Latina Feminist Phenomenology, the focus was how undocumented Latina students' make meaning of their gendered and racialized experiences while navigating higher education. This process facilitated breaking through the silence of undocumented students' lived experiences. Re-centering the stories of undocumented students in higher education provided an opportunity to humanize their lived experiences of survival in higher education. Methods of inquiry included phenomenological reflection on data collected through a series of phenomenological interviews that included open-ended questions.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

This review illustrates the experiences of undocumented students in higher education, the barriers they face, their successes, and implications for educational leaders to better serve undocumented students in finishing their degrees. I conclude with the epistemological orientations and theories that guide my phenomenological research in

examining and giving voice to the lived experiences of undocumented students in higher education.

Challenges Undocumented Students Face in Navigating Higher Education

A number of risk factors and challenges have been found for undocumented students transitioning from high school to college. These risk factors are (a) that undocumented students are more likely to come from socioeconomically strained households (Greenman & Hall, 2013) and have high rates of poverty (Pang et al., 2010). These risk factors are associated with under preparation for college. Researchers also indicated (b) limited resources such as exposure to a college-level curriculum and limited qualified teachers impact the educational experiences of undocumented students (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Orozco et al., 2015), as they are not able to take advantage of opportunities to enhance their educational experiences (Perez, 2012). (c) Undocumented students often report higher levels of anxiety, stress and fear due to their documentation status thus negatively affecting their mental health (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Seif, Ullman, and Núñez-Mchiri (2014) found that students feel demoralized when their access to higher education is limited and when they face a future of uncertainty or exclusion, it impacts school experiences, including the relationships they have with their peers and educators. Students' physical and psychological well-being is essential in enabling undocumented students to manage the emotional side of their challenges and to remain focused on achieving their aspirations and goals (Haynes, 2002; Kim & Diaz, 2013; Luginbuhl, McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016; Orozco et al., 2015).

Low-income Status

Of undocumented immigrants, ages 25-64, twenty-five percent have attended college or graduated from college (Passel & Cohn, 2009). In addition, low levels of education and low-skilled occupations lead to lower household incomes among undocumented immigrants (Perez, 2012). Social and educational opportunities are hindered by poverty, gaps in previous schooling and language barriers (Abrego, 2006; Green, 2003; Williams, 2016). Due to these barriers, undocumented students are systematically denied the right to equal educational opportunities. Labeling undocumented immigrant students as not proficient in English maintains the notion that these students and their families are deficient in their potential to succeed academically. When transitioning to college, undocumented students face challenges not only with English proficiency but also structural constraints such as limited financial aid.

Many undocumented students come from families with limited financial resources and being low-income, first-generation and lack of documentation poses many challenges as they navigate through higher education. Undocumented students with undocumented parents are more likely to live in households with extreme poverty (Abrego, 2006; Cervantes, Minero & Brito, 2015; Montiel, 2016). Passel (2005) reported that forty percent of undocumented children live below the poverty line compared to seventeen percent of U.S.-born children, and the income of undocumented immigrant families is forty percent lower than documented immigrants and native-born families. Abrego

(2006) argued that having an undocumented status creates an exclusionary context that limits their social, political, educational, and occupational opportunities.

One of the most troubling barriers is lack of access to federal financial aid (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Hallett, 2013; O'Neal et al., 2016; Stebleton & Aleixo 2015; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Due to these challenges, the burden of paying for college falls on the students and their families. In addition, undocumented students are concerned with financing their education when scholarships require proof of citizenship for eligibility. Even for DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) students, who had the opportunity to apply for legal work authorization, access to federal financial aid is still denied. Undocumented students responded to their financial need by working, making it difficult for them to be engaged on campus. O'Neal et al. (2016) found that the majority of the DACA participants worked one or two jobs to finance their education which added more stress in balancing work and school. This is a primary stressor because only those who qualify for DACA have a permit to work yet having DACA added stress due to the expensive renewal process and only having temporary protection.

Lack of College Preparation

In addition to financial barriers, academic preparedness is another obstacle undocumented students face as they navigate higher education. These challenges imply that undocumented students would come to college with less experience and knowledge, and fewer resources to be successful (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Orozco et al., 2015). Garcia and Tierney (2011) argued that first generation students rely on institutional

agents for critical college information since their families are less likely to provide college preparation information at home. Delgado Bernal and Enriquez (2017) posited that from a deficit perspective, these families are often blamed for student underachievement and such perspective in education creates inaccessible and inequitable pathways. Deficit perspective defines students in terms of their weaknesses rather than strengths. In essence, these views present a socioeconomic opportunity gap in which undocumented students face inequalities in their opportunity to learn due to poverty. Therefore, undocumented students do not receive adequate amount of preparation to experience a positive transition to college. Lack of college knowledge presents a challenge in access to information regarding the application process (Williams, 2016). Undocumented students' experiences in higher education often include a sense of isolation on campus and uncertain as to whom they can trust (Garcia & Tierney, 2011; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco, 2015; Williams, 2016). As a result, undocumented students may feel stressed or hesitant when seeking assistance. Montiel (2016) posits that low-income, underrepresented students require a significant amount of resilience in order to access and persist in higher education.

Social and Emotional Hardships

Undocumented students also enter higher education with emotional challenges that are further influenced by environmental factors such as poverty, lack of resources, and discrimination (Perez et al., 2010; Williams, 2016). These factors further pose socio-emotional distress due to the strong social stigma of being labeled undocumented.

Gonzales (2011) found that undocumented students experienced inclusion within the public school system, but often experience feelings of voicelessness and invisibility. Furthermore, discovery of undocumented status can prompt reactions of confusion, anger, frustration, and despair among undocumented students. Undocumented students have described that in order to be successful, they had to avoid thinking about the implications of being undocumented and the emotional burden of being undocumented, being members of ethnic and racial minorities, and making sense of the societal messages related to their status. These reflections capture the interpersonal impact of being undocumented (Ellis & Chen 2013). For example, Williams (2016) found that anti-immigrant attitudes towards immigrants created a hostile environment for undocumented students, reinforcing the stereotype that define undocumented immigrants as criminals.

Undocumented students often report feelings of depression and anxiety due to being concerned with unattainable career goals, confusion about their identity, and uncertainty related to whom they can trust (Kantamneni et al., 2016). Emotional concerns for undocumented students in higher education also include fear of having their status exposed and shame for not being able to participate in educational activities (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Moreover, undocumented students may experience decreased self-efficacy due to experiencing barriers due to their status, such as, fear of deportation, loneliness, and depression (Perez, 2011). There is a need to bring awareness of the barriers undocumented student face and the impact on their mental health. Structural and institutional barriers affect undocumented students' ability to access higher education and

persist in college. In understanding the experience of undocumented students, a climate of trust can be created when developing strategies to assist undocumented students to persist in higher education.

Trusting Relationships

Knowing how to successfully finish high school and transition into college requires outside support and guidance. For undocumented students, the need for such assistance is further compounded by their documentation status. Nienhusser, Vega, and Carquin (2016) argued that there is a large knowledge gap in the area of undocumented students' college choice process and this lack of knowledge from institutional agents further created an emotional burden for undocumented students. Gonzales (2010) found that undocumented students reported feelings of disconnection to school and did not have close relationships with teachers due to being negatively labeled and being shut out of many important services. Due to these experiences in high school, undocumented students may not have the resources such as access to counselors and information about the college going process. In examining student level challenges, Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) found that a major concern for undocumented students was a fear of deportation for themselves and fear of deportation or detainment of a family member or friends. The fear and anxiety often reported by undocumented students further impacts their level of engagement on campus.

Regarding campus climate, undocumented students experience discrimination on campus due to their documentation status (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Williams, 2016). In

addition, undocumented students experience isolation and disengagement on college campuses due to discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiments (Contreras, 2009; Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015; Williams, 2016). Many undocumented students feel a pressure to keep their status a secret and continue to live in the shadows. Undocumented students' perception of their interactions with faculty and institutional agents can affect their overall college experience. Finding trusting individuals on campus is a challenge due to the fear and anxiety frequently experienced as undocumented students. Finding trusting individuals continued to be a challenge for undocumented students because they did not know where faculty and institutional agents stand on immigration issues and negative interactions lead them to feel excluded and marginalized (Stebleton & Aleixo, 2015). Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, and Suárez-Orozco (2015) conducted a national study on undocumented students' experiences in higher education and concluded that undocumented students felt a sense of isolation on campus as they felt uncertain as to whom they could trust. In addition, undocumented students in this study felt that faculty, staff, and students treated them unfairly or negatively due to their legal status. As a result, undocumented students may feel stressed or hesitant when seeking assistance.

Munoz (2016) asserted that feelings of isolation and fear are often activated by the absence of emotional support in institutions of higher education. Feelings of exclusion and marginalization due to their documentation status can prevent undocumented students to fully engage on campus. Understanding how undocumented students are influenced by key supports within the higher education system can influence

how resources and information could be more intentional to enhance their educational opportunities and promote higher levels of achievement.

Facilitators of Success

Undocumented students attend college in spite of their documentation status and demonstrate that they have an aptitude for educational success. Morales, Herrera and Murray (2009) illustrated how undocumented students were motivated to pursue higher education due to the hard work and sacrifices their parents made and a desire to make their families proud. Furthermore, O'Neal et al., (2016) reported that undocumented students exhibited grit through pride, optimism, and perseverance as means to cope with stress and depression. Undocumented students showed to be optimistic despite the fear and anxiety experienced due to their immigration status and their struggles and their will to succeed contributed to their resiliency (Contreras, 2009). Enriquez (2011) argued that undocumented students' educational success is related to their ability to develop and utilize social capital in order to secure the resources needed to successfully navigate higher education. Perez et al. (2009) showed that undocumented students protective factors (e.g., supportive parents, friends, participation in school activities, valuing school, bilingual competency) enhanced their resiliency despite risk factors. Protective factors served to offset the negative implications of their identity as an undocumented students (Perez, 2015). Furthermore, social networks have demonstrated the value of providing resources and social support for undocumented students as they navigate their life on the margins (Hallett, 2013). Social networks have also shown to bring consciousness of legal

status and have shown to be critical in navigating higher education (Munoz, 2016).

Valuing undocumented students' cultural and community knowledge as essential aspects of authentic *cariño* as well as necessary to disrupt inequities and conceptualize what it means to belong for undocumented students (DeNicolo, Yu, Crowley & Gabel, 2017).

Resiliency

Although undocumented students acknowledge their challenges in navigating higher education, they also reference their strength in overcoming these challenges (Chang, Torrez, Ferguson & Sagar, 2017; Gamez, Lopez, Overton, 2017; Montiel 2016; Perez Huber, 2009; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). Undocumented students remained courageous, brave and persevering despite the uncertainty of their futures. Resiliency was illustrated through determination and persistence in the face of barriers and in their abilities to create systems of support (Gamez et al., 2017). In essence, the challenges undocumented students faced became motivators that helped them achieve their goals.

Institutional structures can enable undocumented students to create positive self-identities and helping them persist in college. Munoz and Maldonado (2012) utilized in-depth interviews and focus groups to examine how undocumented Mexicana students navigated identities and the meanings of race, gender, class, and legal status to facilitate inclusion and engagement in higher education. Focus groups revealed that dealing with stressors was common theme influencing college persistence among the students. Furthermore, counter-stories assisted undocumented Mexicana students to cope with the stress of their immigration status. The researchers suggested that these stories revealed

the nature in which they resisted dominant narratives, which define them as “illegal”. Munoz and Maldonado (2012) asserted that inclusion must seep into all aspects of higher education such as culture, curricula, classroom practices, institutional structure and administrative practices. In such collaborative effort, administrators and educators must acknowledge that immigration status shapes the experiences of undocumented students in higher education and affects the potential for college persistence. Moreover, higher education leaders have the potential for agency in determining their courses of actions and in developing policies that are attentive to the needs of undocumented students.

Familial Support

A source contributing to resiliency is family support and influences that came in the form of encouragement and motivation. Family members motivated their children by sharing their stories of dreams deferred as living examples of the consequences of not going to college (Perez & Rodriguez, 2011). Perez et al. (2009) explored the relationship between risk, protective factors (i.e., personal and environmental) and academic achievement among undocumented Latino students. Resiliency, which was shown as academic success, was related to personal and environmental resources even in the presence of psychosocial stressors such as undocumented status, low parental education and socioeconomic hardship. For the resilient youth in this study, protective factors (i.e., supportive parents, friends, participation in school activities) mediated academic achievement.

Contribution to their families has served as strategy for resilience among undocumented college students (Katsiaficas et al., 2016; Montiel, 2016). Katsiaficas et al. (2016) found that students have higher educational aspirations when they highly value family obligations. Family represented a resource of inspiration and support to continue to persevere despite the challenges they faced as undocumented students. Results revealed that families and communities are central to the lives of undocumented students as they provide academic, emotional and financial support (Katsiaficas et al., 2016).

In connection with familial support, Perez Huber (2009), examined the forms of capital existing within the families and communities of undocumented Latina students that have allowed them to navigate higher education. Aspirational and familial capital emerged as themes that were tied to one another in the experiences of undocumented women. The participants aspired to be doctors, lawyers, professors and college counselors. This aspirational capital was tied to their families and their migration stories. The participants used their aspirational capital rooted in the migration stories of their parents to maintain their dreams of pursuing higher education. For some participants, their major role was translating for their families, which enabled them to become language brokers in their household. Taking on this role demonstrates their use of linguistic capital which they utilized to help family members navigate through social structures. Social capital refers to the social networks and community resources that were essential in helping the participants in this study navigate higher education in the form of academic resources and emotional support. For the women in the study, the social

resources available in their families and communities enabled them to continue their undergraduate careers. Perez Huber (2009) stated that social networks are an important element of navigational capital that assist undocumented students in maneuvering through social institutions. Strategies of resiliency were critical navigational skills for undocumented women pursuing their undergraduate careers. Furthermore, the researchers suggested that undocumented communities are places rich in resources, assets, skills and abilities that assist undocumented students in navigating higher education.

Social Networks

Munoz (2016) indicated that social networks could empower students to disclose and gain a heightened awareness of their legal status identity. Becoming agents of knowledge enabled students to empower others around releasing their fears of disclosure. In addition, Munoz (2016) described how students became agents of knowledge for other students who were unaware of the resources available to them. Munoz (2016) concluded that disclosure of legal status can be an educational tool and the impact of self-awareness gained from the disclosure process can be transformational. Public disclosure of undocumented status is an expression of empowerment.

Integration into the campus community can be challenging for undocumented students. Hallett (2013) suggested that social networks are important for undocumented students to overcome the challenges with environmental stressors. Through an ethnographic case study Hallett (2013) examined how a group of 18 undocumented Latino/a students maintained a peer network to navigate the education process. The

students in this study viewed participation in a peer network, Assisting Students Concerned with Educating, Not Deporting (ASCEND) as helping them navigate federal, state, and institutional barriers that threaten their access to higher education. The group desired to develop an inclusive environment for all undocumented students to break the perception that immigration only involves Latinos. Members of ASCEND viewed individual accomplishments as collective success that served as a source of inspiration among the students. The collective bond reinforced that they were not alone in their struggle and created a familial type of peer support. Students who participated in ASCEND empowered each other and became a collective empowerment agent. The knowledge they gained further strengthened the unity of the network. Hallett (2013) concluded that undocumented students continue to rely on peer support to overcome federal, state, and institutional barriers that puts tremendous pressure on undocumented students.

Summary

The current literature examined barriers that undocumented students face in an attempt to access higher education as well as identified resources that help students become academically and professionally successful. Researchers have shown that resilient undocumented students have achieved college entry despite the institutional and federal barriers they encounter. The literature highlighted how optimism and aspirations are strengths that need to be cultivated so that undocumented students' motivation can be inspired and sustained. In addition, social responsibility to give back to their families and

communities is an asset to their development and academic success. The literature strongly suggested that institutions can create environments and processes that better address the college access and success of undocumented students. Such efforts can help undocumented students feel empowered and supported while nurturing a sense of belonging. Higher education leaders can foster a motivational climate that contributes to the success of undocumented students by cultivating their abilities to develop and utilize their cultural capital in order to navigate higher education.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory, CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993) offers the opportunity to examine how multiple forms of oppression intersect with the lives of students of color and how these intersections impact their educational experiences. Furthermore, Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, (2001) extend the use of CRT to education, illustrating how LatCrit, a theoretical branch of CRT, can be utilized to examine the unique experiences of Latina/o undocumented students. Re-centering of knowledge produced within undocumented communities is an important principle of CRT. Solorzano and Bernal (2001) posited that the following five themes form the framework for methodology and pedagogy using the lens of CRT and LatCrit:

The centrality of race and racism and the intersectionality with other forms of subordination: This first theme addresses that educational practices have been

historically used to subordinate students of color. These practices include tracking, teacher expectations, attitudes and behavior towards students of color as well as intelligence testing. This perspective focuses on race and racism as the basis of oppression, which challenges the dominant ideology, which supports deficit notions of undocumented students.

This second theme of the **challenge to dominant ideology** examines the system of education and critiques societal inequalities. In this perspective, dominant social and cultural assumptions are being challenged in terms of power and privilege of the dominant culture.

The third theme is **the commitment to social justice** in order to eliminate racism, sexism, and poverty and to empower under-represented minority groups.

The fourth theme is described as the **centrality of experiential knowledge**, which draws on the lived experience of students of color.

The fifth theme focuses on the **interdisciplinary perspective**, which creates a historical and contemporary context allowing for a richer analysis in the educational experience of undocumented students.

LatCrit provides a framework that exposes the oppression of a dominant discourse that frames undocumented immigrant communities as “criminal,” “dangerous,” “illegal,” and a “drain” on limited U.S. social resources (Perez-Huber, 2009). Specifically, LatCrit provides a framework for understanding student narratives as counternarratives to disrupt

and counter the narrative that marginalizes the knowledge of “others”. A critical lens provides an opportunity for social transformation as CRT also illustrates the potential of student voices to influence educational policies and disrupt educational inequities (Vue, Haslerig & Allen, 2017). Solorzano and Bernal (2001) provided an understanding of Critical Race Theory and LatCrit as a framework to create a site of possibility and human agency that would lead to societal and individual transformation by focuses on issues that have traditionally been ignored by critical race theorists, such as, language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype and sexuality through Latinas/os multi-dimensionality. This theory looks at forms of resistant behavior in terms of effectiveness, and in terms of social oppression and motivation for social justice.

Scholars have also utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens to explore the ways in which race, class and gender shape the experiences of undocumented students. CRT provides a lens to examining the facilitation of the inclusion of marginalized stories. Huber (2010) utilized CRT and LatCrit to develop the framework of racist nativism as a lens to highlights the intersection of racism and nativism. LatCrit as a theoretical branch of CRT has been used to examine the experiences unique to Latina/o communities and how multiple forms of oppression intersect with the lives of undocumented Chicana college students (Huber, 2010; Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012). Specifically, Perez Huber (2010) examined the intersectionality of race, immigration status and language that undocumented students negotiate in their educational careers and highlights the intent of the research as connecting to the overall goal of critical race scholars to expose and

deconstruct ways of knowing and conducting research that is anti-racist with a focus on social justice. LatCrit, as a framework, can be used to understand how racism is rooted in the notions of white supremacy that have created negative constructions of undocumented students. Perez Huber (2010) concluded that racist nativism has consequences in the educational experiences of undocumented students. Undocumented students in this study were aware from an early age of the negative perceptions of their communities. The internalization of the negative perceptions of undocumented immigrants lead the students to feel like they did not belong. Perez Huber (2010) calls for future research to focus on the various sources of capital that exist in their communities in order to overcome their educational struggles and succeed in higher education.

Critical Race Theory will be important in this study due to the focus on lived experience and giving voice to undocumented Latinas navigating higher education and an oppressive political climate in the U.S.

Community Cultural Wealth

Inequities in the educational experiences of undocumented students are shaped by policies and practices that push them to the margins. Marginalized communities are often blamed for their underachievement and are positioned as lacking cultural and social capital for social mobility. These notions are based on deficit perspectives that further marginalize immigrant communities.

Yosso (2005) stated that schools work on restructuring ways to help disadvantaged students based on the assumption that Students of Color lack the social and cultural capital for social mobility. There is a need to examine factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequalities for undocumented students that focuses on their sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, Yosso (2005) provides insight into how multiple forms of cultural wealth such as knowledge, skills, abilities, and networks that Student of Color bring to the classroom can empower them to succeed. Yosso (2005) posits that a Critical Race Theory lens can illustrate how Communities of Color nurture cultural wealth through at least six forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. Yosso (2005) provided the following definitions of each form of capital:

Aspirations: the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers.

Social capital: Networks of people and community resources (emotional support). Reassures a student emotionally that they are not alone in the process of pursuing higher education.

Navigational capital: Skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Academic invulnerability: students' ability to sustain high levels of achievement, despite the presence of stressful events. Resilience has been recognized as a set of inner

resources, social competencies and cultural strategies that permit individuals to not only survive, recover, or even thrive after stressful events.

Linguistic capital: intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills (oral histories, parables, stories, and proverbs).

Resistant capital: Knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. Maintaining and passing on the multiple dimensions of community cultural wealth is also a part of the knowledge base of resistant capital. Includes cultural knowledge of the structures of racism and motivation to transform such oppressive structures.

Familial capital: cultural knowledge nurtured among *familia* that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition (commitment to community well-being) by modeling lessons of caring, coping and providing education, which informs our emotional, moral, educational, occupational consciousness. In essence, this framework provides a deeper understanding in how undocumented students' social relationships and resources affect their academic pathways in higher education.

Delgado Bernal (2002) emphasized the ways in which communal and familial knowledges, languages, stories, language, histories, and culture, shared from the knowers and creators are vital to the education of undocumented students. Yosso (2005)

conceptualized community cultural wealth as a way to shift research that focuses on the cultural knowledge, skills and abilities students of color possess.

In examining access to higher education, Perez and Rodriguez (2011) captured the importance of network influences on the college-going process for undocumented students and found that undocumented students relied on familial and institutional support to progress through the educational pipeline. A Community Cultural Wealth framework can be applied in the educational settings to recognize the knowledge, skills, abilities and networks within immigrant communities as key to their educational success (Yosso, 2006).

Focusing on the lived experiences of undocumented students, a sense of belonging can be cultivated in higher education when students' community cultural wealth is incorporated into the classroom. Jehangir (2010) suggests that one way to enrich the journey of first generation students in higher education is to draw on their cultural capital by bringing their stories and lived experiences into the learning process, and allow them to voice and author themselves. Through these experiences undocumented students can participate in knowledge construction. Sharing lived experiences can be enriching, reinforcing, and empowering as well as transformational when navigating higher education. Sources of support can enable undocumented students to develop a deeper and authentic understanding of their identities.

Community Cultural Wealth theory is important to this study because it focuses on the strengths that enable undocumented Latinas to reach their goals and maintain hope for their communities and the future of their education.

Authentic Cariño

Acknowledging the multiple strengths of undocumented students can lead to transformative social change for immigrant communities. Undocumented students are educated in schools that are ill equipped to serve as a path to greater opportunities. In transitioning to college, undocumented students face many challenges adding to their invisibility. DeNicolo et al. (2017) posited that culturally sustaining environments could be informed through critical authentic care by identifying those structures and practices that maintain unequal access to higher education for undocumented students. A critical authentic care framework can position undocumented students as creators of knowledge and thus contribute to their sense of belonging in higher education. Identifying mechanisms that promote belonging in higher education can potentially reduce the educational inequities for undocumented students. DeNicolo et al. (2017) defined critical authentic care as *cariño conscientizado*, a pedagogy of critical consciousness and authentic care as a means to disrupt hegemonic and racist policies that limit the potential of undocumented students to develop a sense of belonging.

Luginbuhl, McWhirter and McWhirter (2016) asserted that low-income students can benefit from a caring climate that promotes hope and empowerment. Luginbuhl and

colleagues suggested that caring individuals have the potential to foster the socio-political development (critical awareness of inequity and motivation to change conditions of injustice and oppression) of low-income Latino communities. A critical awareness can enhance students' awareness of the importance of securing resources and support to be successful (Enriquez, 2011; Luginbuhl, McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Cammarota (2014) suggested that caring relationships can facilitate transformational resistance by allowing the opportunity to form an academic identity against the pressures of criminalization and assumed deficiency. Furthermore, families and community members can help students resist the social and cultural processes within and outside school that encourage failure. Such efforts create access and equity for undocumented students in education.

Institutional structures can enable undocumented students to create positive self-identities, and thus facilitating their college persistence. Hoffman, Vargas and Santos (2008) suggested that campus climate could be improved to serve the needs of undocumented students through accurate, efficient, and caring academic and personal advising. Furthermore, institutional agents can have an impact in the experiences of undocumented students since their motivation was attributed to caring school professionals (Gonzalez, 2010; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hoffman, Vargas & Santos, 2008).

Similarly, Curry (2016) described authentic *cariño* as the “cornerstone of additive education; it is an essential element to the well-being and academic success youth of

color” (p. 884). Caring individuals can assist undocumented students in developing navigational skills to be successful as they can facilitate connections to resources. Establishing a caring relationship is fundamental because students can perceive that their feelings are being valued and their needs can be met by the teacher being motivated to respond to those needs, thus creating a supportive environment that enhances the experiences of the students. Noddings (1984) argues that an ethic of care should be at the heart of the educational system. Authentic *cariño* is important in this study in that it emphasizes valuing the realities undocumented students bring with them in educational spaces. Through authentic care, undocumented students can be empowered to build on their strengths they bring with them to succeed academically.

Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth and Authentic *Cariño* are woven throughout this study to collectively describe the phenomenon of navigating higher education as undocumented Latinas. The current study contributes to the literature on the college experiences of undocumented Latina students and to areas of future research on undocumented students navigating higher education in the context of the current political climate.

Chapter 3-Methodology

The purpose of this phenomenology study was to develop a deeper understanding of how undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in accessing and navigating higher education in the current political climate. At this point in the research, navigating higher education will generally include the college going process and the

navigating higher education will generally include the college going process and the social and academic realities for undocumented students in the current political climate in the United States.

Qualitative Discovery

I developed my research framework through a qualitative approach that directed me to focus on the emotional responses and perceptions of the participants. A qualitative approach explores the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). My focus was on learning the meaning that the participants hold regarding navigating higher education as undocumented students. In-depth conversations with the participants allowed them to revisit their experiences and construct meaning through dialogue.

I utilized *testimonios* to understand the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. Lived experiences was used as a point of inquiry, reflection and interpretation. The practice of *testimonio* can provide a space for giving voice to the experiences of undocumented students as it includes the intention of affirmation and empowerment (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012) and as a space where we generate hope and transformational resistance (Yosso, 2006) in creating equitable educational practices for undocumented students to succeed.

Phenomenology

Phenomenological research is appropriate for this study in that it allowed me to capture the lived experiences of five undocumented students and the realities of their racial, social, emotional and academic experiences. Phenomenological research is inquiry-based and allowed me to describe the lived experiences of undocumented students navigating higher education. Stemming from philosophy and psychology, phenomenology studies the existential meaning structures of a phenomenon and utilizes eidetic reduction that focuses on the analysis of the experiences and aims at description and interpretation (Van Manen, 2014). After determining a phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study, the following suggestions as outlined by Crewell and Poth (2017) and derived from Moustakas (1994) were used as a guide to explore how undocumented students make meaning of their experience navigating higher education:

- A phenomenon of interest is identified
- The researcher distinguishes and specifies the broader philosophical assumptions of the phenomenon.
- Data are collected from the individuals who have experienced the phenomenon by using in-depth and multiple interviews. The participants are asked two broad, general questions (Moustakas, 1994): What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?

- Phenomenological data analysis occurs by developing *clusters of meaning* from significant statements and developing textual and structural descriptions of the experience and reporting the “essence” of the phenomenon.

Critical Latina Feminist Phenomenology

Critical Latina Feminist phenomenology informs my research in that it calls for societal and individual transformation and serves as motivation for social change. As the undocumented student population continues to increase in US institutions of higher education, this research is aimed at creating visibility for this vulnerable population.

Ortega (2016) defined the following characteristics of Latina feminist phenomenology:

- Attention to the lived experience of Latinas/os in the United States, including those born here or in Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Emphasis on concrete, embodied everyday experience
- Attention to the intersection of race, sex, gender, class, immigration status
- Disclosure of the way in which the gendered or racialized aspect of the Latina/o experience is covered up in traditional philosophical discussions that take the white male experience as the norm
- Attunement to the historical and cultural processes that recognizes the heterogeneity of Latinas/os.
- Critical deployment of experiential knowledge in order to contest or reimagine established notions of *Latinidad*.

Inspired by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Maria Ortega, this phenomenology study aimed to reclaim the concept of lived experience and give voice to the lived experiences of undocumented students. Using a Latina Feminist Phenomenology lens, the focus was on undocumented Latina students' memories and their "living through" experiences. Influenced by the work of Latina feminists, I describe the transformative effect of telling stories of struggle, survival and resistance in a world that is unwelcoming. The methodology was shaped by a Latina feminist epistemology that illustrates the process of cultural intuition to validate experiential knowledge of the participants and researcher (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Perez Huber, 2010). Delgado Bernal (1998) explains culture intuition as followed:

A Latina researcher's cultural intuition is achieved and be nurtured through our personal experiences (which is influenced by ancestral wisdom, community memory, and intuition), the literature on and about Latinas, our professional experiences, and the analytical process we engage in when we are in a central position that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic (pp. 567-568).

My cultural intuition is nurtured through my personal and professional experiences and helped me understand the data and the research process.

Testimonios

A Latina Feminist lens informed my phenomenological approach in utilizing *testimonio* to conduct, collect, and analyze in depth- interviews on the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. Weaving together CRT, LatCrit, and Latina Feminist Phenomenology, this study illustrates the tenet of centrality of experiential knowledge as a strength and draws on lived experiences of undocumented students by including critical race *testimonios* (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This framework draws on the knowledge of communities of color and acknowledges the lived experiences with issues such as immigration status and language that undocumented students negotiate in higher education (Perez Huber, 2010).

As a methodological tool, *testimonio* provides a lens to understand how undocumented students heal and respond from oppressive experiences by valuing sources of knowledge that embrace the engagement of social transformation (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Carmona, 2012). *Testimonio* as methodology allows scholars to address educational inequities and systemic oppressions and illuminate a collective experience marked by resistance. The research questions this study sought to address are the following: How do undocumented students make meaning of their educational experiences in higher education? How do the experiences of undocumented students impact their academic success? Since the aim of this study was to understand the lived experiences of undocumented students in higher education, qualitative methods were most appropriate.

Role of Researcher

I have come in contact with undocumented students in these roles: as faculty advisor for IDEAS (Improving Dreams, Equity, Access and Success), a student organization that advocates for the rights of undocumented students on a university campus, as a member of the AB 540/Undocumented Educational Equity Task Force, as faculty co-chair of Raza Faculty and Staff Association (RFSA) and currently the co-chair of the Dream Resource Center Advisory Board. As I engaged in the research process, I realized that I was searching for a methodological approach that would disrupt the narrow focus of Western epistemologies that maintain white superiority through the production of knowledge that uses deficit models to explain the low educational outcomes of Communities of Color. In this phenomenology study I illustrate how theory, method, and epistemology are bridged to help me explore and understand the realities of undocumented students in higher education. I utilized *testimonios* to center the knowledge and experiences of undocumented students that are often devalued, delegitimized, and marginalized (Perez Huber, 2009).

As a Latina immigrant, I also place myself at the center of research as a means of linking research to the concerns of my community so that social change can be achieved to improve the educational pathways for undocumented students in higher education. In addition, this research embraces the different ways of knowing (Calderon et al., 2012) as I am an insider in a privileged institution as well as an outsider, as part of a community worthy of attention. My relationship to the study also begins with my experiences as a

first generation student of color with family members living in a mixed-status household and continues with the collective experiences of immigrant students.

Setting

Research for this study was conducted at the University of the Bay (UB, pseudonym), where I currently work as a faculty member. University of the Bay is a public four-year institution situated in Northern California. Undergraduate enrollment at this selective public university exceeded 26,000 in 2017. Ethnic demographics were: 37% Latinx, 30% Asian, 19% White, and 6% African American. First generation college students make up 38% of the entering class.

In 2016, the university hired a full-time AB 540/Dream Coordinator and the establishment of a Dream Resource Center has been at the forefront of the efforts of the AB540/Undocumented Students Educational Equity Task Force at this university which is comprised of faculty, staff and students who advocate for the needs of the undocumented immigrant community. The work of the Task Force has been supported by Associated Students, Academic Senate and many other faculty/staff allies across the campus. Currently the task force has formed into a Dream Resource Center Advisory Board.

January of 2017 marks the opening of the Dream Resource Center at this university. The Center offers a safe space for current undocumented students, prospective students and allies to receive support, as well as access to resources. In addition, the

opening of the Dream Resource Center provided support to students as they continue to navigate the current political climate. On September 5, 2017, the current administration of the United States announced that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program had been rescinded and no new applications would be approved. During this time, the Dream Resource Center provided support for students who were affected by this decision by providing a safe space in a community forum where students, staff, and faculty could express their thoughts, concerns, and ideas on how we can create an inclusive environment for all of our undocumented students. In addition, the Dream Resource Center has hosted healing circles and discussion talks facilitated by a school psychologist. The purpose of this group is to provide a safe space for AB 540 and/or undocumented students to join a supportive discussion about navigating school, family and outside factors as an AB 540 and/or undocumented/dreamer.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit five undocumented undergraduate students in their junior and senior year of college. Purposive sampling allowed me to explore how undocumented students make meaning of their academic experiences. I recruited students who use the Dream Center and/or are part of the student organization, Improving Dream Equity Access and Success (I.D.E.A.S.). All participants were over the age of 18. A letter of invitation was utilized to recruit participants stating the purpose of the study and notifying them that approval was gained from the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study. Academic support staff that work

with dreamers assisted in gaining access to potential participants. During the first meeting of the fall semester, I attended IDEAS meetings and asked if anyone would be interested in participating in my study. I explained the purpose of the study, time commitment requested, the risks, benefits, the voluntary nature of the request, as well as my intention to keep their information confidential.

Participants

A total of five participants were recruited for the study and pseudo names were used for all participants through the current paper.

Mirley.

Mirley was born in Mexico and arrived in the US at the age of seven with her little brother. She began her education in the US as a second grader and has completed 15 years of education in the US. She is 22 years old, a senior who entered college after high school and a first generation student. Mirley is a DACA student and currently working. Mirley is part of the student organization, Sigma Pi Alpha Sorority Inc.

Nadia.

Nadia was born in Brazil and arrived in the US when she was 11 years old. She has completed 13 years of education in the US. Nadia began higher education via community college as a first generation transfer student with DACA and currently not

working. Nadia is involved in the student organization, IDEAS where she receives support related to her status.

Maria.

Maria was born in Mexico and arrived in the US at the age of seven. Maria completed 14 years of education in the US. She began higher education at a 4 year institution with DACA and is currently working. She is 21 years old and a junior in college. Maria is a member of the student organization, IDEAS and as vice president she helps coordinate meetings and end of the year graduation, Beyond Borders.

Josy.

Josy was born in Mexico and arrived in the US at the age of five. She completed 15 years of education in the US. Josy is 22 years old and is currently working with DACA. She is a first generation transfer student. Josy is part of the student organization, Sigma Pi Alpha Sorority Inc.

Alejandra.

Alejandra was born in Mexico and arrived in the US at the age of five. She has completed 15 years of education in the US. Alejandra is 22 years old is a transfer student with DACA and currently working. Alejandra volunteers at events put together by IDEAS and hopes to be more involved in the future.

Data Collection

A series of in-depth phenomenological interviews were used to explore and understand the experiences of undocumented students in higher education. This study utilized a three-interview protocol (Seidman, 2013) to allow for an in depth exploration of meaning making through the experiences of dreamers in higher education. Interviewing five undocumented students allowed me to go in depth to better understand how they navigate higher education. Interview one focused on life history and participants were asked to reconstruct their early experiences in school that placed their participation in higher education. Interview two focused on the details of the experiences as they navigate higher education. Lastly, interview three allowed undocumented students time to reflect on their previous experiences, and to apply meaning to their interpretations of experiences related to barriers and facilitators of academic success for undocumented students in higher education.

Each student participated in a series of three interviews where their *testimonios* were audio recorded. Each interview lasted 30 minutes (for a total of 90 minutes). Individual interviews were spaced out 3-7 days from each other and conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants. I created an interview protocol (see Appendix A) that helped me focus on their collective educational experiences as undocumented students. A Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix B) was administered after the first interview to obtain participant information.

Data Analysis

I began the data analysis process by reviewing the transcripts of the students' *testimonios* to develop significant statements of how undocumented students made meaning of their experiences in navigating higher education and listing these significant statements (horizontalization of the data). Grouping these statements into clusters of meaning from the significant statements into themes provided the foundation for interpretation. I included verbatim statements to develop a textual description of "what" undocumented Latina students experienced. Next, I developed a description of "how" undocumented students make meaning of their lived experiences navigating higher education in the current political climate. Then, I created a composite of their lived experiences incorporating both the textual and structural descriptions that portrayed the "essence" of the experience. Creswell and Poth (2017) outline phenomenological data analysis derived from Moustakas (1994) that guided my plan data analysis:

- The researcher describes personal experiences with the phenomenon under study.
- The researcher develops a list of significant statements from the interviews about how individuals are experiencing the topic; lists these significant statements (horizontalization of the data) and treats each statement as having equal worth; and works to develop a list of nonrepetitive, non-overlapping statements.
- The researcher groups the significant statements into broader units of information. These clusters of meaning provide the foundation for interpretation

- The researcher creates a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon (textural description of the experience—what happened—and includes verbatim examples).
- The researcher drafts a description of “how” the experience happened (structural description, and the inquirer reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced).
- The researcher writes a composite description of the phenomenon, incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. This passage is the “essence” of the experience and represents the culminating aspect of my phenomenological study.

Internal and External Validity

Validity assesses the phenomenological acceptability and convincibility of a study (Van Manen, 2016). Validity of a phenomenological study are demonstrated through the originality of insights produced in the study. Capturing the essence of how undocumented students make meaning of their lived experiences was the focus of the present study. The integrity of the research was illustrated in accurately capturing the voices and lived experiences of the participants. I recorded interviews and created verbatim transcripts. In addition, I used member checking with my participants as to whether the descriptions derived from the interviews were resonant with their original experiences (Van Manen, 2016). Therefore, trustworthiness of the study was addressed through participant engagement in the data analysis process. In addition, I shared raw data with my advisor who provided feedback.

Chapter Four: Results

With the DACA situation, I'm able to analyze it a little better and be like, okay, well I'm fucked this way but look at all the other things I have and I definitely tied that with what's going on in the current state with DACA. I'm not as scared as I was like there's still that fear in me but it's not overpowering me. And going back to the day, like I said the week before, I was anticipating the news that was coming and I already felt it, I already knew, that they're going to take it away. So I feel I used that week to just cry, just let it out, let out all my feelings because if you bottle it up, it builds up and you explode right? So I used that week to kind of just self care, kind of just take everything out. And like I said once the day came, it was difficult that day I woke up, I remember that night I had a dream with my grandmother who lives in Mexico and I haven't seen her in 10 years. She got deported so I haven't been able to see her. But I had a dream that we got reunited and I saw her cry after all these years...And it was really beautiful and I woke up that morning and I felt for me was the sign that told me it's (DACA) gone. And I was just crying uncontrollably. I felt so much emotions at once, it was anger, it was fear, part of me was like, whoa, this is gone like I still get to see my grandmother you know. It was just so many emotions that I couldn't pinpoint exactly how I felt.

-Josy (Interview, Fall 2018)

Overview

In this study, I explored how undocumented students experience the phenomenon of navigating higher education in the United States and how they derive meaning from it at a time when immigration is front and center in the political discourse. Specifically, this study examined the experiences of undocumented Latina students in the context of navigating higher education in the midst of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. I began to research this phenomenon by seeking to answer two questions: The first: How do undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in higher education? The

second: How do the experiences of undocumented students impact their academic success?

The current study used the *testimonios* of five undocumented Latinas to describe the barriers and facilitators that impacted their educational success. Specifically, the study used *testimonios* to incorporate social, political, and cultural histories of undocumented Latina college students in the current political climate. The *testimonios* were obtained via a series of three in-depth phenomenological interviews. Interview one focused on life history and participants were asked to reconstruct their early experiences in school that placed their participation in higher education. Interview two focused on the details of the experiences as they navigated higher education. Interview three allowed undocumented students time to reflect on their previous experiences, and create meaning to their personal experiences in navigating educational processes as undocumented students.

In brief, the women in this study arrived to the U.S. between the ages of 5 and 11 years old. All women attended K-12 schools with predominantly students of color populations. Two of the women entered the university following high school and three of the women entered community college after high school and successfully transferred to the university. Two of the women were liberal and creative arts majors, three of the women were science majors.

The findings are organized into *trenzas* (braids) that are woven together to describe how undocumented students navigate higher education. In the Shadows *trenza* is centered on the K-12 experiences of undocumented students and how they navigated different educational processes that enabled them to succeed in creating a pathway to higher education. This *trenza* centers on the traumatic experience of leaving their home country and coming to the U.S. and how their perception of self impacted their educational experiences. The transitioning to college *trenza* describes the experience of transitioning from high school to college and being an undocumented college student. This *trenza* helps describe how students come to discover the meaning of their immigration status and its impact on their educational attainment. The *trenza* Political Trauma describes the realities of undocumented students as they navigate higher education during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. The *trenzas* of resiliency, building community and critical consciousness helps describe how undocumented students make meaning of their educational experiences as undocumented students and describes their transformational resistance as they navigate through different educational spaces.

Trenza de Identidades Políticas			Trenza de Comunidad		
In the shadows	Transitioning to college	Political trauma	Resiliency	Building community	Critical consciousness
Separation	Lack of resources and institutional support	Fear of deportation	Awareness	Activism	Advocacy
Language barrier		Uncertainty , anxiety, sadness and stress	Healing	Empowerment	“People need to be more human”
Psychological Stress			Institutional support	Ganas	Aspirations
			Parent support		
			Peer support		

Table 1. Findings are organized into two main *trenzas*, **identidades políticas** and **de comunidad** with supporting strands.

In the shadows

Undocumented student's experiences are influenced by the pressure to keep their status a secret and continued to live in the shadows as college students. The participants

in this study described their traumatic experiences of coming to the U.S. and how they negotiate their social realities in educational contexts. The stress of migration combined with a new school environment places undocumented youth at risk in their trajectories of academic success (Suarez et. al., 2010). Their K-12 school experience showed how undocumented students experience trauma through a disconnect with their country, family, culture and language. Furthermore, their *testimonios* revealed that this trauma continues to be present in higher education.

Separation

The participants in this study described reasons for leaving their country and the importance of education their families emphasized. The following *testimonio* describes the levels of separation Mirley experienced first as her mother and father left their home country and then being separated from her sibling in the midst of reuniting with her parents in America.

Then my mom came over here...they were just living like trying to make it wherever they could get work and then they saved so they could go get us. And we tried twice and it didn't work and then the third time we tried we were in the system and the foster care system for like two months yeah in the foster home in Tijuana. We didn't cross because we were caught again and I remember both of us and like they separated us. I remember they separated me with the girls all girls and my little brother with all boys are like age range. And I remember that I

would go looking for my little brother because we would have different recess time and they would never let me see him. They would be like, he sleeping and I was like no, you just brought him...And I remember I would always see when I was in my house they had a big glass door and they pulled the curtains and you can see who is playing outside. And I would see my little brother but they would never let us talk.

In her *testimonio* Mirley explained how being in the US was really difficult and the trauma experienced has impacted her schooling experience. Her parents worked long hours leaving her to take care of her little brother. Mirley recalls how she would miss the bus to school in the mornings because her parents would be coming home from work in the morning and she did not want to leave her little brother alone. She would get in trouble for not going to school.

One of the participants, Alejandra, was really close to her grandmother, with whom she lived with when she was living in Mexico. When her grandmother passed, Alejandra experienced extreme sadness and loss, especially because she was not able to go back to Mexico to see her one last time. In her *testimonio*, now in college, Alejandra speaks emotionally about separating from her loved ones although it's been twelve years:

That was really hard all throughout the first year I cried a lot like everyday. I'm crying now. It's a touchy subject. So I think four years after we moved here my grandma passed away so I wasn't really able to see her. [continues to cry]. It was

a big deal because I had to leave my grandparents behind. And my mom she got remarried, it was just me and her in Mexico with my grandparents and now I have a new stepdad, it was a huge change for me and then I think like a year later my uncle passed away, because he couldn't take my grandma's loss. So the death of him and my grandma was very hurtful for me, so anytime I think about them, it makes me cry. And it's something that I haven't gotten over.

Alejandra and her mother were not able to travel to Mexico during the death of her grandmother. Situations like these are extremely difficult for undocumented students because leaving to attend a funeral would mean risking being deported and separated.

Language barrier

All participants in this study experienced difficulty adjusting to the American educational system. The biggest barrier was not being proficient in English. The women in this study described moments where they had difficulty communicating with others as a result of not being able to express themselves. In her *testimonio*, Alejandra experienced a setback in her education due to lack of language proficiency:

I had a bilingual teacher and that didn't helped me learn English because she would talk to me in Spanish constantly so the little bit hard for me to pick up the English. So she actually ended up telling my mom that she thinks it would be convenient for me to stay behind to redo my first grade because my English isn't

good but she said otherwise everything was OK. I had to like pick up on English and some stuff So I had to repeat first grade again.

Harper and Hurtado (2007) explained that undocumented students encounter systemic exclusion due to language, unfamiliarity of the American system of education and discontinuity of their education. The feelings of limitation due to language was expressed by all the women. In her *testimonio* Mirley described,

...it was really hard because I didn't speak the language and everyone thought I was dumb because I didn't speak the language and I remember I would be like oh no one wants to be my friend because they don't know how to communicate with me. I got anxiety attacks when I was younger and in second grade they put me with the English learners so I would get taken out of class just to practice my English. It really hard because I had to catch up on everything.

The process of adapting to a new school environment was difficult for all the women. They described feelings of disempowerment as they struggled within social and physical environments. These feelings manifested due to their undocumented status and language differences. Maria described,

The kids at the other school made fun of my accent, they wouldn't let me play with them. It was basic playground bullying. Like, me not being able to defend myself it was humiliating [crying] it was just awful...They didn't try to be my friend. It was a lot of me sitting alone and not having anyone to talk to.

Adapting to a new school environment can be hard if a student is not able to make meaningful connections with others. Mirley described feeling insecure in college due to her accent and not being able to pronounce some words in English and how this experience increased her anxiety. Having a language barrier within their social and physical environment leads to ongoing psychological stress.

Psychological stress

All participants in this study described feelings of anxiety and depression in their K-12 schooling experience. Maria, described instances of discrimination from school personnel in her experience with language acquisition that affected her psychologically.

When they would separate me with that one teacher, like there is nothing that she taught me that I could use in the real world. There was never a good interaction. Like she didn't want me to learn it was like you have to assimilate, you have to assimilate. So there's no option. There was no teaching. It was like learn it or you don't. But then she wasn't teaching me so how am I going to learn it? It wasn't like these are the words of the national anthem and this is how you pronounce them it was like learn it and pronounce them when it comes on. The ELD program there, it wasn't constructive criticism, it was more like you either do it or you don't.

In reflecting on her experience, Maria speaks to the trauma of growing up undocumented.

School should be a learning environment. Always. And there are school like that where there is no funding where the Latino and immigrant population live. It makes me sad, truly. What happened to me wasn't the worst thing in the world but it affected me, emotionally and mentally where I can still cry about it now. It was humiliating. It was sad.

Maria's reflection demonstrates the reality of growing up undocumented in the American educational system and her hopes for a more inclusive environment for students to thrive. The psychological stress experienced in K-12 continues to manifest in undocumented students lives as they transition from high school to college (Gonzales et al., 2015). In the following *testimonio*, Nadia describes how the stress of being undocumented impacted her ability to attend college.

Doing the applications. As simple as that. Doing a college application. I took the SATs to try to go to college. But then I remember just not doing as well I can't even think if it's worth it. I can't use this to apply. I think there was a lot of talk about a social security number early so I don't remember having that. I just remember I couldn't go straight to university. I remember not being able to do the college application because it was more of a general sense of I'm an immigrant, I don't have status so I can't do this. I think is more hearing other people talk about it. Hearing that you know oh you can't go to college because you're undocumented or they used to use the word illegal.

Nadia's *testimonio* speaks about her worry about not having a social security number or a status that would allow her to apply to college. In addition, her *testimonio* illustrates her discovery of legal status and the limitations she confronted in pursuing a higher education.

Transitioning to College

In transitioning from high school to college, undocumented students experience limitations due to their undocumented status and rights. Financial concerns continues to be the most frequent barrier to college choice. Many students have access to federal and state grants, loans, and scholarships that undocumented students do not. Due to these challenges some of the participants chose to pursue higher education via community colleges. Community colleges were important in creating educational pathways to higher education for most of the participants in the study.

Lack of resources and institutional support

In the following *testimonio* Maria describes how a lack of information and support from her high school counselor, made the college going process a bit more stressful.

...my high school counselor, she didn't have the right resources and when I was applying I think everything was the same but financially it was like the one thing that kind of screwed me over because I filled out my FAFSA with everyone else

and then I learned that I couldn't apply or I wasn't supposed to apply for the FAFSA...my parents I mean they have no experience with it either so I couldn't do it was it became stressful because I felt like there was no one I could really talk to about it. I guess it wasn't normal to talk about being undocumented.

For Nadia, the lack of information about the college going process resulted in having to look things up on her own. For example, she was unaware of in-state tuition and how to apply for it. She recalls the process not being so straightforward so she had to figure things out on her own. Nadia reflected on her limitations in pursuing a nursing degree and described,

I was selected as one of the people who was supposed to go to start the nursing program there the next fall. So I had to withdraw, well not even that someone had to take my place because I didn't qualify... So since the first semester of nursing I had to work in the hospital the hospitals were very strict with having a social security number and like back then DACA didn't exist. So I didn't have a Social Security number. So that was the main reason. As far as being a student I think I mean I didn't see myself as any different on that side but then at the same time it feels like I had a little secret that I only show some people.

Lack of institutional support resulted in undocumented students feeling discouraged to pursue a higher education. In her *testimonio*, Alejandra describes having to choose to go to community college because it was the most affordable route:

Once I started to apply to universities that's when the whole like oh yeah, I can't apply for FAFSA I can't do certain stuff, so I was discouraged but I didn't let it get to me...and then I think I applied for the Dream Act that year but I wasn't sure because I didn't end up receiving any money or anything. And the counselor didn't check up for me. Oh did you receive any money? and I didn't know because I was a first year so I guess that means I didn't receive any money and then that's another reason why I decided to go to community college.

The participants in this study experienced feeling lost in the process of accessing higher education. Maria, a transfer student described,

I didn't really have anyone to help guide me and so when I came here, I came to the orientation and like my mom came with me and then we stayed in line for the financial aid office. We were in line here like all day like for hours because the line was super long and then when I finally got seen by someone she had like no idea because I guess they were not trained here either. So I didn't know anything about signing the affidavit. So I had out of state tuition. So I was freaking out so much why am I out of state? I live in this state. I have DACA so I was like, it should transfer over.

Maria explains that she thought her information from her community college would transfer over to the university. She describes being confused due to the extra steps she had to take to apply as a transfer student. Maria also noted that her status was a barrier when interacting with institutional agents.

The women in this study encountered instances where higher education personnel were uninformed of or insensitive to their specific needs. No one was able to foresee that after overcoming the hurdles of being admitted into college that they would face further limitations due to their status. Specifically stemming from the 2016 Presidential Election, undocumented students are presented with the uncertainty of their ability to obtain their college degree and to pursue graduate studies.

As undocumented students navigate higher education they continue to face roadblocks in their pathway to life after graduation and question the value of their degree. Alejandra described the roadblocks that undocumented students face when deciding upon graduate school,

So some of the barriers that I believed to be there are financially, the money is definitely a big issue and like knowing who you can talk to. Who you can be open about your status to. Whether it's even like friends and like teachers sometimes one cannot get help if one is too afraid to be open about their status.

Some of the barriers would be the fear of disclosing one's status and receiving backlash for doing so. Another would be financial, an area that she offered a few tips on how these students could receive more assistance,

I am also thinking about grad school and if we can't receive financial aid, I think departments should create scholarships within their programs that do not require citizenship and it should be open to all. I know that if it's not federal money, it should not have a citizenship requirement. That way one is more motivated and then they don't have to worry about this cost with school.

The women in this study find that they continue to face a financial barrier since they do not qualify for federal financial aid which hinders their ability to pursue their goals for graduate school. Maria shared what her barriers were,

I think that is the biggest barrier that I've come across just navigating this whole other complex after undergrad because if most of us are like first time college students in the U.S., there was no one to guide us through undergrad, we actually want to follow this next route how to get there. And specifically for me, it's like how am I going to get there? What do with DACA? And what can I do if they take it away. What's the point? I know it's thousands of dollars. How much would that be worth it for me?

She was not only thinking of how much it would cost, but what would the value for it turn out to be as well especially if she was not able to finish. Would it be worth it

for her to work through all the barriers present in achieving higher education if DACA gets taken away before achieving that goal. Mirley equated the biggest barrier that an undocumented student faces is fear:

I think we're still afraid we're still afraid I know sometimes I am a personally I'm still afraid personally to ask afraid of others might think of me they might look at me differently. I think just fear itself is like one of the biggest barriers. Like not knowing anyone who is actually like gone through it because majority of us are like first generation so I think that's why it's hard. You don't have anyone to like look up to.

Mirley feared the possibility of going to graduate school and if it was a possibility since she had not known someone who had done it before. Without receiving the proper information along with facing discrimination about it is elaborated,

mainly just like discrimination like people thinking that we're taking something from them I know people say that like we're taking spots in the education system and like we're taking money that the government but I like everybody isn't educated about like everything like we have to have a clean background in order just to apply and we have to pay for application and we have to it's really hard and I've been just people understanding that and I am I think is like anyone would like going through it.

Political trauma

Undocumented students' educational experiences illustrate the impact of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election on their personal, social, and political realities as current Latina college students.

Mirley recalls the fear she felt of the unknown future and losing her job:

I went to the rally on campus the day of the election. I was scared because I know I was like what if the cops go and I'm undocumented and I was still in the renewal process. My mom was like you need to be careful because it can get taken away from you.

That's the only way I can work.

I was really scared.

Mirley experiences feelings of intense fear as many questions arise about the changes the future holds resulting from this Presidential election. She felt unable to be visible in order to prevent herself from losing her protection. Fear of losing her job was a tangible consequence of this election. Maria explains what led to her no longer feeling safe in her own home and now school:

I remember that they have there was a watch party here at [the university] with like the other undocumented people and I decided not to go because I was so stressed out. So when I come to school the next day, they tell me like someone

came in and was like saying a bunch of mean stuff. I'm like wow like that's that's scary like because now you can't feel safe on campus. At home I felt unsafe and now like I remember I chose [the university] because it was like [the city] is a sanctuary city. Later and find out our campus is not considered part of it so I had so many questions the questioning all my decisions.

Finding out that the university was not considered part of the sanctuary city caused Maria to question her decision to be a student there. She no longer felt safe since living in a sanctuary city meant that more protection is provided in preventing deportation.

Fear of deportation

Due to the outcome of the election and the possible termination of DACA, the women in this study expressed feeling scared and feared deportation. Josy described how the election was a threat to her educational goals because she was still a student:

So I think my biggest thing is I will lose my ability to work which is really important to me because I've always been working. Next I basically I would lose my entire anti-deportation status I guess because with DACA like that prevents you from getting deported. I would lose that. So that is the biggest risk there is deportation. I mean in any case I do get deported, that means it would be an end to my education. I mean I will be graduating by the time it expires but I do want to go to grad school. So not having DACA, I guess it was a whole you lose your

sense of security because that's what it really represents of course you have these rights and there's not much but you know, enough to thrive. But overall it's your sense of security and safety that you lose.

Josy explained that the outcome of the election caused her to feel an ugly and disgusting feeling when thinking about being deported and to think that a country where she's devoted to her community would "just throw you out for not having a piece of paper that says you're allowed to be here" (Interview, Fall 2018).

Maria described feeling scared after hearing the outcome of the election. She feared deportation for herself and her family.

What's going to happen to my family? So that affected my schooling that was one of the worst semesters I've had I think ever because I was just like not in the right mental space like that I think since then it's affecting my school always because we're always playing like this weird like abusive relationship we have the government. Like are they going to take DACA away? Is he going to do this to this group of people? Since the 2016 election like I think everything I do is always like I need to watch out with what I'm doing because I could be doing great things and they could just take it away from me. Since I was like what's the point? Or am I outing myself too much? It's new fears that I didn't have before...And then you always hear the stories that they like got someone like on the way to take the kids to school and it's like what if they do that or what if my

parents get arrested while we're in school and then like how am supposed to know? All I could do they get a call and we don't know the process. It's always scary.

For undocumented students, the 2016 election was the most emotionally evocative political event (Sondel et al., 2018). For the women in this study, it was clear that the election had affected them as they described feeling afraid and being concerned about deportation. It was clear that the outcome of the election heightened the level of stress experienced by undocumented students.

Uncertainty, anxiety, sadness, and stress

Psychological and emotional concerns negatively impact undocumented students mental and emotional health (Gonzales et al., 2013). In addition to feeling fear and anxiety, undocumented students talked about feelings of uncertainty and fear of their educational futures resulting from the 2016 election.

Mirley described how the outcome of the election heightened her fear of being undocumented and having her work permit taken away. She explained how she wanted to participate in the march that occurred in the community after the election but was scared to due to her status:

I was scared because I know I was like what if the cops go and I'm undocumented and I was still in the renewal process. My mom was like you need to be careful

because it can get taken away from you. That's the only way I can work. I was really scared.

Maria described the stress of having to constantly question if going to college is worth all her hard work:

I have never seen my dad cry am he cried that time and he said he was sorry that I felt that way but it was better for us to be here like even though we're going through all this, he was like, look you're in college now you're doing all these great things like it's worth it. I was like I don't know if it's worth it like oh I don't know if going through constant like mental manipulation by the administration is worth it.

Alejandra echoed feelings of uncertainty and fear after the election:

I was a bit devastated. I didn't know how it was going to affect us personally as undocumented students. I know he had a lot of threats to like build a wall and do all this. So I did feel a little insecure. I felt scared for my parents because they don't have any type of protection. They are just undocumented and my mom would really worry and that would really worries me...I feel like my world just crushing, coming down. I thought about my job. I was like if DACA gets taken away I won't be able to work. I won't be able to help my parents.

Muñoz et al. (2018) found that the current political climate influenced undocumented students' emotions around their hope and fears. For the women in this

study, fear stemmed from their uncertainty about their futures and the prospects of not having DACA. Another study following the election, found that undocumented students expressed worry that the future of DACA was temporary and were concerned with what would happen to them and their families (Benuto, Casas, Cummings & Newlands, 2018). The *testimonios* of undocumented college students in this study reveal that trauma still persist while pursuing a higher education.

Resiliency

Limited research has examined the impact of an undocumented status on mental health. The fear, uncertainty, and anxiety experienced by undocumented students after the 2016 U.S. presidential election greatly impacted their mental health. This sentiment was echoed by all the women in the study. I chose to keep the *invivo* code to illustrate the powerful narrative. Josy explained the importance of acknowledging people's feelings as a source hope:

Normalizing mental health would be very good in terms of giving people hope... I feel like we're very resilient people and we're brought up to be that way to withstand different changes and hardships. And you know you kind of taught like you always have to be tough and put your best face forward which is really great. But sometimes when we do have those moments of weakness or not necessarily weakness but when we feel like we're losing strength. It's kind of frowned upon and it's like oh you're just being like you know other people have gone through

worse. We need to acknowledge that everybody has feelings and everybody expresses themselves a different way.

Normalizing mental health and bringing awareness to the different experiences that an undocumented student faces can lead to healing and receiving the necessary support.

Awareness

Undocumented students in this study became involved in the student advocacy group to raise awareness surrounding their realities in higher education. Maria explained that she needed to disclose her status in order to bring awareness of the presence of undocumented students:

I like to advocate and I guess a lot of people don't like to talk about it. I think it's part of my identity like this is Maria, like when people want to mention their pronouns, I'm like I'm undocumented as part of it because I want to make people aware of it. Because it could be like, I'm undocumented and they might have not have known and they could have this idea of what an undocumented person is.

Alejandra also shared that bringing awareness of their presence in higher education could help them in receiving the necessary resources to succeed. She explained that bringing awareness must also be included in the classroom:

I think people need to be educated on how to approach a student who is undocumented. Like for a staff member, faculty. Or even if they have another undocumented student, maybe presenting them to each other so they can meet and get connections that way. And my sociology teacher, she provides a link to the Dream Resource Center. And they do comment on what to do like when DACA was being rescinded, like steps of what to do next. To take time to talk about things that affect students, not that many know there are undocumented students in school with them. Or maybe just have a reference page on their school page. One of my teachers she also had it in her syllabus. A link to the resource center. That's the only one I had this semester where she talks about current issues.

Healing

The *testimonios* of Latina undocumented college students describe how bringing awareness to their stories created space for healing.

I wasn't feeling alone and the assurance that the respect that was there this little community like there were Greeks there and they would not talk about it outside the circle.

Sharing a safe space with others to bond about similar situations that they share is an important part of healing. Nadia shared a form of healing for her,

I thought it would also be like a healing. Every time I get together with other students who are experiencing kind of the same thing, it makes me feel like I know that other people are feeling the same fears or happiness or whatever so I think you would that would be beneficial to discuss what was going on.

Being a part of the pre-health dreamers allowed her to experience a weekend retreat where she was able to receive emotional support as she navigates through her reality after the outcome of the 2016 election. For Nadia and the other women, a supportive environment allowed them share their lived struggle.

Relationships with educators provide important source of information and guidance for undocumented students to navigate higher education and achieve success. The women in this study emphasized the importance of building trusting relationships. DeNicolo et al. (2017) affirmed that a sense of belonging within the school community can help immigrant students cope with stress and can provide support for making meaning of their experiences. The three types of levels of support received were institutional, parent and peer.

Institutional Support

Josy explained how the resource center on campus has helped her stay motivated to continue attending classes:

The Dream Resource Center was really helpful to kind of keep me going and keep track with things.

Having a Dream Resource Center is crucial in undocumented students' pathways to success. It acts as a liaison between these students and other resources that they may need.

Maria also expressed the same sentiment about the center and the benefits of it as well as receiving support from the faculty and staff:

The Dream Resource Center, I think now that we have it here that's a lot of help because Norma is the point of contact so I think she gets to be emails from everyone with different resources. Now that she is doing the UndocuAlly trainings, that I've been part of the panel. I've even had professors asks questions directly like what would you like to see what do you do you need from us to know how to apply to our grad program. I think it's something that usually didn't happened before.

Professors participating in these UndocuAlly trainings shows how they are actively supporting these students. Maria is able to give direct feedback to these professors and receive more information about how to apply to the grad program of her choosing.

Parent support

Familial support increased students' motivation and was a source of psychological support. Nadia felt supported by her parents as she navigated higher education prior to

DACA and explained how she had to give up her spot into the nursing program because she did not have a social security number:

Thinking about giving up my spot is so defeating. Because I put so much work into this and then you realize you can't do this because you're undocumented. It's just a piece of paper. I felt defeated so I felt disappointed Like why am I even doing this? In a sense it was kind of like a low moment. Like I could have gotten depressed because of that. I chose not to. I don't know what happened but I just decided to push through. I think part of that is just having a good support system. At at that point it was mostly my parents.

Communication and a positive attitude from parents, even when they themselves are undocumented, helped students stay focused on their future goals.

For support outside of school, I have my parents. My mom well she's undocumented so she understands what I'm going through and she does struggle herself and she struggles to see me struggle but we definitely talk and try to keep a positive mindset of what's going to happen in the future and just think positive.

Nadia explained that her parents taught her that education was the key to success and that no one could take her knowledge away which then led her to pursue her dreams of being a healthcare professional. This is a result of her acquiring the necessary knowledge to succeed through her education. Nadia and Alejandra's *testimonio* illustrate

that family, most notably parents, played an instrumental role in the lives of undocumented students. It was also noted that receiving support from their peers was something to be appreciated.

Peer support

Nadia has a similar story to many others as she is afraid to disclose her status or story at first, but then finds strength and support when she decided to do so.

I kept quiet about my status, because I didn't see anybody else talking about it. I think it wasn't until later on, in my third year when I was in Community College, that I met other students in the same situation. It was interesting because it was either me opening up like I can't do that, And so I had a sense that they felt safe to talk about their situation, so they opened up, and said they were also in the same situation.

Once both Nadia and Josy found people they trusted and have built a community within, they felt more supported.

Josy emphasized the importance of receiving support from her friends:

I went to the march which helped me a lot. And I think what really kept me glued together basically that day was that I was receiving a lot of support not only from family but from friends. A lot of friends that were close to me and I haven't talked to in a while reached out to me. And they're like we love you, we're here to

support you, you know you deserve to stay here. I feel like hearing those words of encouragement that yes you're wanted, yes we love you, and yes you belong here, really helped.

Hearing words of affirmation and encouragement helped assure Josy to not give up after hearing the news that they were going to take DACA away. Josy readdressed the importance of having a strong support system that emphasized her friendships:

You need to have a very strong support system in your life. If I was just out here by myself without family without close friends and all those bonds I've created I think this would be ten times harder for me to go through. But like I said I have a strong support system at home. You know I've met a lot of people and create very strong friendships too that I just feel very supported at all times. So there's very little room for me to doubt in myself and in my actions.

Resources and information were obtained through undocumented peer support group on campus as Alejandra described,

I feel like it's a safe space for students and I really recommend it. It has help me out a lot just because as a first-generation student who doesn't have the knowledge other students might have especially if they are undocumented like this kind of pushes you forward and gives them, like resources and I think that's very important.

Alejandra felt that being part of a peer support group on campus provided a safe space for her to interact with a group of students with similar experiences. It also provided important resources to have a meaningful educational experience. The women in this research noted that the peer support group provided them with a space to talk about their experiences and what they were struggling with both academically and as undocumented students. Specifically, the participants found that the sharing of her personal journey led her to join her fellowship which in turn allowed her to help immigrant communities.

Being part of student groups on campus provided them with additional resources to facilitate a more welcoming and inclusive environment not only for the student, but for their families as well. Through participation in student advocacy groups, undocumented students were able to develop a political voice and identity that helped them overcome the social stigma and silencing of undocumented students (Galindo, 2012). A sense of belonging was nurtured through the relationships they had with their school, their families and their peers.

Building community

Despite the challenges in navigating higher education especially after the 2016 election, undocumented students found a way to move out of the shadows and to contribute to their communities. The women in this study found safe spaces that cultivated their collective empowerment through activism.

Activism

Activism evokes and signals change as undocumented students work to secure rights for undocumented communities and self (DeAngelo, Schuster and Stebleton, 2016). Participation in activism can provide spaces for disrupting notions of living in fear (Muñoz, 2018).

Maria noted that as a DACA recipient, she is already in the system and wants to use her voice to uplift her community:

Because so many students are scared, let me do it, let me be their voice, I am already out. Those that don't have DACA are not in the system, I am, so let me use my voice. I am already so deep in the water. If I get deported, oh well. So I might as well do it. I see that a lot of people see courage from what I am doing.

In her *testimonio* she elaborates on her decision to be an example for her people in hopes to inspire them to do the same. Despite the struggles or obstacles they have faced regarding the outcome of the election, it fueled their motivation to be more civically engaged. In her *testimonio*, Josy illustrated how activism was a way to come out of the shadows and contribute to her community:

It kind of opened my eyes, like all right, you know what it's time for me to step up. And it's not just for me, it's for all the DACA people out there. They're doing really amazing things and the fact that it could all be taken away, it's terrifying, you know. So I feel like I definitely want to be more involved. It's not necessarily

out of fear I would say but it's out of-- like, how would I put it. I'm just tired you know, tired of hiding...Just being surrounded with so many people that have the same views as you and support the same thing. Just the amount of support that was present really made me feel motivated, made me want to do more of it. And they kind of gives you hope right?

Josy explained how going to a rally allowed her to connect with others that shared a similar story. DeAngelo et al. (2016) asserted that these connections can result in future participation in activism as a way to give back to their community. Josy reflected on similar sentiments as Maria, noting her sense of empowerment. Their activism included educating individuals on what it means to be undocumented in higher education and navigating different educational processes to secure resources and advocating for themselves.

Empowerment

Through participation in activism, undocumented students found their political voice that helped them become empowered and overcome the shame and fear associated with being undocumented (Gonzales, 2008; Seif, 2016). Maria described experiences of empowerment as she disclosed her undocumented identity:

I wore a Undocumented and Unafraid shirt and I was really scared again seeing other people that maybe I feel like they were privileged enough to not be scared but seeing them cry almost made me feel better about it because I'm like hey like

I've made it this far. If they're crying obviously like it empowered me like maybe I should feel worse about myself but at the same time I'm like they're all supporting like me wearing that shirt, actually a lot of people were like, I stand with you or like you it's going to be fine like so I have all this people who would back me up. To me, I took it as a sense of empowerment.

Maria explained that her experiences gave her courage to continue with higher education. The morning after the election she decided to wear the shirt and felt a sense of empowerment in claiming her identity as an undocumented student.

Ganas

Ganas, the desire to succeed, was reported by all the women in the study. Gamez et al. (2017) identified *ganas* as internal motivators that undocumented students draw from as a source of strength (self-advocacy, resourcefulness, action orientation).

The women reflected on their own immigration experience and of their parents in their struggle for survival in the U.S. as a source of *ganas*. The challenges they experienced became motivators that helped them succeed in achieving their goals and to overcome negative perceptions of undocumented immigrants in higher education. *Ganas* is what propelled them forward and these motivators helped them navigate higher education despite the challenges they faced as undocumented students (Gamez et al., 2017).

Nadia stated,

For someone to have so many barriers it means so much to progress and get to the point that you want. I think it's pushing through the barriers that I feel I have learned. Maybe it took me awhile. Like I learned this from my parents like thinking about living in Brazil like things weren't easy. Even though things were hard I saw my parents pushing through living life and not letting the struggles put them down. And I think that's what I brought from Brazil like being creative with what you have. Just because I am undocumented doesn't mean I cannot continue going to school. I just took that mindset and kept on going. Kept on pushing.

These *testimonios* demonstrate that efforts to succeed were attributed to undocumented students' sense of determination that helped them persist in their education. Contreras (2009) found that *ganas* helped undocumented students to persist in college and succeed academically. In her *testimonio* Mirley helps us understand that she credits her belief in herself to her parents' hard work and determination for her persistence and self confidence. Even though her parents are like many other immigrant families who may have had many struggles, they worked hard to make sure that their children had better opportunities than they might not have had:

From then on we had all live in a one bed and it was a king size bed and it was the four of us in that room and there was a lot of like my parents never I guess showed us that we were poor because they were always like Si se puede!

In the following *testimonio*, Josy described that much of her motivation was

attributed to the encouragement she received from her parents. She explained that after the outcome of the election she called her parents and they encouraged her to continue to pursue her goals:

I called my parents and they told my dad like I don't know what's going to happen. I'm really scared. You know I'm still in school and this kind of threatens my goals. And he did give me a chat and he said wherever you go you're going to thrive...I'm one of those people that I come from very intrinsically motivated family and I kind of always put my mind and my soul into something that I wanted to do and have always made that happen. So I think what he was trying to say is no matter where I go as long as I have that mentality I'll be able to grow and thrive and accomplish whatever I wanted to do here, I can accomplish anywhere else.

Josy's *testimonio* demonstrates how her passion and determination are very much supported by her parents. This supports a healthier mentality to keep up hope in her journey of success and stability.

Critical consciousness

Cadenas, Bernstein and Tracey (2018) contended that critical consciousness is related to a sense of political agency that helps undocumented students cope with oppression and persist in higher education. Knowing that there are others in the same situation gave the women in the study the courage to fight for their rights and challenge

oppressive policies that negatively impact their educational goals. Through critical reflection, Josy described,

Like I said previously, despite my limitations I think I have a really good life and I don't think I would change any of the things I've gone through. Because it's made me resilient. If I had it easier I don't think I would be as grateful for things and I want to be as humble. And I wouldn't be as sympathetic with those of other people. So I think being a minority has definitely helped me be a better human.

She described her *ganas* while being critically conscious. By being sympathetic to other people's realities in comparison to hers she is able to cope and embrace her own identity.

Advocacy

Being a part of critically conscious groups who offer support and recognition to each other is how undocumented students advocate for their rights.

Maria reflected on the inspirational graduation that is set up by a support group on campus:

For IDEAS for the Beyond Borders Graduation, we also have Departments who also donate money for the graduation for us to have a safe place for these undocumented grads to have a special place in celebration it's great that now they could have save space for their family where we can speak our language

where is smaller and it's more personal to get speak a lot about the struggles they went through because at other graduations they would not be comfortable speaking about oh by the way I'm undocumented and these are my struggles. So when departments are actually giving us money that is for the graduation this shows that they want to support us and they want us to to be successful.

Creating a safe space with all of the resources needed for an event that celebrates the accomplishments of undocumented students shows that there is an understanding, however small, of the presence they hold in the community and of the recognition they deserve.

“People need to be more human”

In the current political climate, undocumented students often experience feelings of shame due to their status. Perez et al. (2010) noted that emotions of shame, fear, marginalization, and uncertainty can be derived from experiences with discrimination and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Mirley described the unfair treatment undocumented people receive:

It makes me sad and really mad because people don't like understand and like also like the reason like we left our homeland or like their home countries is like to pursue better and like to come here and be treated like less than someone It's really sad and makes me really upset because I know I'm not like I know I'm not taking anyone's job because I know like I am and qualified and able to do the

same job they can and majority of the time like people who do take jobs are taking like low like hard jobs so I think people need to educate themselves a little more and be more human because especially now in this type of climate, people just need to be human literally like it's not that hard to be like a simple human being and like just be kind to one another.

Everyone has similarities in their identity, struggle and aspirations for success. More advocacy efforts were described by those who continue to come out of the shadows and their support systems, allowing their motivation to be sustained.

Aspirations

The women in this study maintained optimism although they recognize their struggles related to their undocumented status. Their *testimonios* illustrate how undocumented students reclaim their identity and come out of the shadows.

I feel like even now that this happened I'm even more proud of being DACA. Because I'm not going to hide obviously, I've done so much. Even if you take this away from me, I'm going to still do a lot more you know. I'm going to keep succeeding wherever I am. And that's always something that my dad always tells me, you know sometimes I'm like, oh shit what's going to happen with this you know. And my dad says, it doesn't matter, he's like, you're a bright woman and wherever you go, you're going to succeed, doesn't matter if it's in this country or another.

In her *testimonio* Josy embraces her identity and her desire to succeed is prevalent. She recognized her barriers, but was able to continue to push through and be proud of her identity. The *testimonios* of undocumented Latina illustrate how they were able to develop a positive self-image that motivated them to pursue their goals and envision the possibility of success (Muñoz & Maldonado, 2012).

The *testimonios* of Latina undocumented students revealed that their ability to make meaning of their educational experiences as they navigate higher education positively impacted their self perception. The women in this study felt empowered by their experiences by using their voice to heal and uplift their communities. Their *testimonios* reveal that their experiences are marked by hope for a better future and dreams fulfilled.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

Through *testimonio*, we learned to translate ourselves for each other.

(The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 11).

This phenomenological study explored how undocumented Latina students experienced and made meaning of their experiences in higher education. I was interested in discovering how undocumented Latina students describe their experiences in the current political climate. This offers relative insight for researchers, educators, student services personnel, faculty and administrators in higher education. My research intent

was for study findings to augment the body of knowledge surrounding undocumented college students. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How do undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in higher education?
- How do the experiences of undocumented students impact their academic success?

This study provides the *testimonios* of five undocumented Latina college students to give voice to their lived experiences of resistance and transformation as they navigate higher education. Undocumented Latina students' lived experience is used as a point of inquiry, reflection and interpretation. Undocumented students in this study reclaimed and gave voice to their stories as a way to heal and transform their communities. The data collected for this study came from phenomenological interviews to provide a more in-depth understanding of the meaning of their experiences as undocumented students navigating higher education.

In describing the phenomenon, I strive to stay present as possible to the phenomenon and reflexively mindful of my own position and perspective (Finlay, 2014). Critical reflection further allowed me to engage in creating *trenzas* (strands) that provided a collective description of the phenomenon of navigating higher education. My aim was to adopt a phenomenological attitude where I bracket (set-aside) any interpretations and just let the phenomenon present itself in its essence. I engaged in the data to discover

possible meanings of the phenomenon, a process that is “systematic, intensive and intuitive” (Finlay, 2014).

Discussion

This study sought to answer two questions: (1) How do undocumented students make meaning of their experiences in higher education? (2) How do the experiences of undocumented students impact their academic success? Findings were categorized into the following *trenzas*: *Identidades políticas* and *de comunidad*.

Trenzas de identidades políticas includes: In the shadows, transitioning to college, and political trauma. *Trenzas de comunidad* includes: resiliency, building community and critical consciousness. These *trenzas* were woven together to give voice to the experiences of undocumented Latina students in higher education. Undocumented Latinas struggled transitioning to college due to implementation of new policies and the discrimination they encountered on campus in the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Despite their struggles this study revealed that *ganas*, families, mentors, and community were important factors that facilitated success among undocumented students.

In the Shadows

The women in this study traveled as children to a new land without economic means and without the ability to speak English. The experiences of undocumented Latina students illustrate a struggle of living in-between cultures, races, languages, and genders (Anzaldúa, 1987). Anzaldúa describes this as in-between space of *nepantla* as a place of

healing and meaning making, critical reflection and transformation. Undocumented Latina students reflected on their experiences after the outcome of the 2016 election and described how the trauma of being undocumented still persists in navigating higher education. Anzaldúa's concept of *nepantla* allowed me to provide a more holistic perspective to the lived experiences of undocumented Latina college students to describe how they negotiate educational spaces. Undocumented Latina students give voice to their experiences and feelings of living in-between two worlds, and the tensions of being both highly visible and invisible at the same time. Delgado Bernal & Aleman (2017) also illustrated the conceptualization of *nepantla*, the in-betweenness where transformation and learning occurs. The use of *testimonio* as sites of knowledge enabled undocumented students to use their voice and bring awareness of their collective experiences.

Transiting to college

In navigating higher education, undocumented Latina students found a sense of belonging by participating in a student support group on campus. Sharing a collective struggle and survival in higher education provided an inclusive space to tell their stories. These stories became a production of knowledge that they shared within their communities. The *testimonios* revealed that social networks are an important element of navigational capital that assisted undocumented students to navigate through social institutions, which aligns with Hallett's (2013) suggestion that peer networks could be an effective mode of transferring different forms of capital necessary for encouraging academic success.

Political trauma

The 2016 Presidential Election illustrated the intense debate immigration issues have on the educational pursuits of undocumented students. Hagan, Sladek, Luecken and Doane (2018) affirmed that the 2016 election was a significant source of stress for undocumented students.

The presidential campaign was marked by anti-immigrant and racist sentiments that criminalized undocumented immigrants and immigrant communities as a whole (Sondel et al., 2018). The current U.S. Presidential Administration has further criminalized immigration policies and practices leading to separation of families and deaths of children (Licona & Luibhéid, 2018). Sondel, Baggett and Dunn (2018) posited that the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election lead to political trauma caused by tangible consequences for students and their families of promises made such as building a wall between the US and Mexico, the deportation of undocumented people and the termination of the DACA program. The discontinuance of DACA had a great impact in the educational experiences of undocumented students and will lead to significant changes in educational equity and access for this population (Nguyen & Kebede, 2017).

The *testimonios* of Latina undocumented students revealed that navigating higher education in the current political climate caused feelings of fear, shame, anxiety and uncertainty for their futures. These emotions came about due to experiences of discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment, fear of deportation, and systemic barriers such

as ineligibility for federally sponsored programs and financial aid (Perez et al., 2010). Gonzales, Suarez-Orozco and Dedios-Sanguinetti (2013) indicated that experiences of exclusion, discrimination and isolation have implications for undocumented youths' mental health and well-being and places them at risk for stress-induced emotions such as anxiety, guilt, depression, anger, hopelessness, shame and uncertainty. Participants in this study experienced ongoing stress due to the barriers of their undocumented status.

Resiliency

The *testimonios* of undocumented students demonstrate an urgency around awareness of mental health and critical support. The traumatic experience of familial separation and the chronic threat of deportation continues to affect undocumented students as they navigate higher education. This study suggests that *testimonios* are an important part of the healing process by allowing undocumented students to give voice to their experiences and advocate for themselves and their communities (Huber 2009). O'Neal et al. (2016) found that immigration status contributed to undocumented students' ability to maintain hope despite the challenges they face as they continue to navigate higher education. Undocumented students' desire to succeed would increase if more awareness and support about their mental health needs were known. Institutions need to recognize the mental health needs of undocumented students and can work towards a holistic approach to mental health initiatives. Awareness of mental health for undocumented students can help institutions in providing legal assistance, counseling, and mental help support (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Perez et al., 2010).

Building Community

The *testimonios* illustrate how undocumented students' determination to succeed aligns with aspirational, familial and navigational capital (Yosso, 2006). The women in this study reflected on their own aspirations and motivations to pursue graduate studies. The *testimonios* demonstrated how undocumented students build on individual and collective strengths to secure resources and inspire their communities to uplift. The women in this study wanted to use their voice to advocate for the rights of undocumented students on campus and in their communities. Engaging in critical reflection allowed for personal transformation where undocumented students wanted to raise awareness and open up access for all. This study also revealed that undocumented communities are places rich in resources, assets, skills and abilities that assist undocumented students to navigate higher education. With the opportunity to go to college, undocumented students have a new sense of hope and a mission to give back to their communities.

Critical Consciousness

Undocumented students derived strength from the challenges they faced and developed the ability to be resourceful and to remain optimistic through their educational experiences. Their success in supporting their communities was demonstrated through engaging in activism. Student support group on campus provided undocumented students with a welcoming and empowering space to advocate for resources and a safe space for undocumented students in higher education. This study found that successful navigation

of their challenges improved their belief in their abilities. A critical consciousness can enhance students' awareness of the importance of securing resources and support to be successful (Enriquez, 2011; Luginbuhl, McWhirter & McWhirter, 2016; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

Despite the obstacles, they persisted, breaking down barriers and creating possibilities to realizing their educational goals. The process of participating in this study that involved *testimonios* allowed participants to reflect on their lives and how they use the knowledge that they had gained. Furthermore, undocumented students possess a sense of responsibility to fight for human rights, for example when Josy stated,

I attended a rally for DACA and I definitely want to attend more because my experience was so positive. Just being surrounded with so many people that have the same views as you and support the same thing. Just the amount of support that was present really made me feel motivated, made me want to do more of it. And they kind of gives you hope right? Surrounded by those people, kind of gives you the hope that you feel you really didn't have any left.

Morales et al., (2011) found that undocumented students can be empowered by opportunities to exercise the limited freedoms this country affords them as undocumented individuals

Through their experiences, undocumented students developed a sense of responsibility to give back to their families and communities by fulfilling their educational goals.

Expectations to succeed fueled the motivation to succeed academically. Family support as a source of motivation also contributed to a sense of responsibility among undocumented students. For example, Cervantes, Minero and Brito (2015) found that undocumented students held strong bonds with their families and expressed a desire to give back to their communities and provide for their families in the future.

Limitations of Study

A major limitation in my study is that the findings are based on five undocumented Latinas. Participants were also recruited from a Hispanic Serving Institute which could mean that this campus is friendly to undocumented students. Interviewees from non-Hispanic Serving Institute might encounter experiences very different to those of the students in this study. I engaged with some of the students in my role of advisor and as an immigrant myself. This type of interaction allowed for a sense of comfort and trust.

Implications and Recommendations

In understanding the experiences of undocumented students, institutions can begin to understand the unique challenges of undocumented students and can play a role in developing a holistic campus environment. Institutions can create environments that address undocumented students' access and success in higher education. Delgado Bernal (2002) emphasized the ways in which communal and familial knowledge, languages,

stories, language, histories, and culture, shared from the knowers and creators are vital to the education of undocumented students.

In understanding the experiences of undocumented students, educational leaders can begin to understand the unique challenges of undocumented students and can play a critical role in creating educational pathways for this unique population that continues to be marginalized. Undocumented students can benefit from environments that foster learning and the development of social capital in higher education. When such learning environment fosters the development of relationships with faculty and staff, students are able to create pathways to their educational success.

Recommendations for Teaching

The women in this study described feeling afraid to attend college after the outcome of the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. In reflecting on their experiences, they felt that support from professors was a key factor in fostering a sense of belonging. One of the participants explained that her professor included support services for undocumented students in the course syllabus. Sondel et al. (2018) focused on how teachers can respond to students' fears and anxieties, and sadness by introducing a pedagogy of political trauma to mediate the trauma caused events such as the 2016 election. This recent work illustrates the need for pedagogies that are culturally sustaining and transformational. Sondel et al. (2018) outline a framework of a pedagogy of political trauma that encompasses tending to students socio-emotional wellbeing, cultivating civic

knowledge and capabilities, and developing critical consciousness. This type of pedagogy also calls for social justice action where teachers can provide safe spaces for support and for educators to respond to the social-emotional needs of undocumented students.

Recommendations for Institutions

Undocumented students may never get to college due to difficulty navigating the enrollment process on their own. This may be due to lack of knowledge and experience from their educational, professional and social community. Institutions can support the educational success of undocumented students by creating partnerships between high schools and colleges to build bridges that will increase the number of undocumented high school students attending college. Institutions can also be spaces of empowerment in creating deeper and sustaining support systems that are culturally meaningful and help undocumented students thrive.

Policy Implementation

Understanding the experiences of undocumented students can influence the development of policies that consider educational equity. Gildersleeve and Hernandez (2012) highlighted the importance of understanding the constructs within in-state tuition policies as conduits of power that can influence the political climate of undocumented students and potentially create educational pathways. Institutional leaders can translate these policies into transformative local policies that do not perpetuating the objectification of students. This provides an opportunity for policy approaches to be

employed and enhanced to be more effective in assisting the students in securing financial resources, student engagement and social-emotional support. Education and training is needed for institutional agents to support the educational success of undocumented students. Person et al. (2017) asserted that it is important for administrators, faculty and staff to understand and have knowledge of policies and the challenges undocumented students face in order to best assist them in navigating the higher education system. Higher education institutions can also act as agents for social change by striving for justice and equity in educational access and support for undocumented students. Understanding the implementation process can help institutional agents reshape their practices to expand educational opportunities for all students (Nienhusser, 2018).

Cariño Conscientizado

Critical authentic care can enable practitioners and educators to identify the challenges and barriers undocumented students experience in navigating higher education and cultivating culturally sustaining environments (DeNicolo et al., 2017). Cammarota (2014) suggested that caring relationships can facilitate transformational resistance by allowing the opportunity to form an academic identity against the pressures of criminalization and assumed deficiency. Identifying mechanisms that promote belonging in higher education can potentially reduce the educational inequities for undocumented students. DeNicolo et al. (2017) defined critical authentic care as *cariño conscientizado*, a pedagogy of critical consciousness and authentic care as a means to disrupt hegemonic

and racist policies that limit the potential of undocumented students to develop a sense of belonging. Caring individuals can assist undocumented students in developing navigational skills to be successful as they can facilitate connections to resources. When undocumented students receive support from trusting allies, they are able to confide in them and receive guidance and resources which can aid in reducing barriers and anxiety. Transformative educators can engage in work within their institutions and professions in order to challenge inequitable practices, policies and structures. Within the current immigration political climate, the sense of fear undocumented students often experience interferes with the ability to seek relationships, therefore, institutions of higher education need to be intentional in building relationships with undocumented students.

Recommendations for Future Study

This phenomenological study presented a portrait of undocumented Latina students in higher education. Their stories helped lay a foundation of knowledge surrounding how undocumented Latina students make meaning of their experiences in navigating higher education and the current political climate. It is from these rich descriptions that I make recommendations for practice. The findings are best understood through the context of the five undocumented students interviewed as they reflected on how they had navigated higher education during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.

Findings from this study offer a foundation from which to build on as future investigations continue to evolve. I recommend that future studies explore the interaction between political events and mental health issues among undocumented college students.

Future research might also look at job attainment for DACA students, as this appears to be a barrier for many graduates, while others have found creative solutions. In addition, exploring the graduate school aspirations of undocumented students can provide an understanding of how undocumented students negotiate educational spaces and to help institutions to better understand the complexity of immigration and education to challenge the current trends in educational policies. In her *testimonio*, Maria describes new fears surrounding the uncertainty of life after graduation and graduate school:

I don't know how to apply. How I can pay for it because no one in my family is a U.S. citizen. I don't know who would even sign away for a loan for like thousands of dollars. If I don't get accepted to a nearby school I would have to move out so that's dealing with a whole other thing that I have never dealt with. I cannot live away from home, it's like how am I going to afford it? If I want to go to a more prestigious school say like Georgetown, it's on the other side in a different state. Like are they immigrant friendly? So there are these other barriers that I face as an undergrad.

I recommend that future research expand the target population to include a more diverse student demographics including other undocumented non-Latina groups. By focusing on the experiences and educational opportunities of undocumented students we can inspire more focused research that will ultimately lead to improved practices.

Conclusion

Examining the phenomenon of navigating higher education as a point of inquiry addresses and serves the practices of institutional agents working with undocumented students. The women in this study attended college in a political context that created fear and stress. The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election resulted in a xenophobic and less welcoming society where undocumented Latina students come to make meaning of their educational experiences and future aspirations. Given the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the U.S., it is important to understand the experiences of undocumented students in order to best serve them. Undocumented students confront inequities and fears imposed by political, legal, and education systems that constrain their educational success and limit their career opportunities. Institutions of higher education can bridge access and create academic pathways for undocumented student to succeed in higher education by providing undocumented students with resources, opportunities and spaces for their lived experiences.

My investigation utilized phenomenological methodology to develop descriptive *trenzas* (themes). I interviewed five undocumented Latina students who identified as being DACAmented. The in-depth phenomenological interviews provided rich data. My findings revealed two main *trenzas*: **identidades políticas and de comunidad**.

The *testimonios* of undocumented Latina students were used as a means of reclaiming the concept of experience and giving voice to their lived experiences. This

study facilitated breaking the silence surrounding the experiences of undocumented students in higher education and describes notions of empowerment, telling their stories of struggle, survival and resistance in a world that has been unwelcoming. This study has allowed me to gain deep insight into how undocumented Latina students make meaning of their lived experiences in higher education. The purposeful design of using the lens of Latina Feminist Phenomenology focused on the voice of the participants. I hope that the powerful *testimonios* of Latina undocumented students are able to raise consciousness, prompt questions, and inspire dreams.

Phenomenological Reflections

Borders-barbed-wire, wooden, sometimes invisible-separating, constraining, restricting. Seeing, sensing a new. Borderlands-where cultures, ideas, norms, selves are remade, reconfigured, where pain mingles with uncertainty, fear, anxiety, creativity, and new possibilities. The new mestiza lives there. The shadow beast is her strong will, unfreezing her so she can take a stance, so she can change. The new mestiza is the shadow that walks hand in hand with the words of these pages, leading us away from tidy, unified selves. It is good company.

-Mariana Ortega

In writing this dissertation, I had to digress. I was exploring the phenomenon of undocumented students navigating various worlds. I *had* to digress. As a Latina and an immigrant- *una extranjera*, I struggled and became fearful of not having the right words to write my dissertation. I realized that I too was becoming paralyzed, stopping, and doubting. As other Latina scholars have emphasized, I too felt limited by traditional academic approaches that moved toward comparison, tend to simplify, aggregate and

reduce experience to variables (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). At the time when I struggled to write, I found inspiration from words of other Latina scholars. Ortega (2016) described the writing of women of color as not being constrained by disciplinary borders.

In connecting to the phenomenon, the *testimonios* of undocumented Latina students offers a space for critical reflection, healing, and transformation. Their *testimonios* describe how they make meaning of their experiences navigating higher education and the current political climate in the United States. More importantly, this critical Latina phenomenology illustrates the identities of undocumented Latina students navigating different worlds. Gloria Anzaldua (1987) describes these experiences as being in borderlands. Anzaldua describes a borderland as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (pg.3). It is in the borderlands that we create a new consciousness and it is through *testimonios* that we can speak to and write about life on the borders.

Anzaldua described that in borderlands; the self can also occupy another space, a liminal space of *nepantla*, or in-betweenness. In paraphrasing Ortega (2016), *nepantla* represents actual borderlands, a theoretical space allowing a new consciousness where we can “question, mediate, translate, negotiate, and navigate these different locations and thus be able to form a critical stance” (pg. 27). It is in *nepantla* that I discover the possibility of transformation, resistance, and hope through the *testimonios* of undocumented Latina students navigating higher education and the current political

climate. The *testimonios* of undocumented students provide a powerful and transformative form of narrative (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001) and a basis for theorizing.

In the following section I provide a description of what I refer to as *Nepantlera* consciousness that is characterized by the lived experiences of undocumented Latina students by weaving together two main themes of *trenzas*: **identidades políticas** and **de comunidad**. Anzaldua defines *nepantleras* as found in Ortega (2016) as “boundary-crossers, thresholders who initiate others in rites of passage, *activistas* who, from a listening, receptive, spiritual stance, rise to their own visions and shift into acting them out, *haciendo mundo nuevo* (introducing change)” (pg. 19). The *testimonios* of Latina undocumented students illustrates this new consciousness through the following concepts:

Trenzas de identidades políticas

This concept describes the socio-political consciousness of the Latina undocumented students in this study. The students in this study became aware of how an unwelcoming environment characterized by anti-immigrant rhetoric and dehumanizing immigration policies impacted their educational experiences in the United States. In telling their stories, these women became *nepantleras*, creating spaces for healing and transformation and a new vision of empowerment and hope. This concept is described through their *testimonios* and weaving together the *trenzas* of **in the shadows**, **transitioning**, and **political trauma**. Their *testimonios* were sites of knowledge

production and consciousness raising to fight against oppression and challenge anti-immigrant legislation and policies.

Trenzas de comunidad

This concept encompasses *cariño conscientizado*, a critical authentic care that is essential in creating nurturing additive educational spaces (Delgado Bernal & Aleman, 2017). The *testimonios* of the students in this study can be used as pedagogical strategies that examine the ways in which race, class, and immigration status influence teaching and learning in the current political climate. In addition, this concept illustrates undocumented students as creators of knowledge. The students produced knowledge of their educational experiences in higher education, as well as their challenges and aspirations as undocumented Latina students. They realized that although their degrees might not mean anything, they have gained knowledge that empowered them to enact change and create hope. *Trenzas de comunidad* includes weaving together the *trenzas* of **resiliency, building community, and critical consciousnesses**, which illustrate immigrant communities' aspirational, familial, linguistic, social, navigational, and resistant capital.

Trenzas de identidades politicas and *trenzas de comunidad* describes a critical Latina feminist phenomenology, where undocumented Latina students through their *testimonios* reveal a powerful transformation. The students in this study made meaning of their experiences and became empowered to create social and disruptive spaces as a

means to bring about social change and raise consciousness. Through their *testimonios* they created spaces for healing, critical reflection and transformation. *Testimonios* also allowed me to theorize their experiences and engage in critical reflection as a doctoral student who is also Latina and an immigrant as part of a collective consciousness of positive transformation in educational contexts through the lens of Latina Feminist phenomenology as means of resisting traditional paradigms that often silences the experiences and knowledge of Latinas (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

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