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Critical Junctures along the Chicanx/Latinx Educational Pipeline: Interdisciplinary and Intersectional

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## **Editors' Message**

We are pleased to bring you this special issue on the Chicax/Latinx educational pipeline, guest edited by Drs. Pedro E. Nava and Ramón A. Martínez. Though the guest editors faced some production challenges along the way, this collection of articles is highly anticipated as it extends and critiques our understanding of the more “traditional” trajectory of Chicax/Latinx students. Several contributors to the issue examine the pathways of mother-scholar, undocumented/queer, and military students, respectively, while other contributors showcase the structural and interpersonal supports needed to promote equitable educational experiences and outcomes for Chicax and Latinx students. In addition, the closing piece highlights the pedagogical and mentoring approach of one of our own Journal’s associate editors: Julie López Figueroa offers important insights on the intentionality required to be an excellent mentor and teacher in higher ed. Another theme that persists throughout this important collection is the agency/resistance that many Chicax/Latinx students possess and use to persevere when faced with a systematic lack of structural support. Readers will welcome the new perspectives they gain after “seeing” the diversity and heterogeneity of Chicax and Latinx educational experiences, made possible by the wonderful authors assembled in this special issue.

Gracias to all for their hard work and persistence in bringing this collection of writing to light!

Juntos logramos más,  
Patricia Sánchez, Co-Editor  
Antonio Camacho, Co-Editor

## **Critical Junctures along the Chicana/Latina Educational Pipeline: Interdisciplinary and Intersectional Perspectives**

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The *pipeline* metaphor has long been a useful tool for elucidating the educational experiences of Chicana/Latina students in US schools (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). While there is certainly no single pathway or monolithic set of educational experiences that characterizes schooling for Latina students (Solórzano & Yosso 2000; Yosso 2006; Covarrubias 2011; Covarrubias & Lara 2014), we maintain that the Chicana/Latina educational pipeline remains a powerful metaphor for highlighting critical concerns related to the experiences of Chicana and Latina students in kindergarten through higher education settings. The pipeline metaphor focuses our attention on metrics and outcomes related to equity, compels us to examine human experiences and institutional settings across the lifespan, and allows us to identify particular points in the trajectory where Chicana and Latina students are effectively *pushed out* of schools. Moreover, as the empirical and theoretical literature on the Chicana/Latina educational pipeline has evolved over the past two decades, various intersectional perspectives (e.g., related to gender, sexuality, national origin, social class, citizenship status) have further enriched our understanding of the diversity and heterogeneity of experiences among Chicana and Latina students (Aleman, Bahena, & Aleman, 2022a, 2022b; Covarrubias 2011; Covarrubias & Lara 2014; Covarrubias, Lara, Nava, Burciaga, Velez, & Solórzano 2018; Covarrubias, Lara, Nava, Burciaga, & Solórzano 2019; Perez-Huber, Malagon, Ramirez, Gonzalez, Jimenez, Velez, 2015). In this spirit, we argue that re-visiting the pipeline metaphor at this particular historical moment can help us to better apprehend some of the overlapping forms of vulnerability that play out in the lives of Chicana and Latina students at various critical junctures along their educational trajectories.

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In this special issue, we seek to highlight a few *critical junctures* along the Chicana/Latina educational pipeline that help illustrate some of the intersectional vulnerabilities that characterize the experiences of Chicana and Latina students in US schools. To begin with, we focus on *high school* as a particularly consequential juncture in the educational trajectories of Chicana and Latina students. Especially for those Chicana and Latina students who have been marginalized in various ways throughout their elementary and/or middle school experiences, high school is often the point in the pipeline where many of these students end up getting pushed out of school. Arguably, this particular point in the trajectory also represents a critical opportunity for repair and healing in the wake of previous experiences of vulnerability and marginalization. We seek to shed light on two hopeful examples—two critical interventions that emerged at the high school level. In sharing these portraits of possibility, we ponder what might happen if more Chicana and Latina youth had experiences such as these, both in and out of schools? Next, we focus on *higher education* as a critical juncture along the Chicana/Latina educational pipeline. Beginning with the premise that not all Chicana and Latina students experience higher education spaces in the same ways, we focus on the understudied experiences of Mexican-American military veterans (who represent a non-traditional pathway into higher education) and on the unique experiences of Chicana/e and Latina/e mothers who are simultaneously graduate students in the academy.

Finally, we zoom out to look *across the lifespan* of one Mexican student who has resisted various intersectional forms of marginalization and successfully navigated multiple critical junctures along the educational pipeline as he has forged his own transnational educational pathway from high school to higher education. In highlighting these distinct junctures along the Chicana/Latina educational pipeline, we deliberately seek to invoke and draw on interdisciplinary methods and intersectional perspectives by showcasing how different scholars use different sets of tools for asking different sorts of questions about the pipeline and different theoretical lenses for exploring the diverse experiences of groups that are positioned differently at these key junctures across the pipeline. In the next portion of this introduction, we lay out more detailed descriptions of each piece in this special issue.

In her article, “The Moral Ethic of *Cariño*: A Culturally Competent Approach to Working with Immigrant-Origin Students,” Karla Lomelí reports on an ethnographic case study of Ms. Grace, a veteran high school English teacher in Silicon Valley who worked effectively

with immigrant-origin Latine youth. Describing how this teacher's perspectives on her Latine students led her to systematically develop culturally competent teaching practices, Lomelí argues that Ms. Grace enacted and embodied a pedagogy that reflected what she calls a "moral ethic of *cariño*." By showcasing how Ms. Grace accounted for, sought to understand, and actively drew on her Latine students' everyday lived experiences, Lomelí provides a portrait of the kinds of teaching that are arguably necessary to support immigrant-origin Latine youth. This article serves as a powerful example of how a non-Latine teacher was able to cultivate and embody effective and culturally competent teaching. Crucially, the approach to pedagogy on display in this article is, unfortunately, not in place for many Latine high school students at this critical juncture in the educational pipeline. As we seek to understand why and how Latine students get pushed out of school at this critical juncture in the educational pipeline, Lomelí points us towards promising possibilities for promoting Latine student success.

Drawing from Solorzano and Bernal's (2001) transformative resistance theoretical framework, Johnny Carlos Ramirez's article, "From Safe Spaces to Sacred Spaces: Chicana/Latina After-School Youth Development and Transformational Resistance," is an ethnographic exploration of youth participants in the Black Panther Mentoring Program (BPMP). BPMP is an out of school youth development program, supporting "at-promise youth" participants in nurturing, mentoring relationships and raising youth's critical consciousness, resulting in the creation of a powerful community counter space. The article explores the experiences of three active participants in BPMP, who demonstrate the diverse ways the program became a safe space, helping them to resist social and academic marginalization experienced in schools and the broader society. Ramirez chronicles how BPMP became a space that helped youth affirm one another at a critical juncture in the educational pipeline. This, in turn, helped expose students to curricular content and experiences in BPMP that ran counter to the harmful traditional curricular content they learned in school. By centering their marginalized identities, BPMP youth felt cared for and supported, displaying a degree of interconnectedness. Ramirez ends by calling for the importance of establishing relationships of trust with "at-promise youth" in school and out-of-school spaces where they can come to see themselves as sacred.

The third article explores the unique experiences of military veterans re-entering the educational pipeline after completing their enlistment. In "Mexican American Student Veterans:

From Military Service to Higher Education,” veteran Alfredo Gonzalez utilizes a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the extent to which military service equips Mexican Americans to pursue and complete their bachelor's degree. As we know, disproportionate numbers of working-class Mexican American youth will take this path due to active recruitment and financial stressors, despite active organizing campaigns against militarization in schools over the last two decades (Galaviz, Palafox, Meiners, Quinn, 2011; Mariscal, 2005; Zavala, 2018). Examining this understudied pathway of the educational pipeline, Gonzalez used census data to create a first-of-its-kind Mexican American veterans' educational pipeline. His interviews with Mexican American veterans revealed that they experienced racism and lacked institutional support navigating higher education, but eventually found veteran advocates who provided concrete forms of support and shared key navigational strategies. The article concludes with important recommendations for the expansion of Veteran Resource Centers as conduits to guide and support veterans as they transition to colleges and universities.

The fourth article, by Christine Vega, examines the graduate school experiences of Chicana Motherscholars in doctoral degree programs. In “Motherscholars Traversing the Educational Pipeline through Moments of Sacred Pause,” Vega introduces the concept of *sacred pause* as a form of resistance to academia's hostility and hyperproductivity. These sacred pauses—moments of joy, gratitude, and love—are disruptions and opportunities for these motherscholars to acknowledge their wholeness as parents, their children, and their “mommy wins” against the backdrop of academia that fails to see them as whole beings. Drawing from *pláticas* with three Chicana/e and Latina/e Motherscholars, Vega reveals the specific ways these mothers traversed the educational pipeline, providing for themselves and their children. One example of a sacred pause came from an academic advisor leaving a meal behind in the lunchroom for one of the mothers and her three children, as it affirmed her identity as a motherscholar and helped make the invisible visible. Other examples of sacred pauses that evoked feelings of joy, gratitude, and love included Motherscholars serving as joyful bridge-makers for students from marginalized communities and on the verge of dismissal from the university. Vega concludes with a reflection on the Motherscholars' journey across the educational pipeline in an effort to honor the small moments of joy, gratitude, and love that can fundamentally transform educational and life trajectories.



The fifth article, “An Undocumented Student’s Quest for Acceptance: A Testimonio Analysis Traversing the Chicana Educational Pipeline,” by Argelia Lara, explores in depth the *testimonio* of Joaquin—a gay, unaccompanied, and undocumented Mexican (im)migrant, showcasing his transnational experiences navigating the educational pipeline. Using a Critical Race Quantitative Intersections + *Testimonio* (Covarrubias et al. 2018) framework, Lara traces Joaquin's exodus from a small town in Michoacán, Mexico, as he headed north to escape the physical violence directed at him because of his sexuality. Arriving in US schools, Lara utilizes Joaquin’s *testimonio* as a guiding light to illuminate different structural impediments he encounters at each critical juncture of the educational pipeline. Building on her prior work with Alejandro Covarrubias (2014) on the undocumented educational pipeline, Lara experientially grounds Joaquin’s *testimonio* to reveal the level of structural vulnerability he experienced and why educational outcomes for Chicana undocumented populations are lower than for US-born and foreign-born naturalized Chicana populations. Lara proposes important considerations for educational leaders doing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work at a time when communities of color, particularly immigrants, are facing a backlash in a post-Obama era.

Next, we share an interview that Pedro conducted with Julie Lopez Figueroa, an ethnic studies and higher education scholar who has devoted her career to creating a greater understanding of access and equity issues as they pertain to marginalized populations, especially Chicana and Latina communities. The interview covers Lopez Figueroa’s trajectory across the educational pipeline. It explores how this trajectory informs her pedagogical and mentoring approach towards working-class and immigrant Chicana and Latina students and communities. Lopez Figueroa offers important insights on the intentionality required to be an excellent mentor and teacher, especially for students from backgrounds that higher education institutions were not originally designed to serve.

Finally, Emily Ramos and Pedro E. Nava provide a review of book, *The Chicana/o/x Dream: Hope, Resistance and Educational Success*, in which Conchas and Acevedo (2020) explore the testimonios of Chicana students who resist the role coloniality plays in creating a marginalizing context across the educational pipeline. The authors introduce the Framework of *Atravesada/o/xs* *Nepantleando* (FAN), which they use to examine students’ intersecting identities and uncover structural inequities, while critiquing institutional processes of marginalization. Conchas and Acevedo provide a set of concrete practices and frameworks for

preK-12 and higher education practitioners to enact and provide students with institutional support.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue speak directly to the kinds of support that are necessary to promote educational justice for Chicax and Latinx students in US schools. Whether by highlighting their presence or their absence in particular contexts, these contributions bring into focus the kinds of structural and interpersonal supports that need to be in place in order to promote more equitable educational experiences and outcomes for Chicax and Latinx communities. These contributions also showcase the various ways in which Chicax and Latinx students assert their agency and engage in active forms of resistance to get ahead—and stay ahead—despite the systematic lack of structural support.

Each of the articles in this special issue represents a unique and critical juncture—and related enactment(s) of resistance—along the Chicax/Latinx educational pipeline. Ms. Grace is actively resisting normative approaches to teaching (e.g., low expectations, deficit frames, assimilationism) by embodying an ethic of *cariño*. BPMP students are developing critical consciousness and a stance of resistance by asserting resistant identities. Veterans are resisting and persisting as they navigate obstacles without structural supports to reintegrate themselves into the educational pipeline. Motherscholars are resisting neoliberal and patriarchal cultures and systems by creating and holding space for themselves and their families. Joaquin, an unaccompanied and undocumented immigrant, is resisting by asserting his *testimonio* of self-affirmation as a queer Mexican who has repeatedly resisted and persisted across multiple critical junctures. Finally, the interview with Julie Lopez Figueroa and the book review of Conchas and Acevedo's *The Chicana/o/x Dream* offer a broader view of the pipeline that helps situate and contextualize the preceding articles by showcasing powerful and hopeful examples of counterstorytelling across the Chicax/Latinx educational pipeline. It is our hope that the insights reflected throughout this special issue can contribute to broadening and deepening our understandings of the diversity and heterogeneity of Chicax and Latinx educational experiences, including intersectional vulnerabilities and ongoing forms of radical and hopeful resistance.

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**The Moral Ethic of Cariño: A Culturally Competent Approach to Working  
with Immigrant-Origin Students**

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**Abstract**

This study provides a portrait of Ms. Grace, a veteran English teacher at a high school in Silicon Valley. I examine how Ms. Grace's perspectives on her immigrant-origin Latine students informed her teaching, highlighting the perspectives and practices that guided her pedagogy. Analysis of the data demonstrates the cyclical nature of how this teacher's perspectives on her students led her to embody a cultural competence that demonstrated a *moral ethic of cariño*. Through Ethnographic Case Study methodology, this study highlights the importance of cultivating cultural competencies in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth, and the ways in which teachers enact and embody such competencies. I highlight how a *moral ethic of cariño*<sup>1</sup> emerges in both the teaching practices and in the perspectives toward her immigrant-origin students, demonstrating the critical role that teachers play in providing a more inclusive learning space for the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth.

**Keywords:** *culturally competent teaching, cariño, immigrant-origin students, inclusive literacy, critical literacy*

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<sup>1</sup> "Cariño," a term of endearment, can be translated as love, sensitivity, gentleness, affection. It is well recognized among Latine communities, and was an intentional choice by the author, a native Spanish speaker, as it transcends the notion of care in the English language. In this theoretical framing, Cariño is embodied as a practice in one's approach to teaching.

Petite and soft-spoken, Ms. Grace had an almost magical command of her classroom. Her immigrant-origin Latine students were eager to learn and attentive to her instructions. She understood their challenges and treated their lived experiences as assets in learning how to read and write in an additional language, in this case, English. From my observations, she nurtured students' talents and, as a result, created a mutually respectful relationship where her students valued what she had to say. Ms. Grace, in turn, was deeply interested in her students and viewed their struggles in a particular light. She noted, "*I feel like no matter what they've gone through, there's hope and that's something that you have to continue to tap into. You have to find that hope and you have to just help it grow.*" In this reflection, she illustrates the importance of teacher perspectives in shaping the cultural competencies needed to effectively teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. In this study, I ask the following question: How do teacher perspectives shape culturally competent pedagogical practices?

When teachers develop perspectives about students' cultural ways of being and language and literacy practices (whether from a deficit- or asset-based orientation), these perspectives inform teachers' cultural and pedagogical competencies in ways that make them either more or less responsive to the learning needs of immigrant-origin Latine youth (Lomelí, 2020). Culturally competent teachers enact inclusive instructional practices that treat immigrant-origin Latine youth as critical and capable readers, writers, and scholars with important ideas that contribute to learning. In this study, I define cultural competence as the amount of careful attention that the teacher pays to her immigrant-origin students' lived experiences and the degree to which this knowledge informs her teaching practices (Lomelí, 2023).

The idea that educators bear the ultimate responsibility for creating the conditions under which students thrive and succeed in the classroom has a long lineage stretching back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Dewey, 1904, 1916, 1986). Thus, the adults around children have the responsibility to create the conditions for students to cultivate and nurture their intellectual abilities (Hidalgo & Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Valdés, 2001, 2004). Central to those conditions is how educators perceive their students. Historically, educators in the United States viewed marginalized communities through a deficit lens, using notions like ‘verbal deprivation’ (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966) and a ‘culture of poverty’ (Lewis, 1959) to explain why these students often struggled academically. Recently, educational scholars such as Rosa and Flores (2017) have critically interrogated the assumptions of traditional deficit views regarding linguistic facility and the relationship between low educational achievements. Latine scholars have long been interrogating critical societal factors that impede the learning outcomes of Latine students, and they have been calling for more equitable practices in school contexts (Moll et al., 1992; Trueba, 1998; Gutierrez, 2008; Valdes, 1997a, 2001, 2004). This stance is particularly important as it relates to immigrant-origin Latine students. Too often, such students are seen as “the problem” because they are acquiring English as an additional language (Orellana & Gutiérrez, 2006). Rosa and Flores (2017) note that discriminatory systems and structures have been present long before the existence of immigrant-origin pupils in schools and are central to the educational inequalities that marginalized people experience. In other words, immigrant-origin students are not “what needs to be fixed” in schools, nor are they “the problem”—instead the cultural competence of educators is what needs to be addressed.

These cultural competencies are enacted in pedagogical practices that are shaped by, in part, by teacher's perspectives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). A critical

approach to cultural competencies specifically refers to how teachers structure learning opportunities in the classroom for a more democratic project of schooling in which immigrant-origin Latine students can fully embody their multiculturalism and multilingualism (Watson et al., 2016). The culturally competent teacher actively seeks out ways to learn more about the student, their community and their lived experiences, and incorporates this valuable knowledge into the curriculum, so students will be able to see themselves in and engage meaningfully with curricular content (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). Such understanding is then reflected in the teacher's pedagogical practices. In short, teachers are better positioned to serve immigrant-origin Latine students when they perceive them through an equity-driven lens, have developed cultural competence regarding their students' lived experiences in relation to the immigrant narrative, and leverage those assets and experiences within the context of schooling.

If we recognize the important role teacher perspectives play in shaping culturally competent practices, it then becomes increasingly important to better understand how the cultural competence of teachers is influenced by how they approach their students and how that then informs teaching practices. This is especially important in cases where students have diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. However, our understanding of how best to support immigrant-origin Latine students in meaningfully engaging them in our classrooms is limited because little research has closely examined how teacher perspectives inform cultural competence and the resulting impact it might have on such students. This study aims to address this gap by using qualitative analysis and ethnographic case study to examine the cultural competencies of one exemplary teacher committed to working with immigrant-origin students in her English Language Arts (ELA) classes. I examined Ms. Grace's perspectives on her

immigrant-origin Latine students to better understand how such perspectives informed culturally competent teaching approaches.

### **Cultural Competence in the Teaching of Immigrant-Origin Students**

Fields outside of Education, such as counseling psychology and social work, have developed *cultural competence* frameworks to assist professionals in the caring professions in providing a more inclusive experience to their patients (Sue, 2001), yet very little work has been done around advancing cultural competence frameworks that support teachers in teaching immigrant-origin students. Though scholars concerned with multicultural education and cultural diversity in schools have urged us for decades to embrace culturally-relevant, culturally sustaining, and culturally responsive pedagogies in the authentic inclusion of culturally diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995b, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017; Gay, 2002; Muhammad, 2020), very little work has explored how cultural competence might inform inclusive teaching perspectives to create pathways that seek to leverage the literacy skills that immigrant-origin Latine youth bring with them from their native language and rich cultural experiences.

The need for a cultural competence framework in the literacy teaching and learning of immigrant-origin Latine students stems from the fact that their experiences often differ significantly and in substantive ways from other students. As is the case for many transnational students, immigrant-origin students often have to navigate dual cultures and languages and negotiate their identities between nations. The inequalities they face manifest against a backdrop of wider disparities that pose challenges in their educational journeys (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). Among these are newcomer status (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008), language barriers (Valdés, 2004), and undocumented status of self



and/or caregiver (Yoshikawa, Kholoptseva, & Suárez-Orozco, 2013). These challenges expose immigrant-origin youth to particular vulnerabilities in schooling systems that require a deeper understanding of the obstacles they face. Bolstering their cultural competencies would help teachers to better respond to and include the experiences of such students in their teaching practices.

### **A Theoretical Framework for The Moral Ethic of Cariño**

Informed by the literature cited above, I propose a *moral ethic of cariño* as an additional theoretical framing of cultural competence in the praxis of teaching immigrant-origin students. Much work has been done around the conceptualization of the ethic of care in Education (Noddings & Shore, 1984; Noddings, 2012, 2013). In fact, many Latine scholars have long pursued a scholarly interest in the notion of cariño in the context of humanizing the learning experiences of Latine children and adolescents in schools (Valdés, 1996; Nieto, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999; Rólon-Dow, 2005; Bartolomé, 1994a, 1994b; Curry, 2021). These scholars have conceptualized cariño as a form of relational practice oriented towards humanizing the personhood of Latine students in schools. More recent scholarship has extended the concept of cariño to teacher perspectives and practices in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth, moving the field to consider how teachers' perspectives might be embodied in pedagogical practices (Lomelí, 2020; 2023). For immigrant-origin Latine students, the *moral ethic of cariño* marks the difference between what teachers think about their students and how they intellectually approach them in the curriculum. This includes, but is not limited to, the authentic inclusion of their multilingual and multicultural identities. Particularly, the *moral ethic of cariño* is distinct in that it moves beyond relational practices of teacher-student interactions and is

concerned with the classroom practices that teachers enact in order to bolster the learning of immigrant-origin Latine youth.

A *moral ethic of cariño* does not focus exclusively on care and love, but rather urges educators to critically examine the perspectives that we embody and the practices that we enact in the classroom as we claim commitment to an equitable education for immigrant-origin Latine youth. Hence, a *moral ethic of cariño* (Lomelí, 2020; 2023) moves beyond the realization that adolescents of immigrant-origin need a humanizing learning environment and towards examining the practices and perspectives by which such an environment is created (or not). Ultimately, the goal of a *moral ethic of cariño* is to build on the work of previous scholars in order to expand our understanding of the kinds of practices that enact social justice commitments in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine youth (Valdés, 1996; Nieto, 1992; Noddings, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999; Rólon-Dow, 2005; Bartolomé, 2008; Curry, 2021). This framework offers an expansive approach to critical pedagogies (Freire, 1998) in the teaching of immigrant-origin Latine students (Lomelí, 2020; 2023).

### Methodology

The data presented in this article were collected as part of a larger ethnographic study at Dreamers High<sup>2</sup> focused on teachers who were deemed by their community to be “effective” teachers of immigrant-origin Latine students. This paper highlights the ethnographic/case study of one of those teachers, Ms. Grace. In the following section, I describe the setting, introduce the research question that guided my inquiry, describe the focal participant of this study, and outline the methods I employed to collect and analyze the data.

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<sup>2</sup> Names of all institutions and persons are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

## **Setting**

*Dreamers High* is a public high school in one of the largest school districts in the South Bay Area of Northern California. It was intentionally chosen for its schoolwide focus on the improvement of equitable conditions for learning, its explicit mission to help historically marginalized student populations, and the school's existing structures that support a college-going culture in a community where economic resources are scarce. Annually, the school enrolls approximately 1400-1500 students and serves a diverse student body: 78% of the students are Latine, 10% Filipinx, 7% Asian, 2% Pacific Islander, 2% African American, and 1 % White. The vast majority of the students (80%) come from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds and live in households where the average income is less than \$42,000 per year (by contrast, the median household income in the surrounding area is \$117,474 per year).

In this study, I ask the following question: How do teacher perspectives shape culturally competent pedagogical practices?

## **Focal Participant: Ms. Grace**

At the time the data were collected for this study, Ms. Grace had been teaching for nineteen years. What is distinctive about Ms. Grace is that she teaches three sections of English in quite varied content areas: both college-level courses—Advanced Placement Language Arts and Advanced Placement Literature for 12<sup>th</sup> graders—and English as Additional Language (EAL) Level Two for recently arrived immigrant-origin students (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders). Ms. Grace was not only responsible for running the Advanced Placement Program at her school, but simultaneously worked with the district's English Language Development coordinator to create an engaging curriculum for newly arrived students.

Ms. Grace, who self-identifies as Filipina, was raised in the community in which she teaches, and she herself had a mixed educational experience while in the district's schools. Crucially, the struggles she experienced in this district motivated her to come back to her community as a high school English teacher. As a first-generation, woman of color, Ms. Grace poignantly recalled her personal challenges in the public school system that at the time viewed her through a deficit lens:

I thought the counselors at my high school had kind of typecasted me as someone who was not really going anywhere. They just put me in whatever classes. I remember not being talked to about where I wanted to go to college, so I ended up going to community college for quite a while.

Ms. Grace eventually transferred out of community college and into a highly selective university in the Bay Area, where she double-majored in English Literature and Native American Studies. She then pursued law school in Chicago, passed the bar exam, and earned a license to practice in the state of Illinois. Ms. Grace worked as a solo practitioner for a few years before deciding to transition to a teaching career.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data sources of this study include interviews with Ms. Grace focused on her perspectives and pedagogical practices. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 90 minutes. I visited the school weekly for 32 weeks and was in Ms. Grace's classroom for a total of 18-visits of 90 minutes per class, taking fieldnotes during each visit. The classroom visits (32) and interviews (12) were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Teacher interview transcripts and classroom audio recording transcript visits were open coded (Saldaña, 2009). Secondary data

sources included informal interview transcripts (10) with students and Ms. Grace during and after classroom visits, as well as conceptual memos (30).

### **Data Analysis**

Primary data sources for this study included interviews with Ms. Grace, audio recordings of classroom observations, conceptual memos, and field notes. I often relied heavily on Ms. Grace's words, including numerous—and often lengthy—quotes from interview transcripts. I further included her voice as a participant by beginning my analysis process with NVivo coding (Saldaña, 2009), a method that uses the participants' own words as codes. I engaged in this work with an inductive approach (Creswell, 2013). Coding was open, axial, and selective (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), and followed thematic patterning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Seidman, 2006). Rather than looking for a list of identified “best practices” or a matrix of critical pedagogies, I actively searched for data that demonstrated Ms. Grace's cultural competencies and sought critical orientations to teaching immigrant-origin Latine youth. Across all data sources, I was looking for instances in which the teacher was enacting cultural competencies that affirmed and dignified her immigrant-origin students' lived experiences. Secondary data sources included informal interviews with students and Ms. Grace during and after classroom visits. To triangulate data, I actively sought to put interview data in conversation with my field notes and audio recordings. This process unfolded iteratively over time as I revisited the data for evidence to support and revise my emergent conclusions.

### **Findings: Culturally Competent Approaches to Teaching**

Analysis of the data revealed that Ms. Grace enacted cultural competencies that informed her inclusive teaching approaches with her immigrant-origin Latine students. Ms. Grace revealed herself to be a close study of her students' lived experiences, and she assigned

great value to what she learned about them. In the section below, I present interview data that demonstrates how Ms. Grace enacted teaching approaches that privileged her immigrant-origin students' lived experiences, hence embodying culturally competent approaches to teaching.

To begin with, Ms. Grace demonstrated a deep understanding of where her students were coming from and what they were experiencing outside her classroom walls. When describing her students, she did so from an informed stance that recognized the complexity of her students lived experiences:

Sometimes they're coming from homes where the financial burden is so great that the things on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the stuff at the base takes precedence. Every caregiver, every student, they just want the best life for themselves, and part of high school is discovering what that is. I've learned that some of my students are living with two other families, some are not living with their parents and are under the care of extended family members. Some of these things are things they have no control over as newcomers. However, that doesn't mean that they shouldn't have some control over those things that they can control... They want agency. They want to be in charge of their destiny, and they should be. In my class, I want them to have agency over their learning and that means they are the experts in the way that they make connections to the content learned in class.

Her response here reveals an ongoing generative approach to understanding her students' realities. I use the term generative to refer to Ms. Grace's ability to enhance her understanding by connecting what she learns about her immigrant-origin students to her professional knowledge in order to inform her practice as she designs her teaching approaches (Ball, 2009). According to Franke, Carpenter, Levi, and Fenneman (2001), "knowledge becomes generative

when the learner (in this case the teacher) sees the need to integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge and continually reconsiders existing knowledge in light of the new knowledge they are learning” (pp.655-656). In her response above, Ms. Grace not only demonstrates an understanding of the lived conditions that her students endure, but also demonstrates a culturally competent approach regarding how such material conditions might influence her students’ hope for agency. Ms. Grace’s ability to understand her students’ lived conditions leads her to add to her professional knowledge on how to approach them by inspiring hope in them through their human right to agency. Ms. Grace makes an attentive choice to focus on responding to the impact of her students’ material conditions and generates learning opportunities in her classroom in which her students might feel agency in their own learning.

Teachers play a critical role in the ways that they draw and build on their students’ lived experiences to create an inclusive and respectful learning environment. For Ms. Grace, this was made evident in the dignifying approaches that she demonstrated with her AP literature students, as well as with her newcomers in her English as an Added Language class. As a teacher, Ms. Grace was keenly aware of the kinds of obstacles and challenges that her immigrant-origin students (across all of her classes) were facing outside her classroom walls. In sharing about one of her AP students, she recalls:

I have a student in my AP lit class who just went through his father being deported. They managed to, I dunno, he said get him back, I don't know what that means, and I don't ask... Can you imagine the incredible amount of stress that child has been under? And so, I can't afford to solely care to prepping him for his AP exam. It doesn't work that way.

Ms. Grace's conscious choice to refrain from probing about what the students meant, by 'get him back' demonstrates a generative understanding of her immigrant-origin student's experience and the impact that such experience has on his learning. In her brilliant ethnographic research, Mangual Figueroa (2017) highlights the ways in which undocumented students make decisions about what and when to share or withhold about their migratory status during conversations with peers and teachers. In the ongoing crisis of restrictive immigration policies and enforcement of such policies in school settings, immigrant-origin students – both documented and undocumented immigrant students born outside of the United States and or U.S. born children of immigrants—demonstrate heightened fear and distress of parent deportation and family separation (Turner & Mangual Figueroa, 2019).

For Ms. Grace's students, such fears were palpable to her, and she was attentive to them. 'They managed to, I dunno, he said get him back, I don't know what that means, and I don't ask...' Here Ms. Grace demonstrates cultural competence in the sense that she understands the distress that her students might be facing, and such understanding leads her to halt her questioning, reflecting her respect for the student's choice to privacy. Furthermore, Ms. Grace moves beyond the basic understanding of the importance of academics and is critically aware of the importance of seeing the whole child, as she is critically aware of the stressors that might be impacting her student. In her reflection above, Ms. Grace pauses to not just consider the learner in her student, but also the whole person, 'Can you imagine the incredible amount of stress that child has been under?' In seeing the whole child, Ms. Grace transgresses her teaching practice to an attentive inclusion of the intellectual and the emotional dimensions that are both simultaneously important in learning. 'And so, I can't afford to solely care to prepping him for his AP exam. It doesn't work that way.' Her response to this student's situation indicates that Ms. Grace



has a deep regard for her student, as she respected his privacy and made a conscious choice not to probe deeper about getting his father “back,” demonstrating an understanding of how not to heighten the constant stress and fear related to deportation that looms over many immigrant families.

In her teaching approaches, Ms. Grace demonstrated a deep understanding of where her students were coming from and what they were experiencing outside her classroom walls. When describing her teaching practices with her newcomers, Ms. Grace voiced the urgent need she feels to get kids to take a stance about the texts that they are reading in class. And this was reflected in the ways she spoke about her students. She shares:

*For me, it is important that students are able to promote their ideas about what they read in class. All of my students!... They need to be able to make connections to the text, create questions and talk about those questions and lead others to think deeply about the ideas that they are engaging with.... They are acquiring a second language, coming from another country to a new one, so their perspective on what they read has a unique lens. I'm interested to hear about their ideas. I want them to talk about those ideas, to craft questions from the text themselves in multiple languages. Help them get started on making their own connections to the text and teach them that their own interpretations and text connections are insightful and valid.*

When Ms. Grace thinks of bolstering her students' literacy skills, she frames their interpretations of the text as unique and valid, leveling the playing field by positioning her students' immigrant-origin experiences as valuable contributions and connections to the texts, regardless of the language in which they decide to make those text connections. This, in turn, demonstrates her belief in her students as competent readers, thinkers, and writers. When she

notes, 'I want them to talk about those ideas, to craft questions from the text themselves in multiple language,' Ms. Grace underscores her students' ability to draw on their lived experiences and make connections in a cross-linguistic format in which her students' multiple languages are framed as potential resources. She does not see this as a deficit, but rather as a strength that helps her students communicate their connections by drawing on the full range of their linguistic repertoires. Such an approach to teaching demonstrates yet another aspect of her cultural competency, as she signals her understanding that her immigrant-students are multilingual learners and might draw from their experiences in multiple languages. In addition, Ms. Grace displays a conscious choice to defy bureaucratic language levels that deem her immigrant-origin students as proficient or not in the additional language. Instead, she demonstrates greater interest in their lived experiences and their ability to read a text and draw on their personal connections and cross-linguistic use of their languages in the process of meaning-making, hence displaying the cultural competence she has acquired over time in becoming a respectful listener of her students' experiences and communicative practices.

This cultural competence was further made evident in her fourth-period English as an Added Language (EAL) class, in which she taught newcomers. Her newcomer students were expected to lead a class presentation in English as best they could, blending informational text structures with relevant research topics, such as important features of their country of origin. This project relied heavily on reading and writing in English, the open use of Google Translate, researching on the internet, and visiting the school library to check out books about the country that they originated from. Students were asked to conduct research about a valuable commodity produced in their countries of origin, geographical features, historical snapshots, and interesting features of their native homeland. Students were expected to work in groups to

make sense of their readings, peer revise their writing, and troubleshoot any issues with Google Documents and PowerPoint. Ms. Grace had clear and intentional goals for her students that surpassed mere language acquisition and encompassed learning skills that her newcomers would benefit from in other classrooms. As she explained,

When they go to another classroom, there may still be a language barrier, but at least the tools that a teacher may ask them to use, whether it's Google Docs or research, they will be familiar with the process. And they'll have some familiarity with research and presentations. And I think that's important!

The relevant content of the assignment (features of the students' home country) to students who had undergone the life-altering experience of migrating to the United States as adolescents provided them with familiar content in an unfamiliar language. Some of the students in this particular class had left their countries unaccompanied and arrived in the United States to reunite with their family members. Others had left their immediate family and were reuniting with extended family members. Regardless of the specific details of their individual journeys, they were all acquiring a new language, grieving the loss of what they had left behind in their native countries, and finding new ways of being in a new country. By selecting this very relevant topic as an area of classroom inquiry, Ms. Grace actively sought out ways to create a learning environment in which her immigrant-origin students' experiences were relevant and important to their long-term ability to become learners in a mainstream classroom. In the process, her newcomer students familiarized themselves with Google Classroom, a learning platform that the school relied on heavily.

As students prepared for their research projects during one of my visits, a group of three boys from three different countries in Central America collaborated in Spanish as they

prepared their presentation in English. Throughout the entire time that they worked together on this project, they fiercely debated which of their home countries had better food. The three boys became animated and loudly defended the “honor” of their native country’s preferred dish, occasionally slipping in a few curse words here and there in Spanish. Yet Ms. Grace did not seem to be bothered by any of this. She explained why she let them have such an animated side conversation:

I know that they are loud and here and there off task. I also know they curse. But listen, there are other battles I'd rather fight. That's not one of them. I want them to feel that they can express themselves freely here, a lot of them left so much behind. I don't want them to leave their linguistic expression behind either.

In her classroom, Ms. Grace is not interested in regulating her student’s communicative practices, expressions, or language use. Instead, her teaching practice embraces an approach to student autonomy in which students are invited to exert agency. This is a conscious teaching approach that demonstrates Ms. Grace’s cultural competence as she creates and holds space for students to engage in discussions that pertain to their experiences however they see fit. Notice that Ms. Grace is critically aware that her newcomer students are sometimes loud and off task, *‘I also know they curse. But listen, there are other battles I'd rather fight. That's not one of them.’* Martínez and Morales (2014) refer to such language, the use of *groserías* (cursing), as a transgressive language practice that often signals ethnic solidarity, nudging educators to not just dismiss such language use as inappropriate. In the case of Ms. Grace, she understood this and decided that this was not a ‘battle’ she was going to fight.

Ms. Grace expects her students to demonstrate deep thinking about social issues that require a degree of immersive study into the topic; therefore, she found value in her student’s

commitment to recall their home land's cultural foods and assert their discursive voices with great command, even if this meant using *groserías* (cursing) to defend the beautiful features of their native land. At the end of this project, the three young men presented their work successfully, and their side conversation did not present itself as an impediment to their learning in Ms. Grace's classroom. Instead, Ms. Grace perceived their classroom interactions as critical communicative practices that complemented and enriched their learning. This has to do, in large part, with how Ms. Grace understands her students' need to experience community and a sense of belonging, another marker of her culturally competent approach to working with immigrant-origin Latine students.

### Discussion

At the intersection of Ms. Grace's practices and perspectives is a culturally competent outlook that centers on what I call a *moral ethic of cariño*. The cultural competencies enacted as part of a *moral ethic of cariño* may benefit teachers of immigrant-origin students in steering them to think about embracing practices that are attentive, responsive, inclusive and critically conscious of their students' particular needs. A *moral ethic of cariño* aims to view "the material, physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of Latine youth" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 110) from an equity-driven stance, resisting all notions of deficit that historically have been invoked to frame Latine students in American K-12 schools. In previous scholarship, the term *cariño* has emphasized the manifestation of caring grounded in Latine cultural values. As Hidalgo and Duncan-Andrade (2009) explain, *cariño* is often translated as caring, affection, or love, but much is lost in this translation. As a concept, *cariño* is the foundation of relationships among the poor and working classes—often the only thing left to give in families raising children on substandard wages. There is a considerable body of research demonstrating the educational importance of

teachers who forge meaningful connections with students, and of school cultures where all interactions between students and adults authentically embody *cariño* and a concern for the well-being of students (Bartolomé, 1994a; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). While the concept of *cariño* is not new, the theorization of the *Moral Ethic of Cariño* is in that it presents a framework that unpacks teacher perspectives and practices in working with immigrant-origin Latine youth. The moral ethic of *cariño* urges educators to constantly revisit their perceptions of students and revise their teaching practices so that authentic inclusion is achieved. For immigrant-origin Latine students, this generative approach to teaching plays a critical role in how students feel in our classrooms.

In Ms. Grace's case, her positive perspective on her students directly and profoundly informed her teaching practices. It was important for Ms. Grace that her students were deeply engaged with texts, communicated their ideas with familiar content in an unfamiliar language, and drew on their full linguistic repertoires (including when this meant talking about their ideas in "less-than-perfect" English) with autonomy. For Ms. Grace, a *moral ethic of cariño* was enacted in her careful examination of—and attention to—her students' struggles and lived experiences as they navigated their duality in languages and cultures and, in the case of some of her students, their duality in the complexity of being U.S.-born with undocumented parents. Ms. Grace maintained that affirming her students' lived experiences—and positioning herself as a student of such experiences—informed her curricular choices, facilitating the authentic inclusion of her students. Ms. Grace felt the moral imperative and the ethical duty to provide her students with skills necessary to read the world around them long after they left her classroom and. Another critical component of her teaching craft was to allow her students to assert themselves in communicative practices that felt authentic to them. Her teaching

approach demonstrated a series of deliberate choices that signaled her cultural competencies as she educated her students in such a way that granted them the right to critically think, question, and explore, and in doing so, she embodied the ultimate manifestation of a *moral ethic of cariño*.

### Conclusion

Ms. Grace's teaching stance defies easy categorization or analysis. Ms. Grace has developed a cultural competence that allows her to understand the experiences of her students, and such understanding deeply informs her teaching approaches. Rather than perceiving their experiences as disruptive or deficient, Ms. Grace perceived them as opportunities to bridge the learning happening in class. Providing immigrant-origin Latine students the autonomy to just "be" as they work on an assignment turns out to be a critical step towards creating a classroom environment that is conducive to high levels of engagement and learning, one in which teachers can enact cultural competence by embodying a *moral ethic of cariño*.

Though this study is a singular case and is limited by its sample size, one thing is certain: Ms. Grace has mastered the ability to demonstrate a *moral ethic of cariño* for her students through her culturally competent practices and perspectives. She affirmed her students for who they were and what they brought to her classroom both culturally and linguistically. In recognizing the importance of creating a curriculum that was relevant to their experiences, she did not lose sight of pedagogical practices that were responsive to their needs. Her most valuable data point was her students' lived experiences, which directly informed her generative practices. I argue that a *moral ethic of cariño* requires not merely that teachers positively perceive and care for immigrant-origin Latine youth, but also that teachers enact culturally

competent practices that intellectually engage and include students in meaningful ways. As noted in previous scholarship, the practice of meaningfully engaging immigrant-origin students in content area curriculum has the potential to act as a form of transformational resistance in their lives (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Central to such a stance would be the authentic inclusion of linguistically-diverse students evidenced by a moral *ethic of cariño* that centers the lived experiences of immigrant-origin Latine youth. Such a moral *ethic of cariño* is a stance that embodies cultural competencies and that intentionally aims to understand the narratives that immigrant-origin youth encounter as they strive to navigate learning across multiple languages and cultures.



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**From Safe Spaces to Sacred Spaces:  
Chicanx/Latinx After-School Youth Development and Transformational Resistance**

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**Abstract**

This ethnographic case study examines how a social justice-based after-school (AS) youth leadership development program became a space for youth participants to develop a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice action. Research demonstrates that youth development programs and models that cultivate agency among Youth of Color directly contribute to Positive Youth Developmental (PYD) outcomes (Larson, 2006), and are an effective intervention strategy for youth at high risk of school pushout. However, few studies specifically examine the factors that prompt engaged Chicanx-Latinx AS youth participants to develop a resistance behavior that reflects a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice—Transformational Resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). In this article, I explain how youth participants explicitly cited how creating “safe spaces” and chosen-familial bonds through femtoring/mentoring relationships cultivated transformational resistance outcomes. I conclude by discussing how the Black Panther Mentorship Program (BPMP), a social justice-based AS youth program, transcended the traditional notions of safe spaces and transformed into a *sacred space* because it gave youth participants holistic forms of unconditional acceptance, acknowledgment, and interconnectedness. As a result, BPMP youth’s connection to sacred spaces enabled them to overcome personal and educational barriers.

*Keywords: Chicanx/Latinx youth, Safe Spaces, Sacred Spaces, After-school programs, positive youth development outcomes*

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The disparity in Chicana/Latina educational attainment is cause for national concern. Chicana/Latina populations are the largest racially minoritized population in the United States (US Census, 2020). Still, there has not been a significant increase in educational attainment compared to their white counterparts in the United States (Covarrubias, 2011; Perez Huber, et al, 2015; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Similarly, as a racialized ethnic group, Chicana/Latina populations have the lowest educational attainment relative to their white counterparts (Covarrubias & Lara, 2013). The educational experience of Chicana/Latina is one of accumulated structural and institutional marginalization and inequity (Duncan Andrade, 2005; Yosso, 2013). Chicana/Latina students struggle to access the economic and social resources their white, middle-class counterparts benefit from (Orfield & Ee, 2014). In Communities of Color, public schools are often segregated, underserved, and underfunded; poor urban schools are often ill-equipped to compensate for these structural social inequalities (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Orfield & Ee, 2014). 3 out of 10—approximately 30% of Chicana/Latina youth growing up under these educational conditions, including recent immigrants, are pushed out of school nationally (Covarrubias, 2011).

To fully understand the severity of high school pushouts for Chicana/Latina youth (Tuck, 2012), we must frame it within the context of the “school-to-prison pipeline” narrative. Critical scholars (Sojoyner, 2013; Valles and Villalpando, 2021) assert that there is a direct pipeline of Students of Color who get pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. The overrepresentation of police in schools, zero-tolerance policies, suspensions, and high-stakes testing contribute to the school-to-prison nexus phenomenon (Stovall, 2018). Consequently, research indicates that Latino (and African American) males are more likely than their white counterparts to be suspended from school (Rios, 2011; 2017), be given a disability classification (Artiles, 2013), and are half as likely to be identified for talented and gifted programs (Torres & Fergus, 2012). Moreover, Latino males consistently report that they are less likely to seek help at school, including assistance offered by teachers, staff, and peers, because of the hostile schooling environment within schools (Ponjuan, Clark, and Sáenz, 2012). School and community-based interventions such as after-school (AS) programs are needed to support low-income Youth of Color to gain academic success and positive youth development outcomes to address this crisis.

Critical scholars argue that current AS youth development programs and models are

limited by an inability to examine the complex social, economic, and political forces that bear on the lives of urban youth, particularly Chicanx/Latinx youth (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Emerging research shows, however, that AS youth development programs that employ a social justice youth development (SJYD) framework and focus on PYD outcomes can empower youth to identify, critique, and transform structural and institutional forces, as well as provide avenues to engage in social justice actions (Ginwright, 2016).

In further addressing the disparity in Chicanx/Latinx educational attainment, this article draws from an ethnographic case study that sought to understand how Chicanx/Latinx youth participating in a social justice-based AS program, the Black Panther Mentorship Program, developed a transformational resistance (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001) consciousness that motivates toward social justice and critiques social oppression (Ramirez, 2018). The following research questions guide this article: How do Chicanx/Latinx youth in an AS program cultivate a transformational resistance consciousness? How do in-school and out-of-school educators implement relational pedagogical approaches to create sacred spaces and transformational resistance outcomes for Chicanx/Latinx youth?

## **Literature Review**

### **Sacred Spaces**

A few critical scholars have engaged in educational discourse centered on creating and engaging sacred spaces. A study examining a community collective of a critical educators' racial affinity group noted that participants' utilization of *testimonio* and storytelling pedagogical approaches contributed to collective learning and healing culture. The power of “holding space for one another” cultivated sacred spaces for critical educators of a racial affinity group (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

In addition, Chicana/o/x scholars have theorized on creating sacred spaces within university institutions designed to maintain hegemonic and colonizing ideological perceptions of Students of Color. A study highlighting the experiences of Chicana educational researchers working collectively in predominantly white university institutions noted how creating a “Xicana-centered” sacred space enabled them to develop a sense of empowerment to be their authentic selves and foster intellectual growth, emotional support, and collective validation (Soto et al., 2009). Epistemologically, the authors theorized that the circle of dialogues and reflexivity were spaces for knowledge creation by simply sharing their Chicana subjectivities and

telling and listening to their own stories, aligning with Chicana feminist cultural intuition conceptual frameworks.

In this article, I draw on cultural healer and clinical therapist Jerry Tello's *La Cultura Cura* framework, which centralizes the healing and restorative power of gathering in sacred spaces that offer unconditional acknowledgment, acceptance, and interconnectedness. Tello (2018) explains that engaging in sacred and ceremonial spaces leads to a remembering/re-claiming of the ancestral teachings and values that speak to the importance of embracing one's personal sacredness, a sacred interconnectedness within a circle/community of support, and the journey to find one's sacred purpose(s) in life.

### Theoretical Framework

Transformational resistance is a conceptual framework emerging in critical race theory in education. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) theorized that hegemonic definitions of Chicana and Chicano oppositional behavior as solely deviant fails to acknowledge the systemic, institutionalized forms of oppression and domination that contribute to their oppositional behavior and the agency that Students of Color have in displaying oppositional behaviors as expressions of resistance behavior. They contend that students' resistance behaviors can be classified in four ways: (a) Reactionary Behavior; (b) Self-defeating; (c) Conformist; and (d) Transformational Resistance. In Figure 1, "Defining the Concept of Resistance," youth oppositional behavior is measured in quadrants of resistance.

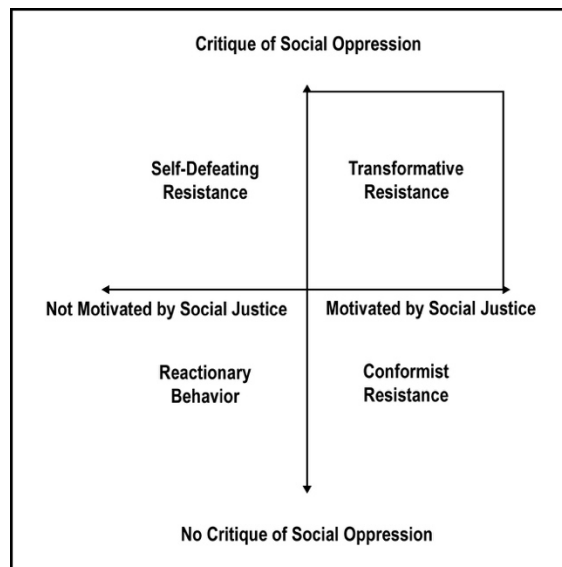


Figure 1. "Defining the Concept of Resistance" (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Solórzano & Delgado Bernal (2001) also theorized that student resistance behaviors could be expressed internally or externally, depending on the context and the level of students' agency. The authors thus framed student resistance in a model that contextualized resistance behaviors in thematic categories and provided a clear analysis and measurement tool for scholars, practitioners, and community members.

Solórzano & Delgado Bernal's article was instrumental in influencing subsequent literature on student resistance and provided a framework for resistance discourse (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2022; Cammarota and Fine, 2010). Their model highlighted the role of human agency, a consciousness of social oppression, and motivation for social change in shaping expressions of resistance behavior and then categorized, identified, and articulated different forms of student resistance. In doing so, Chicax/Latinx student resistance discourse shifted into a paradigm that considered how human agency could be expressed in multiple ways, illustrating the fluidity of resistance behaviors on a spectrum from *reactionary* to *transformational*. Further, the student resistance framework is a powerful tool to articulate and operationalize youth oppositional behavior in a manner that acknowledges the harmful resistance behaviors and the potential for transformational resistance outcomes.

As a youth intervention worker and researcher for nearly 20 years, I have seen firsthand the positive developmental outcomes among Chicax/Latinx youth when they develop a transformational resistance consciousness (Ramirez, 2018). Youth asset-based behaviors such as possessing a deepened sense of purpose and empowerment are reflected in a heightened expression of youth voice, increased aspirations, embracing of one's social identities, and genuine desires to be agents of change in their schools and communities. After conducting the study this article draws from, I began to reflect on the role that the creation of safe spaces played in cultivating transformational resistance outcomes for Chicax/Latinx youth. The overwhelming reporting of study participants' connection to a safe space was a direct result of BPMP's implementation of the Mayan philosophy, *In Lak Ech, Tu Eres Mi Otro Yo, You Are My Other Me*. Rooted in ancient Mayan epistemology, ontology and axiology, *In Lak Ech* provides a worldview that promotes the interconnectedness of humanity. In his book, *Amoxthli the X codex: In Lak Ech, Panache Be, Hunab Ku and the Forgotten 1524 Debates*, Dr. Cintli Rodriguez (2010) explains the Indigenous concept of *In Lak Ech* as a symbiotic framework for human beings to become interconnected in their humanity. He states:



*In Lak Ech* is not simply an ancient Indigenous Maya concept; in fact, it is a prescription for how we should treat each other as human beings. It is the anti-thesis of dehumanization. It is the first step toward rehumanization. It is the first step in viewing our fellow human beings not simply as neighbors, but as brothers and sisters. As co-equals. (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 20)

Rodriguez's definition of *In Lak Ech* speaks directly to the ancient Indigenous epistemological aims that provided a framework for human beings to engage with one another in a manner that provided a sense of belonging and interconnectedness, which encourages relationships and spaces wherein human beings have empathy, unconditional acceptance, and restoration.

BPMP fostered a culture that allowed youth participants to feel safe and interconnected through *In Lak Ech* principles. As a result, BPMP youth participants' were able to establish an interconnected community of support that included their peers and adult allies, which was foundational in developing a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice. This phenomenon prompted me to think beyond the foundational role that safe spaces contributed to transformational resistance outcomes, and toward illuminating in-depth interconnectedness to a community of support among their peers and adult allies in the cultivation of sacred spaces.

## **Methodology**

### ***The Black Panther Mentorship Program***

The BPMP was a student-instituted peer femtoring/mentoring program that resulted from a youth participatory action research project where students sought to address the pushout rate at their high school. BPMP was designed to be a social justice-focused youth leadership development program to empower young people to realize their potential to reach their personal and educational goals and learn how to engage in community-building and grassroots organizing efforts. BPMP youth participants engaged in programming that focused on:

- **Empowerment:** Increased self-awareness that drew heavily from Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), and Indigenous knowledge.
- **Positive Peer Support and Femtorship/Mentorship Relationship Development:** Utilized a holistic approach to provide a safe space for academic and personal support to overcome barriers at school and home.

- **Health & Wellness:** Participated in workshops and activities promoting health and wellness, including art-based projects, plays, hikes, bike rides, field trips, and talking circles, to respond to toxic stressors.
- **Activism/Civic Engagement:** Learned leadership development strategies to engage community building and grassroots youth organizing efforts.
- **Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR):** Engaged in youth participatory action research for community-based action research focused on addressing social inequalities on campus and in their neighborhood.
- **Field Trips:** Attended cultural, educational, political, and Indigenous ceremonies to provide exposure to spaces, knowledge, and networks to support their leadership and personal development.

BPMP took place after school at a Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) high school in the Pico/Union/West Adams area of Downtown Los Angeles. The Pico Union/West Adams area is primarily low-income, where 90% of students at the local high school qualify for free and reduced lunch (California Department of Education, 2016). According to 2010 census data, the population is 85% Latinx, 65% foreign-born residents primarily from Mexico and El Salvador, with a high concentration of undocumented and mixed citizenship status families; 87% of mixed-status citizenship homes are single-parent households. Around this time, in addition to economic and educational disparities already in place, the Pico-Union/West Adams neighborhoods were experiencing high levels of gentrification, resulting in low-income Latinx immigrant families being displaced due to land development, and soaring rent hikes, gang and drug violence, including increasing gun violence due to the rise in marijuana dispensaries, and increased police surveillance and harassment of street vendors and neighborhood residents (Gorski, 2002).

Under these conditions, BPMP participants were exposed to high levels of social toxins (Ginwright, 2016) that resulted from struggling to navigate and negotiate environments that cause pain and trauma, such as having family members deported, and fatigue from being hyper-vigilant against violence and harassment by gangs and law enforcement. The sociopolitical conditions and high levels of trauma experienced by the study participants contributed to why BPMP was perceived and embraced as a safe space where Chicana/Latina youth could find support and interconnectedness that facilitated kinship bonds with their peers and adult

femtors/mentors, which, in turn, enabled them to keep moving forward in reaching their educational and personal goals.

### **Research Positionality**

From 2011-2018, I established relationships with youth participants, parents, teachers, and school staff. I co-facilitated developing and implementing youth empowerment and mentoring programs in three LAUSD high schools with an immigrant rights organization called the *Advancing Justice Center* and community partners. I conducted the study to generate research to support the increased resources for AS youth leadership development programs for youth who are at risk of being pushed out of school. To do so, I developed relationships of trust and reciprocity after eight years of working with the youth, school officials, and community partners. With a spirit of reciprocity, I supported the overall goals of the *Advancing Justice Center's* youth leadership program. I earned trust and respect as an activist-scholar and youth worker practitioner by honoring my methodological commitment to engage in research “with the community” and not “on the community.” My research positionality is therefore grounded in conducting grassroots, youth/community-engaged research that can be used—and operationalized—as a resource for social justice and healing outcomes.

### **My Cultural Intuition**

I draw from Chicana educational researcher Dolores Delgado Bernal's (1998) Chicana feminist epistemological concept, “cultural intuition,” to utilize my lived experiences, experiential knowledge, and nearly 20 years of youth development work experience to inform the study. Cultural intuition asserts that Chicanas, feminists, and Scholars of Color have a particular way of making meaning in their lives. Within that process, they have a unique perspective based on being members of marginalized groups in the US. Delgado Bernal (1998) theorizes that four primary sources contribute to cultural intuition: 1) one's personal experience (including collective experience and community memory), 2) existing literature, 3) one's professional experience, and 4) the analytical research process itself. My cultural intuition informs how I co-analyzed data and themes with youth participants and acknowledged the role of creating safe spaces for BPMP youth in cultivating transformational resistance outcomes, and theorized how BPMP programming space was transformed from a safe space to a sacred space. In this next section, I provide an overview of the study's findings that demonstrates how BPMP youth participants cited the role that safe spaces grounded in the principles of *In Lak Ech*

contributed to the development of transformational resistance behaviors. In addition, I illustrate how BPMP safe spaces provided feelings of unconditional acceptance and a heightened sense of belonging to a community of support for their peers and adult allies, which I theorize speaks to sacred spaces and sacred interconnectedness.

### Findings

#### ***The Creation of “Safe Spaces” grounded in the values of In Lak Ech***

Study participants reported that BPMP’s AS youth programming provided a “safe space,” which was foundational in their cultivation of a critique social of oppression and motivation for social justice. Traditionally, the term “safe space” is understood as “an environment that allows students [youth] to engage with one another over controversial issues with honesty, sensitivity, and respect” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 135). However, I build on this notion by highlighting how the safe space within BPMP was directly related to students’ cultivation of agency, and as a foundational condition for fostering critical socio-consciousness, and how the BPMP safe space was transformed into a sacred space that provided an interconnectedness and restoration able to sustain hope and motivation in the participants’ daily lives.

*Curly Sunshine* is a 19-year-old, gender-nonconforming Chicanx who was born and raised in the Mid-City area of Downtown Los Angeles. *Curly Sunshine* grew up in a mixed-citizenship status home with their undocumented mother and two older sisters. During their childhood, they worked with their mother as a street vendor, assisting in translating with English-speaking customers. Developed through their life experiences, *Curly* has strong communication skills and carries *themselves* as a natural leader. *They*<sup>1</sup> joined the BPMP in the tenth grade and became active participants, taking on several leadership roles. In high school, they founded the first-ever LGBTQIA<sup>2</sup> student club on campus to address the hostile environment and lack of visibility of queer students on campus. Moreover, *Curly* theorized on the interrelationship between creating a “safe space” and developing a social justice lens:

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<sup>1</sup> *Curly Sunshine*’s intersectional identity pronouns are: They, Them, She and Her.

<sup>2</sup> LGBTQIA stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Allied.  
<https://gaycenter.org/about/lgbtq/>

I feel that the process of creating a “safe space” and developing a social justice lens goes “hand in hand.” It’s essential for youth to be in a safe space first because... why learn about social justice? Why care about other people? Why go out of your way to try to make this world better for other people if you don’t have a group of people that actually care for you and are there for you? So I think that by creating a “safe space,” you open doors for people to actually connect to their humanity, connect into their compassion, connect to their love for one another, you know, it’s *In Lak Ech*.

*Curly* provided a powerful theorization on how establishing a “safe space” is foundational to developing youth resistance that embodies a social justice critique. *They* theorize that BPMP’s safe space embodied the practices of human interconnectedness and a sense of belonging outlined in the philosophy of *In Lak Ech*. Under these conditions, safe spaces play a foundational role in the process of re-humanization, which is necessary to develop a critique of social oppression and motivation for social justice—Transformational Resistance (Brayboy, 2005; Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003)

Another participant, *Brother B*, a 19-year-old Chicax BPMP youth leader, highlighted the significance of engaging in a safe space, contributing to his critique of social oppression. *Brother B* grew up in the Pico/Union/University Park area of Downtown Los Angeles. His parents emigrated from Mexico in the late 1980s and separated when he was five. His mother worked as a garment worker and always supported his educational aspirations. *Brother B* joined the BPMP during the 10<sup>th</sup> grade when his school therapist recommended that he take a step out of his “comfort zone” and build his social skills by joining an AS program. After participating in a BPMP YPAR project which focused on racial microaggressions and positive coping strategies, he created an online community blog called the *Black Rose Press*. In the following passage, *Brother B* illuminates how his experiences with BPMP as a safe space cultivated a community of respect and inclusion:

I definitely feel that BPMP is a “safe space” because of the values of *In Lak Ech, Tu Eres Mi Otro Yo, You Are My Other Me*. I felt that in my years of being in BPMP, we maintained our values of being connected with one another. BPMP did uphold the value of ‘if I hurt you, then I’m hurting myself,’ and I did see that, especially in how BPMP members treated one another. They were respectful to one another and always tried to maintain

that respect, inclusiveness, and diversity. Those values make BPMP a great program and a wonderful “home” to be in at school.

*Brother B*'s reference to BPMP as a “home” speaks to the kinship bonds and feelings of safety he experienced engaging in BPMP youth programming spaces. He credits the interconnectedness and unconditional acceptance of BPMP to the values of *In Lak Ech* that created a familial environment in which BPMP members felt safe and supported. It was important for the Chicana/Latina youth participants to engage in the BPMP AS program space, especially within the hostile and violent schooling spaces that historically (and present-day) have been designed to eradicate their cultural identity, agency, and expressions of dissent. Thus, *Brother B*'s reflections illuminating the importance of having a safe space that felt like home, which was also grounded in the Indigenous worldview of *In Lak Ech*, truly amplifies the power of resistance and survivance that comes from unconditional acceptance and interconnectedness of Chicana/Latina youth.

In addition, *Brother B* shared that BPMP provided a safe space for him to affirm his LGBTQIA identity:

In BPMP, I found a “safe space” thanks to mentors *Johnny Rockit*, *Ivette Ohh*, and *Tim Tezzy*. I was able to embrace my LGBTQIA identity fully. I had already come out as LGBTQIA before participating in BPMP, but at that time, I was still trying to figure out how to embrace my identity fully. But with the support of BPMP, I could stand firmly in my LGBTQIA identity when it came time to write my personal statement for the UC's. I was able to include my LGBTQIA identity in my essay. I needed to express it. I felt that these admission people needed to know that this is who I am. And so BPMP helped me build up my confidence too! That's what the “safe space” of BPMP has given me.

*Brother B*'s reflections truly capture how a safe space with a community of support of mentors and mentors assisted him in unapologetically embracing his LGBTQIA identity as an expression of transformational resistance to the heteronormativity and dehumanization embedded in U.S. society. The development of a sociopolitical consciousness led to an understanding that disclosing his queer identity in his college admissions essay was an act of resistance to normalizing the public suppression of his LGBTQIA identity. This process of affirmation within BPMP, coupled with his motivation to share his LGBTQIA identity, was a means to disrupt the traditional narratives of college essays that align with power, privilege, and white supremacy.

A third participant, *Cio*, illuminated how engaging in a “safe space” provided her support as an undocumented Latinx student in LAUSD. When she was eight, she emigrated from Guatemala to the US with her older sister as an unaccompanied minor. Her mother, who had emigrated years prior, worked as a street food vendor in the Pico/Union/West Adams area of Downtown Los Angeles. Throughout her childhood, *Cio* took on adult roles to support her single mother’s food vending cart as a necessary means to ensure her family could afford rent, food, and clothing. Thus, *Cio* and her two sisters experienced a process of adultification where they helped their mother prepare, cook, and vend before school, after school, and on weekends. With the demands of working long hours and the pressures of a heavy academic workload, *Cio* found herself not having time to enjoy life as a teenager. In this following passage, *Cio* explained how her participation in BPMP’s “safe space” gave her a community of support and a temporary reprieve from the pressures of her daily routine:

A “safe space” means that you’ve been accepted and that you feel comfortable. Because sometimes you might not feel that support at home, and you might feel depressed. In my case, at home, I felt like time would just run by so fast, you know. I would go home, go to work, and then go to sleep, and then get up and start it all over again. But being at BPMP actually helped me see that my time was important there. I was able to use that time to experience the love of other people and feel all their positive expressions. It could be someone giving me words of encouragement like ‘*Cio*, you’re good at this’ or ‘*Cio*, you did this—Great job!’ At BPMP, I felt all that positivity was feeding into me. I believe that all falls into a ‘safe space’ because it helps you gain confidence in yourself. And then you add all the love of your own family and then all the love from members of BPMP. It all makes a big difference in your life. It gives you hope! And you know, some youth really need that cuz they may not have that at home.

*Cio*’s reflections on her engagement in BPMP’s “safe space” speak directly to the contribution of pyd outcomes, such as building her confidence and developing a sense of connection to a community of peers and mentors/mentors. It also provided an opportunity to establish connections and support with same-age peers, which helped mitigate the stressors of undergoing the process of adultification. Adolescent development scholars (King et al., 2005) identified the critical role of building confidence and connecting to a community of positive peers for youth to move from surviving to thriving. Additionally, *Cio* cited that the community

love and support she received from her involvement in the BPMP space gave her hope. Increasingly, youth development scholars conducting healing justice work (Ginwright, 2011; 2016), highlight hope's critical role in increasing resilience and overall mental wellness among urban Youth of Color. *Cio's* engagement in BPMP increased her hope as she struggled to manage adult roles and responsibilities to ensure her family's livelihood. Thus, BPMP's "safe space" directly increased her resilience and wellness.

Moreover, *Cio* credited the "safe space" and community support of BPMP with her ability to overcome her fears and negative stigma of being undocumented within U.S. society: BPMP helped me not to fear being undocumented. Before as an undocumented student, I used to think I'm not valuable to the U.S. But the support I got from BPMP made me feel that everything I do in this life counts and is important to the world. This [affirmation] gave me a lot of self-respect. Being undocumented in the U.S. is hard; everyone says undocumented immigrants are here intrusively. But you know what, undocumented immigrants are here because we are the ones who are doing a lot of hard work for the U.S. [economy]. Basically, the U.S. provides work, and we [undocumented immigrants] provide them a service, which is our work!... What I gained at BPMP was to value ourselves and see how we can give back to the community.

In the passage above, *Cio* highlights how BPMP directly contributed to developing her positive self-perception of her undocumented identity as a direct act of resistance to the fear and racist nativism within U.S. society. The conscious awareness to reframe her undocumented identity to align with being the hardest workers in the U.S. workforce and that her life has value driven by a desire to give back to her community embodies transformational resistance outcomes. *Cio's* transformational resistance directly pushed back against the deficit perspectives and dehumanizing narratives that frame undocumented Latinx immigrants as criminals with low self-worth. Thus, *Cio's* reflections illustrate how transformational resistance consciousness can lead to PYD outcomes such as increased self-confidence, self-worth, and self-efficacy (Larson, 2006; Riggs, 2006).

Another participant, *Ivette Ohh*, a 24-year-old Undocuscholar,<sup>3</sup> was a youth facilitator and coordinator at BPMP for nearly six years. She was one of the original student co-founders

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term undocuscholar to signify students who embrace and frame their undocumented status and identity as an asset in their engagement of the U.S. educational system.



of the program while in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She was born in Nayarit, Mexico, and migrated with her mother to the U.S. when she was six months old. *Ivette Ohh* grew up in the Pico Union neighborhood of Downtown Los Angeles, a Mexican and Central American (im)migrant community that suffered high levels of poverty, violence, and historically underfunded and under-resourced public schools (Simon, 1997). In the tenth grade, *Ivette Ohh* and her classmates utilized the findings of their YPAR project to develop a femtoring/mentoring after-school program as a prevention and intervention strategy to address the high school pushout rate. In the following passage, *Ivette Ohh* shared how BPMP provided a safe space, and how grounding the space in *In Lak Ech* created a culture in which youth participants internalized the values of acceptance and interconnectedness. She states:

The reciting of the *In Lak Ech* poem every time we close our BPMP youth sessions influenced the youth to internalize the values of ‘Tu Eres Mi Otro Yo, You Are My Other Me.’ And we as facilitators, internalize it too. In a subtle way we are ‘programmed’ to treat each other with respect and love.... I think the beauty of our BPMP space was that we created a culture where all the youth participants knew that BPMP was a safe space for us all. They knew BPMP was a space to articulate their ideas, and they would not attack one another for not having the same belief system.

*Ivette Ohh’s* commentary highlights the intentionality of BPMP adult facilitators to engage in programming rituals and practices that nurtured a culture that youth participants felt safe to express themselves. She eloquently theorizes on how the reciting of the *In Lak Ech* poem at the closing of BPMP youth programming was, in many ways, a ritual or ceremonial practice that reminded the youth and adult facilitators to respect and love one another. The internalization of humanizing values that center acceptance, respect, love, and interconnection by BPMP youth participants directly challenges the dehumanization that Chicax/Latinx youth experience in U.S. society.

In summary, these findings indicated that creating a safe space was a foundational element that created a community of support and familial/kinship bonds in which BPMP youth participants experienced unconditional acceptance and a deepened sense of belonging. In addition, BPMP youth highlighted the development of Transformational Resistance consciousness in ways that strongly affirmed their marginalized intersectional identities, such as being LGBTQIA and undocumented. And lastly, the BPMP youth program’s embracing of the

values of *In Lak Ech* created a culture of unconditional acceptance and interconnectedness, which led to it being more than a safe space. It transformed into a sacred space.

### **Discussion**

In summation, study participants highlighted that engaging in “safe spaces” was foundational in developing a critique of social oppression. The inclusiveness and human interconnectedness that shaped the BPMP programming space were created by utilizing the Indigenous epistemological framework of *In Lak Ech*, which Chicax/Latinx youth participants described as central to BPMP being a “safe space.” Chicax/Latinx Youth in the program reported undergoing a deepened sense of belonging and membership within a humanizing community. This process led BPMP members to experience a degree of human interconnectedness and positive outcomes.

Scholars have critiqued the notion of creating or holding “safe space” within structures or institutions inherently designed to be violent and dehumanizing for People of Color (Carter, 2007; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Some scholars contend that when youth or communities challenge hostile climates within institutional spaces, they transform them into a “brave space” (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2016). I contend, however, that framing BPMP as a “safe space” accurately describes how the space functioned for people with marginalized social and intersectional identities. LGBTQIA and undocumented youth, for example, experience high levels of trauma due to structural oppression (Schmitz, et al, 2020) in their schools. Chicax/Latinx LGBTQIA and undocumented youth populations’ physical safety is often at risk in public and institutional spaces, and this population experiences higher rates of suicide, addiction, and school pushout (Brown & Hyatt-Burkhart, 2013). I also argue that a space that focuses on creating a humanizing community environment where youth do not feel that they will be verbally attacked or bullied is cause to label BPMP as a safe space. The dearth of spaces where Chicax/Latinx youth feel a sense of inclusiveness and human interconnectedness in communities or schools also gives reason to identify spaces such as BPMP as safe spaces.

### **Transforming Safe Space to Sacred Space**

By understanding themselves not solely as isolated individuals, but as interconnected members of a broader community that cared about them, BPMP participants could engage space through the sacredness of healing and togetherness. Participants' sense of interconnection to one another’s humanity led to creating a sacred space, where once youth

humanized one another and felt deeply interconnected to BPMP, they transcended their relationship to the AS youth space and their school environment. Changing their relationships and connections to one another and their classroom spaces manifested indigenous epistemology as an act of decolonization within schooling spaces that are inherently colonizing and dehumanizing (Pizzaro, 1998). Youth participants and facilitators successfully reclaimed their humanity and interconnectedness within oppressive schooling structures as an act of resistance and refusal.

Further, the Indigenous epistemological and humanizing pedagogical practices that cultivated the creation of sacred spaces align with re-Indigenization for urban Chicax/Latinx youth when they learn concepts, ceremonies, and rituals that originated in their ancestral epistemologies (Acosta, 2015). Arce (2018) reminds us that the re-Indigenization of Chicax/Latinx youth occurs when they are exposed to and engage in culturally rooted Indigenous epistemological frameworks such as *In Lak Ech*. And by doing so, there is a decolonizing and liberatory component to shifting institutionalized spaces like schools or after-school programs to sites of empowerment, healing, and re-humanization. BPMP youth participants and adult facilitators collectively changed the relationship between the space and its members by operating from humanizing and Indigenous-centered interconnectedness relationships (Ramirez, 2018).

Within these temporal environments, spiritual activism (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Huber, 2009) can promote a resistance that enables one to transcend structural and institutional forms of oppression. The youth participants in BPMP created and participated in a space two times a week that provided them hope, authentic caring relationships, and human interconnectedness. BPMP's programming space transformed into a "sacred space" because the youth participants and adult facilitators built a community of love, support, and inclusiveness that resulted in social, emotional, and mental replenishment to exercise their empowerment, resilience, and agency.

### **Implications**

This article offers perspectives for in-school and out-of-school educators seeking to create sacred spaces that empower Chicax/Latinx youth to engage in transformational resistance outcomes. In an educational system and white supremacist society that dehumanizes Chicax/Latinx youth, it is the responsibility of the educators (in both formal and informal settings) to exert a high level of intentionality in developing the relational, pedagogical, and

curricular practices that cultivate sacred spaces and transformative youth resistance behaviors. There needs to be an unequivocal recognition of the harm and trauma caused by the structural and institutional violence experienced by Chicana/Latina youth, especially those with intersectional, marginalized identities such as LGBTQIA and undocumented youth populations. From this premise, we need to create youth-centered spaces that provide unconditional acceptance and interconnectedness to a community of support from peers and adult allies. In addition, there needs to be a shift toward a Chicana/Latina youth engagement that incorporates a holistic framework that centers them first as human beings before they are seen as students or future workers within our capitalist society. Our Chicana/Latina youth need to be framed and treated as sacred, even when they do not embrace their sacredness and are on a daily journey to realize their sacred purpose (Tello, 2018). Finally, school leaders must actively pursue opportunities to develop collaborative partnerships with community youth workers, organizers, and organizations. Community elders, youth and cultural workers, healers, mentors/femtors, artists, and activists can play an important role in sharing their wisdom, talents, love, acceptance, and unconditional support with our young people. Let's start working together in a sacred interconnectedness that centers on developing humanizing relationships of trust, acknowledgment, respect, and dignity with our youth and adult allies. Palabra.

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## **Mexican American Student Veterans: From Military Service to Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

This study employs descriptive qualitative analysis to explore the experiences of eight Mexican American veterans utilizing Veterans Affairs education benefits to pursue baccalaureate degrees. Participants were recruited in Southern California at two California Community Colleges and three California State Universities. The findings suggest that Mexican American student veterans navigate college and their education benefits based on their experiences in the military. The study identifies five factors Mexican American student veterans negotiate when transitioning to college: (a) minimization of racism; (b) lack of support; (c) being experiential learners; (d) substitute leadership; and (e) being financially motivated.

**Keywords:** *student veterans; post-9/11; GI Bill; Mexican American; military*

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In the wake of heinous tragedies that took the life of Army Specialist Vanessa Guillen, serving in the military is losing its appeal for many Latinx<sup>1</sup> community members (Diaz et al., 2022). The rise in military sexual traumas, coupled with spiking Latinx casualties overseas, suggests that military service is becoming an increasingly hostile path to achieve economic and social mobility. More than two straight decades of U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused labor shortages in military institutions (Scott-Killern & Singer, 2023). In a desperate move during its lowest point in the 2022 recruiting crisis, the Army relaxed the high school diploma enlistment requirement for new recruits 18 and older (Beynon, 2022). At the same time, high schools nationwide have noticed a consistent presence of recruiters on campus, specifically in the most economically vulnerable districts (Monforti & McGlynn, 2021). Countering recruiters in schools are organizations like Truth in Recruitment and the Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities, which educate students on what some recruiters intentionally omit and offer alternatives to military service.

Today, the education benefits available to service members increased significantly with the passage of the Veterans Educational Assistance Act in 2008, commonly known as the post-9/11 GI Bill. Eligibility is based on three years of honorable service after September 10, 2001, which includes a monthly living stipend based on the military's Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) determined by the institution's location (Picker, 2011). Despite the financial resources attached to pursuing a college degree, veterans are less likely to utilize their education benefits compared to other Veterans Affairs (VA) programs like disability compensation and health care (VA, 2020).

Given that Hispanic service members constitute 18% of active-duty personnel (DOD, 2021), and they are expected to make up about 16% of all veterans by 2046 (Schaeffer, 2021), the literature on the military-to-education pipeline remains silent on the effect military service has on Latinx veterans who exercise their benefits to seek a college education, let alone Mexican Americans—the largest Latinx subgroup in the military. Keeping in mind that veterans have historically faced personal and institutional difficulties integrating back into civilian life and college campuses, it is urgent that we explore how Mexican American veterans use and navigate their education benefits. To what extent, if at all, does military service equip Mexican Americans with the competencies to pursue and complete baccalaureate programs?

## **The Mexican American Veteran Education Pipeline**

Research on the education pipeline makes clear that Mexican American students suffer disproportionately at every “leakage” point in the continuum (Alemán et al., 2022; Covarrubias, 2011; Solórzano et al., 2005). Of particular significance is the transition from secondary to postsecondary education (Solórzano et al., 2005). This is also a critical juncture when students transition to young adulthood. Though students are pushed out or drop out of the education pipeline (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006), some Mexican American students may instead choose other forms of professional development, like joining the military to receive job training, travel, or simply leaving their homes (Martinez & Huerta, 2020; Monforti & McGlynn, 2021). Given the importance of a college education—along with the training and necessary certifications—to enter some of the most in-demand occupational sectors, military service similarly offers prospective enlistees a path to social and economic mobility with precise figures on education, housing, and retirement benefits (Martinez & Huerta, 2020). For example, Huerta (2015) identified that one of the factors prompting Latino men to enlist—while in secondary education—was regular contact with military recruiters who reinforced occupational and economic incentives associated with serving. Compared to sparse and inconsistent contact with school counselors that offered narrow guidance on ambiguous career paths with little to no assurances, the presence of military recruiters played a significant role in Latino enlistment.

Whether or not serving in the military delivers on promises of upward mobility remains debatable. A closer look at the Chicana/o education pipeline sheds some light on the outcomes of Mexican American veterans. Using Covarrubias’s (2011) qualitative intersectionality as a template, I employed the August 2021 supplement of the Community Population Survey to plot the Mexican and Mexican American veteran education pipelines illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Immediately noticeable is that Mexican educational outcomes have improved since 2009. Figure 1 illustrates that of the 100 Mexican students that begin school in the United States, 30% will be pushed out of high school in 2021 compared to 44% in 2009; 70% will complete high school in 2021 in contrast to 56% in 2009; and 37% will enroll in college in 2021 as opposed to 27% in 2009. Based on that same pool of 100 students, the number of Mexicans that earned an Associate’s degree climbed from 5 in 2009 to 8 in 2021—a 60% increase—and those that earned a professional degree or doctorate doubled from 2.2 to 4.45 in 2021.

Mexicans that earned a B.A. increased by 10%. Only .03% out of 70 who complete high school join the military.

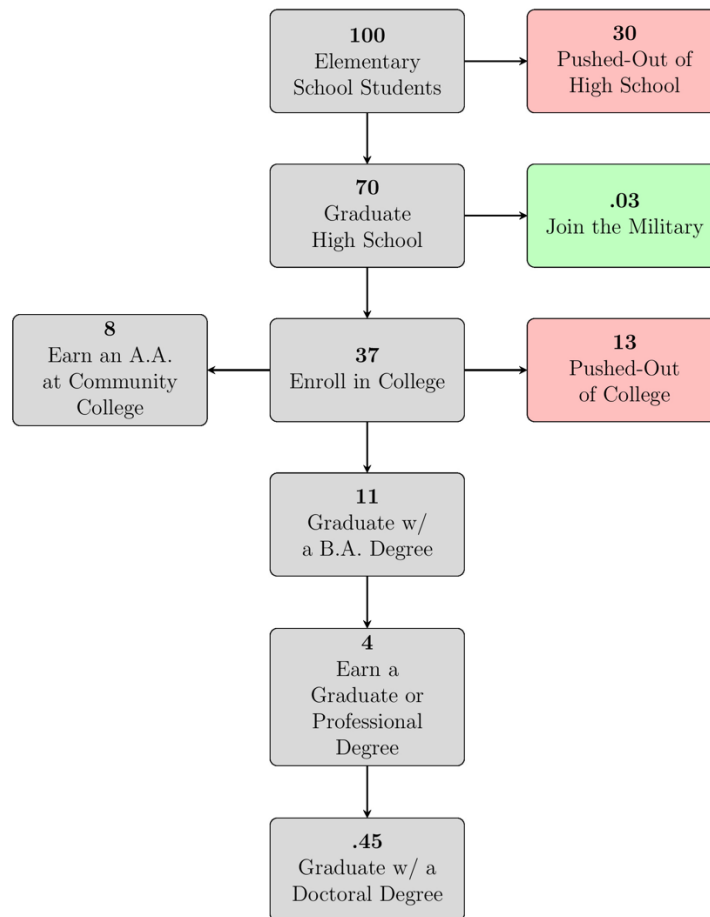


Figure 1. Mexican American education pipeline.

The Mexican American veteran education pipeline, illustrated in Figure 2, outlines a significantly different narrative. Out of 100 Mexican students that served in the military, 95% completed high school, a difference of 25% from those without service. In 2021, there were 75% more Mexican Americans with military service enrolled in college; more than double earned an Associate's degree; over one-third more received a four-year degree; and more than double completed professional and doctorate degrees compared to Mexicans without service. Though this is simply one observation measuring educational attainment, for Mexicans, serving in the military does indeed offer a clearer path to educational benefits and attainment compared to not serving.

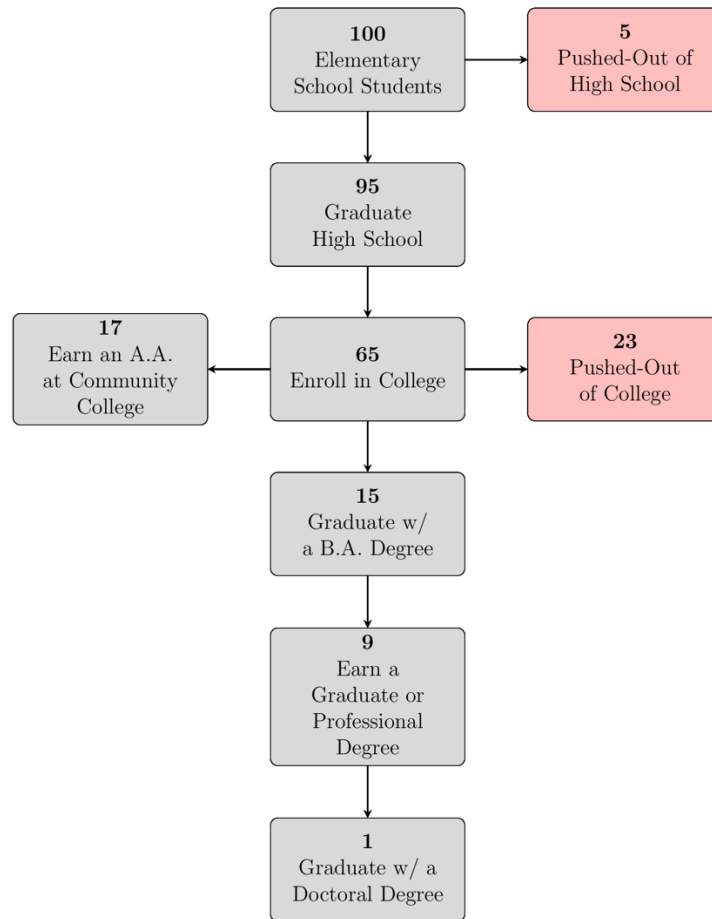


Figure 2. Mexican American veteran education pipeline.

Induction in the military based on educational attainment is at the discretion of each service branch, “Possession of a high school diploma is desirable, although not mandatory, for enlistment” (Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction Criteria, 2016). Apart from the recent recruiting crisis, for several decades, service branches required a high school diploma or its equivalent for induction, which explains the higher number of service member high school graduates. Still, what is striking from the Mexican American veteran education pipeline is that the number of students pushed out of college is almost double the number of non-service Mexicans. One explanation for higher numbers of Mexican American veterans being pushed out of college could be that many more are enrolled and face similar obstacles as Mexicans without service. Alternatively, the higher number of Mexican American veterans pushed out of college could stem from pursuing college while in the armed forces, which can be difficult to manage along with individual unit demands (Buddin & Kapur, 2002).

Nevertheless, the critical juncture creating leaks in the Mexican American veterans education pipeline is relocated from secondary education to post-college enrollment. Despite securing access to education benefits, higher education institutions are not structurally positioned to offer the proper mentorship and socio-emotional support Mexican American student veterans may need to begin and complete a four-year degree (Hung et al., 2022), which is the basis of this study.

### **Latinx Student Veterans Transitioning from the Military to Higher Education**

Interest in the experiences of military veterans transitioning to college has grown significantly after the United States has spent over two decades continuously at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. A small group of scholars has focused on service-connected undergraduates and their experiences after leaving the armed forces and entering higher education (Ackerman et al., 2009; DiRamio et al., 2008; Norman et al., 2015). They found that veterans' experiences transitioning to college are made difficult in the absence of individual oversight by senior leaders to help guide their everyday tasks (Ackerman et al., 2009). Other studies highlight previous characteristics prior to entering the military as determinants of college choice (Molina, 2015). The research conducted so far assumes that because veterans have financial education benefits at their disposal, they are likely to begin and complete a baccalaureate program.

A growing body of research has begun to investigate Latinx military recruitment and service to better understand the relationship between patriotism and decisions to enlist, or commission, and considers their positions doubly colonized (Bradford, 2021; Monforti & McGlynn, 2021). Scholars found that about one-fifth of "Hispanics" face discrimination in branches like the Army (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2009), yet few studies have directly investigated how experiencing racial discrimination in service influences student veteran experiences transitioning to college (Hunt et al., 2022; Santos et al., 2015). Recently, Hunt et al. (2022) found that racially minoritized student veteran men in the Southeast, including four Latinx student veterans, face alienation and racism on campus. However, their findings suggest that Latinx student veterans minimize the presence of racism on campus, invoke their veteran identity as a mechanism of resiliency, and continue to subscribe to meritocracy. The current study seeks to expand this literature by descriptively summarizing Mexican American student veteran experiences navigating higher education institutions in and outside the armed forces.

## **Methodology**

Considering the purpose of this investigation is to understand the impact of military service on Mexican American student veterans pursuing a four-year degree, basic qualitative description was employed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Sandelowski, 2000; Schroeder & Perez, 2022). A basic qualitative descriptive design is ideal for studies that are under-theorized, and when researchers are interested in how people understand and interpret their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, basic qualitative designs are less restricted from being committed to theoretical antecedents or frameworks (Sandelowski, 2000). The main goal of a qualitative descriptive study is to produce an accurate, descriptive summary that captures the phenomenon under investigation “in a way that best contains the data collected” (p. 339; see also Schroeder & Perez, 2022, p. 57). The descriptive summary may catalyze future phenomenological or grounded theory approaches on this topic (Sandelowski, 2000).

## **Positionality**

As a post-9/11 Mexican American Marine Corps and Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran, I navigated community college and transferred to a four-year university in 2009, when the post-9/11 GI Bill was implemented. My first-hand experience in the infantry provides a unique platform to pose questions mindful of different experiences in military occupational specialties (MOS), military culture and values, overseas deployments, and availability of resources in and outside of service.

## **Data Collection and Participants**

The following analysis is derived from eight in-depth semi-structured interviews with Mexican American student veterans in July 2022. These interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, ranging from 40 to 60 minutes. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. A call for participation was distributed from the Veterans Resource Centers (VRC) at three California State Universities (CSU) and two California Community Colleges (CCC). I initially contacted the directors at each VRC to solicit participation through their email lists, which included a screening survey in determining eligibility based on two criteria: self-identifying as any Latinx subgroup and being able to present their Department of Defense Form 214 “Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty” (DD-214). Verifying participants possessed a DD-214 affirms that they served and separated from the military (Schwille et al., 2019). Moreover, student veterans cannot access benefits associated with

programs like the post-9/11 GI Bill without presenting their DD-214 to a certifying official. Table I illustrates the participants using pseudonyms to uphold confidentiality, along with selected demographics and characteristics.

**Table I**

*Mexican American Student Veteran Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Military Branch (Years of Service)</b>	<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>Education Benefits</b>	<b>Major</b>
Abigail	Woman	35	Marine Corps (4)	CCC	Voc. Rehab	Sociology
Gil	Man	26	Marine Corps (6)	CCC	Voc. Rehab	Business
Leticia	Woman	28	Navy (4)	CCC	Voc. Rehab	Administrative Justice
Andres	Man	36	Navy (4)	CSU	Voc. Rehab	Accounting
Juan	Man	33	Army (8)	CSU	Post-9/11	Jazz Studies
Benito	Man	25	Army (3)	CSU	Post-9/11	Sociology
Alfonso	Man	56	Navy (12)	CSU	N/A	Management
Jackie	Woman	30	Marine Corps (12)	CCC	Post-9/11	Biology

During the interview, I asked participants to describe their racial and ethnic background. All eight participants identified as Mexican; two participants stated they were Mexican American, and one identified as Mexican and Peruvian. Seven were born in the United States; one reported being born in Mexico and naturalizing while in service. Two served in the Army, three in the Marine Corps, and three in the Navy. Their active-duty service ranged from three to 12 years; the average time in service was 6.5 years. One participant was junior enlisted, six were non-commissioned officers (NCO), and one was a senior enlisted staff non-commissioned

officer (SNCO). Three participants were in a combat related MOS and five were in combat support MOSs. Three participants were women and five identified as men. Six participants reported honorable discharges and two received general discharges. Four participants were enrolled at a CCC and the other four were enrolled at a CSU. All participants served in the post-9/11 era.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with a review of interview transcripts and participant summaries, which included the initial participation survey. Subsequent content analysis proceeded in two stages. First, using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software, I conducted open coding inductively to identify patterns and cooccurrences and generated initial codes. The second phase of analysis consisted of collapsing initial codes into subcategories to reduce the data (Schreier, 2014). The following is a descriptive summary of eight Mexican American student veteran experiences navigating CCCs and CSUs.

### **Findings**

#### **Minimizing Racism**

One of the first ideas that emerged when Mexican American student veterans reflected on their individual military service was that they, initially, were inattentive to racial discrimination. Though each veteran had varying degrees of awareness to implicitly or explicitly racially motivated events, most deferred or minimized racist experiences as being part of the military's culture of meritocracy. Stated differently, if service members were being singled out, hazed, or ridiculed based on their racialized identities, participants suggested that service members were expected to preserve and adopt the dominant group's high standards by meeting its thresholds or succumb to discrimination as an "other."

Participants were asked about experiencing racism while serving. During his interview, Juan stated that he did not experience racism. However, he mentioned, "but my nickname was Jose Suave Adios Mios Cadillac Rios the third," which was reduced as a joke among his unit. Although Juan was reluctant to classify his nickname as racism, he was aware of the racial tropes associated with being a Mexican man. Gil also indicated that he did not experience racism, but instead encountered "tough love." Gil shared his perspectives on racism in the military:



Every race is going to get treated the same way, even if it's good or bad. So yeah, I don't, I wouldn't say it was racist because it wasn't just a specific race, it was just more a rite of passage kind of thing. I know like a lot of times the like African American guys or girls would get in trouble, or not get in trouble, they get ridiculed for failing swim [qualification] or something. Everyone be like, oh okay, that's like that's expected. I mean and nine times out of ten, they wouldn't get butthurt they're just like, yeah, whatever they'll laugh about it. You know they really know what's coming. Just little things like that. I don't think anything was like legit like hardcore racism like out of hate is what I'm trying to get at.

Similar as Juan, Gil minimizes explicit racism as a joke, yet at the same time, he is aware that institutions and society perceive certain racialized groups as inferior when he identifies races as "good or bad." Gil notes that Black service members are stereotyped as unable to successfully complete swimming qualifications. The fact that Black service members refrain from publicly challenging racist comments signaled to Gil that they supported and even endorsed these perceived stereotypes that Black people are unable to swim. Gil supports the meritocratic ideology that Black service members' abilities will either demonstrate whether they get accepted or are ridiculed. For Gil, racist microaggressions do not meet the threshold of racism because they are not "hardcore" or driven by hate, as seemingly evidenced by people deferring to laugh about such situations.

Other participants initially rejected the idea that they experienced racism while serving but quickly changed their minds. For example, Jackie, who served twelve years in the Marines, reflected and soon realized, "now that I'm on this topic, there is a lot of racism." She would eventually be promoted as a Staff Sergeant and trained to become a military recruiter, where she observed explicit moments of racism and discrimination. During her recruiter training program, Jackie's command mobilized Spanish-speaking recruiters to address a shortage on the East Coast:

So, when you're telling me I'm going to Connecticut because I speak Spanish, all of a sudden, I don't speak Spanish. It's not fluent. So, at that point, I got to stay in California. I didn't stay with Riverside because they already had too many female Hispanic speakers, but they needed one in Orange County, specifically in Placentia, because they don't have any other Mexicans to send there. So that's when I got pulled out of Riverside the

morning of and placed in Orange County. But I think when the Marine Corps chooses recruiters, all they look at is demographics. And statistically, if we put this race in this kind of area, they're going to look at that race and be like, I want to be that.

Jackie had initially been unaware of institutional or systemic racism in the Marine Corps until she reflected on experiences that stood out to her. Without reflecting, Jackie would argue that racism was less prevalent than sexism. Her identity as a woman was more detrimental to her career than being racialized as "Hispanic." At the same time, Jackie realized that senior leaders in her recruiting command employed race strategically to assign specific duty stations for new recruiters, "They put all the Black [recruiters] in Long Beach. It all makes sense to me then, that it does exist at a higher level, but I think when it's, like, trickling down at the lower levels, we don't even see it." Jackie noticed that her recruiting orders were not based on her abilities; instead, the Marine Corps intentionally placed her where potential recruits that looked like her would see themselves in uniform.

### **Unsupported**

All the participants expressed feeling unsupported on the topic of seeking an education while serving in the military. The lack of support manifested in three ways: (a) being unaware of education resources; (b) lacking proper mentorship to use resources; and (c) being discouraged by unit leaders. Information about education resources differed by branch, with the Army and Marine Corps being the least accommodating for service members seeking to take advantage of their benefits. Most participants only learned about resources like Tuition Assistance (TA) while attending transition classes when they separated from the military. Additionally, since military culture generally rejected the idea of taking college courses while actively serving, there were very few, if any, senior leaders to look toward as mentors.

The military is responsible for sharing information about educational resources, it is also the same institution that blocks its members from effectively utilizing those resources. One way the military prevents service members from using their education benefits is by not making them aware of available resources. For instance, Jackie was not informed about available resources until she completed her first enlistment, "I didn't even know it [TA] existed until my second enlistment. And at that time, I was already pregnant." Jackie believes that if resources like TA had been explained early on in her career, she would have taken advantage of those opportunities before starting a family.

Another way the military made it clear that utilizing educational benefits while serving was undesired was through a lack of mentorship. Abigail, a Marine veteran, was aware of TA but less acquainted with navigating both college and military service:

It was different, I think. I was kind of not confused about the actual process of it, I think I was more confused on like time management like how to be a student in the military. Yeah, yeah, that was kind of hard and I didn't really have like a mentor that you know was trying to pave the way or anything. I'm kind of conflicted because I feel like I should have had more of the initiative. You know to figure it out if I didn't have that [a mentor], but I think in hindsight, you know, just being a young Marine like that's the whole point of a mentor, you know, because young Marines don't think like that.

Though Abigail recognized that she lacked mentorship when she contemplated pursuing college courses in the military, she ultimately resorted to meritocratic ideals to insist that despite not having a mentor, she herself should have had more initiative in learning about education benefits. As Abigail continued, it became more apparent that her commitment to meritocracy conflicted with her desire for mentorship navigating higher education when she mentioned, “. . . not to just say I have my degree right, you should strive for that. But sometimes you have to break it down, like I say, Barney style, you know, like to get somebody on a path.” For Abigail, “Barney style” meant taking things by the numbers, step-by-step, which is the type of guidance she had wanted, but ultimately did not receive.

A third way that Mexican American student veterans evoked feeling unsupported was through being explicitly discouraged from seeking educational resources by institutional policies and senior unit leaders. For example, during Leticia's interview, she mentioned that prior to enlisting, her recruiters helped provide information about the various educational resources available while serving. Yet, when asked about her experience using resources like TA, Leticia stated, “I actually never got to use it [TA]. I never took advantage of it, and I wish I did.” Leticia further shared:

I didn't get to use it because I think at the time, I had to have two years in the military. I think they changed it or something while I was in, I don't recall. But I remember I had my daughter, and I didn't pass the first BCA [body composition assessment] after having my daughter, so I was automatically at the time, like, disqualified from it.

Though Leticia was interested in pursuing college coursework while serving in the military, two separate institutional policies restricted her ability to use those benefits; a time-in-service requirement that was not met and a physical fitness exam that, for the most part, penalized her pregnancy. Leticia stopped short of identifying the military as the institution that limited her from pursuing college; rather, she summed up her disappointment as being unable to use the opportunity when she “wanted to.”

Comparably, Andres was equally discouraged by the military’s bureaucratic labyrinth to use TA, “It was too burdensome, I guess, because I had to go up my chain of command.” Access to educational resources excited Andres that he took advantage of his opportunities but was quickly deterred by the lack of information and guidance:

When I got to my final duty station, they said, oh, you know, use tuition assistance, which I did, and I had to submit a chit and write it up through the chain of Command. And then I had to go to the Command Education Officer. And then when I went to the college, they told me, why don’t you just fill out the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid]? It’s a lot quicker. You don’t need to be dealing with all this. And I thought, oh, really? And so, I used the financial assistance once from the command, and then after that, I just used the FAFSA.

Andres realized that the messages he received prior to enlisting omitted details about navigating chains of command and completing critical paperwork. In fact, his college provided more financial guidance than his command, which ironically suggests that if college had been one of the factors for his enlistment, he could have started—and maybe even finished—his studies without enlisting. Moreover, Andres’s training command summarily declined applying for educational opportunities, “They wouldn’t allow me to seek [an] education while under a training status, even though I had like months because I had like a month gap between corpsman school and field medic school.” Despite his motivation and eagerness to concurrently enroll in college courses while training to become a field medic, the Navy confined Andres’s opportunities and attention to completing its own training courses—information that had been left out before he enlisted.

### **Experiential Learners**

Surprisingly, while Mexican American student veteran accounts of using educational resources while in the military largely depict being unsupported, most participants lauded their

military service for thriving in college. They attributed their current motivation and educational journey to learning productive habits, implementing routines, paying attention to details, and being mission oriented in uniform. In addition, military service provided participants with tools that easily segued from one institution to the other.

Gil disclosed that without his experience in the military, he “would have been more relaxed, not really focusing, just kind of here [in college] just to be here.” As an infantry rifleman in the Marines, Gil indicated that if he had gone to college immediately after high school, he would not be as successful:

Just because, you know, you take it more seriously, and you know how to navigate through everything as far as the basics of time management and scheduling. Being prepared for something, like you learned all that, and then you’re kind of just putting it through to just like another kind of thing, like studying versus getting ready for a field [operation] or rehearsals.

Due to his military experience, Gil was not only trained in infantry tactics but also fundamental organizational skills, such as meeting deadlines and recognizing the importance of planning—he had not acquired these “basic” skills in his secondary education. Gil also identified executing tasks as a learned skill that he then applied, almost innately, toward studying for his courses cultivated during training exercises. Additionally, Gil demonstrated that being mission-oriented promoted a sense of urgency, further increasing the importance of executing tasks that are quickly measured and evaluated, such as making it to a platoon formation on time or completing a ten-kilometer hike with full combat loads.

At first, Benito was reluctant to attribute his time in the military as an incubator for college, “I mean, for my job, being an I I Bravo [Army infantry], the only thing they care about was how fast can you run, how many push-ups can you do, and what’s your rifle qualification.” As he reflected, however, Benito shared that the Army had, indeed, equipped him to pursue a college degree:

But then also mentally? Yeah, I think the military prepared me quite well because my entire train of thought, going to school was just like, this isn’t even that bad. I’m in a room that has air conditioning. I just have to listen to a professor, write some notes down and just do the homework and study for a test. And so far, it’s gotten me a pretty high GPA. I’m at 3.8 GPA right now. That’s my mentality going through it all. I’m chilling.

There's no sense of danger whatsoever in here. For some people that have no military experience, it's just like, they're just freaking out about getting a homework assignment done that probably takes, like, 20 or 30 minutes to do.

Though challenging, going to college for Benito seemed more hospitable than deploying overseas to a combat zone where service members face constant imminent threats. Enduring traumatic events in war gave Benito an alternative perspective to articulate obstacles in college, such as assignments and exams, that were unevenly matched.

Furthermore, Benito was unable to relate to his peers who could not complete and execute assignments. Benito expressed confidence in implementing the same types of habits and routines in a challenging environment absent of danger. Similarly, Leticia indicated that she "needed" the military to disrupt what had become a complacent life:

Before the military, I wasn't really going anywhere in life. I didn't have motivation. I think I was just letting the days go by, and it was just years wasted, like, four years wasted. And the military itself, I didn't see it at the time, but once I was transitioning out, like, I saw that I was more determined, and I had more motivation than I ever had. And I knew what I was passionate for. And I knew my strengths and my weaknesses. And I work well under pressure. So, I was like, I want to take that to my advantage and see what I can do with that.

Currently in the process of transferring to a research university, Leticia seeks to become a lawyer and veterans' advocate. Part of her motivation for pursuing a career in law stems from testifying as a witness for a friend's legal dispute in military courts. Leticia realized that she enjoyed those experiences and the legal process, "I've always been the one to just, like, put the pieces together and like, argue, and I like it. And, I was just like, well, what can I do with that?" Although Leticia was discouraged from acquiring a college education while in the Navy, her experiences in the military exposed her to other career possibilities that would otherwise go unrecognized.

### **Substitute Leadership**

Though no longer in uniform, each participant searched for guidance from people they could trust to provide accurate and relevant information. More often than not, key personnel like certifying officials and student veteran counselors were associated with Veterans Resource Centers (VRC). Together with VRC program directors and coordinators, Mexican American

student veterans were able to meet with staff members that understood how to effectively exercise VA education benefits by introducing strategies unbeknownst to them. Through these interactions, student veterans developed confidence in their relationships with VRC staff that mirrored their experiences with senior leaders in the military as being cared for.

After meeting with a certifying official, Andres gained confidence in realistically going to school, “speaking with the counselor helped me plan everything because I didn’t know that if you go half time, it only eats up half of the eligible time remaining [on post-9/11 benefits].” Andres was reluctant to pursue college because he assumed that VA education benefits would only be granted when enrolled full-time. Prior to transferring to a CSU, Andres used most of his VA education benefits at a community college that lacked an adequate VRC. Despite depleting his VA education benefits, the certifying official at the CSU VRC offered Andres critical mentorship to continue his studies using a less familiar VA program: Chapter 31, Veteran Readiness and Employment, formerly known as vocational rehabilitation (voc rehab). This program provides veterans with service-connected disabilities job training and pays for college tuition to acquire a specific occupation (VA, 2022). Andres recollected, “I used the GI Bill at [CCC]. Took a break, then I decided to go back to school. I used my GI Bill and had about a month and eleven days left, and that’s when I applied to voc rehab.”

Similarly, Leticia was directly mentored by a Chapter 31 counselor, “the VR and E counselor told me, like, you know what? Use this program first [Chapter 31], and then for law school, use your GI Bill for whatever education that you want to pursue after the VR and E program is done.” Though still in the process of transferring to a four-year institution, Leticia built rapport and is close with the veterans’ counselors and Veterans Department at her CCC. The benefits of pursuing Chapter 31 were also brought up to Gil at his CCC:

I used my post-9/11 for more trades and things. I didn’t use it all, I used a fraction of it until I learned about Chapter 31, the vocational rehab, and that I learned about when I applied to [CCC]. They were like, oh, you should apply, and they told me how and they helped me through the process and that one [Chapter 31] I feel like they’re [CCC] super helpful, and it’s not just applying, and you know everyone’s going to accept the GI Bill, but that one [Chapter 31] is more in depth and personal.

Gil highlighted the extra steps involved in securing Chapter 31 benefits compared to the post-9/11 GI Bill. Since Chapter 31 is meant to support job training in a specific occupation, not the

pursuit of a college education, service-connected disabled veterans must qualify for the program by completing interviews with the VA, which may take longer to become eligible. The VRC staff continued to be Gil's guide throughout the process and plans to save his post-9/11 GI Bill to pursue a master's program.

### **Financially Motivated**

The most salient characteristic shared by Mexican American student veterans about transitioning to college is their financial motivation. Although achieving a college degree for most participants also signified higher earnings potential, Mexican American student veterans approach VA education entitlements as another mission to complete to earn a wage. In other words, one of the main factors impacting their decision to pursue college has more to do with their pocketbook rather than a chosen area of study. While the VA grants enrolled student veterans monthly living stipends, it does so based on the schools' location, meaning certain schools might be less attractive not because they are inadequate. Instead, enrolling in other schools may provide student veterans higher BAH payments (DOD, 2021).

Going to college was not the goal for Benito after getting out of the military. He believed that his time away from school while in the military had already put him at a disadvantage, "Everyone's going to look at me like I'm some idiot," he expressed. Originally, Benito intended to become a police officer; however, due to sustaining a knee injury in the police academy, he resigned. Pursuing a college education was his last resort to provide for himself, and the fact that taking courses came with financial support helped finalize his decision, "They gave me a monthly check, and that's why I decided to go to school." With that same incentive in mind, Juan enrolled in college after completing his enlistment in the Army. Not only was his CCC nearby and easily accessible, to Juan, "It was free money, so I might as well collect on that GI Bill and get something out of it." When Andres responded to how the post-9/11 GI Bill affected his decision to pursue college, he was motivated by the amount of money he could receive compared to his previous factory job: "I wasn't even working 40 hours a week. It was actually less than what the GI Bill was paying me."

Other participants were strategic about enrolling in specific schools to maximize the amount of housing allowance they received since the post-9/11 GI Bill awards funds based on where the school is located. As a result, Jackie preferred a different college but enrolled at her local CCC since the award amount was higher, "I probably would have went to Mount SAC if



they gave me more BAH, but because [CCC] does give more [money], I attend here.”

Considering that she is a single parent caring for young children, Jackie believed she lacked the luxury of gaining an education compared to finding a stable job. The post-9/11 GI Bill, however, extended a path where she could pursue a program of study and support her family:

I think it enabled me to get the education. I don't think if I wouldn't have had those benefits I'd be in college right now because you get promised those grants, but that's not putting money in my pocket. I need to work, so I don't think school would have been a focus for me if it weren't for those benefits.

Jackie is aware of general opportunities to receive financial college support, however, without guaranteed funding to cover the cost of attending—on top of the cost of living—seeking a college education would be the least of her concerns. At the same time, she also realizes that receiving scholarships only pay for tuition, her most important obligation demands a stable income to support her family.

### Discussion

Mexican American student veterans are determined to pursue a college degree, due in large part to their experiences and commitments to military culture and values, including selfless service, meritocracy, and loyalty. Studies on Latinx student veterans attempt to demonstrate how prior conditions and characteristics before military service may be important indicators of college enrollment and success (Molina, 2015). One critical aspect these studies neglect to consider is how the military prepares veterans to pursue higher education.

Consistent with Hunt and colleagues (2022), Mexican American student veterans downplayed the existence of racism in the military, which also affirmed their adoption of meritocratic values they carried into civilian life. At the same time, however, some Mexican American student veterans recognized how the military fundamentally maintains racism through everyday operations, disrupting the idea that “only Black veterans acknowledge it [racism]” (p. 786). Still, the military's emphasis on meritocracy inculcated Mexican American student veterans to believe that individual ability is the most significant factor impacting upward mobility.

Despite being systematically discouraged from using education benefits while in service, Mexican American student veterans continue to attribute their persistence and confidence in college to their military service. This finding suggests that the military passively prepares

Mexican American service members by adapting and gradually shifting their perceptions from fixating on outcomes to valuing the process that leads to completing missions. Another important finding in this study departs from previous research indicating that prior characteristics before enlisting are determinants of college enrollment and school choice (Molina, 2015; Santos et al., 2015). These studies failed to consider how new education policy initiatives and their implementation would impact veterans' decisions to pursue a college education, leading some to speculate about the actual impact service-connected education benefits have on Latinx student veterans (Santos et al., 2015). For financially motivated Mexican American student veterans, school location—particularly at the community college level—is a critical factor influencing enrollment since the level of BAH is contingent upon the school's address.

### **Implications**

Based on these findings, most Mexican American student veterans are unclear about their educational or professional goals, and they are likely to enroll in college for financial security. Moving forward, colleges and universities can better support Mexican American and Latinx student veteran transitions to college by informing their career goals. In other words, since higher education institutions are enrolling student veterans, more efforts must be made to expand VRC budgets to include not only program administrators but also staff directing veteran research and professional development opportunities. Given the amount of financial resources and diversity that student veterans contribute to higher education institutions, it makes sense to broaden the capacity of VRCs with faculty and career advisors, otherwise, colleges and universities run the risk of maintaining student veteran mentoring deficits. Though lacking direct mentorship in exercising education benefits, research shows that three out of four Latinx service members report having an occupational mentor throughout their enlistments (Dempsey & Shapiro, 2009). In the same way, VRCs can train a cadre of staff to mentor incoming student veterans that share academic and professional interests.

Additionally, considering that Mexican American student veterans may shop for institutions with the highest financial return, it may be appropriate for colleges and universities to develop regional VRC consortiums to better exchange information between institutions and students. Situations may arise where some institutions may be better equipped to accommodate student veterans than others. Within this same recommendation, VRC

consortiums may have the ability to host veteran summer transition programs focused on student-veteran intersectionality (Smith, 2014), where incoming racially minoritized student veterans can be invited to learn more about their intersecting identities, activities that were institutionally suppressed while serving. Holding such transition programs will recreate cohorts familiar to most veterans, further creating opportunities to build and develop their new community.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The use of Latinx signals an acknowledgment of nonbinary gender identifications within the various groups with backgrounds in Mexico, Central America, and Latin America. Mexican and Mexican American is used to refer to people who have family origins in Mexico. Legal permanent residents are included in the term Mexican American student veterans. Chicana and Chicano are used to identify people normally associated with people of Mexican origin in the US seeking racial identification and distance from labels like “Hispanic.”

<sup>2</sup> I only utilized data for observations that were 25 and older, following similar guidelines found in Covarrubias (2011).

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## **Motherscholars Traversing the Educational Pipeline through Moments of Sacred Pause**

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### **Abstract**

By focusing on three Chicana Motherscholars pláticas, traversing the Educational Pipeline, I conceptualize sacred pauses as moments of joy, gratitude, and love (Tuck, 2009) as resistance and refusal. Sacred pauses refute the neoliberal university indoctrination of hyper-productivity (Hidalgo et al., 2022). This paper expands on the complex journeys of the academic bridges to what Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) calls 'passageways, conduits, and connectors' to illustrate the sacred journeys of overcoming barriers traversed through the Educational Pipeline towards doctoral degree completion for Chicana/e and Latina/e Motherscholars with children. The Motherscholar narratives characterize the potential of reciprocity and healing in bridge makers in Parents of and Women of Color.

*Keywords:* Sacred Pause, Pláticas, Educational Pipeline, Motherscholars, Bridges

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“[T]o mother ourselves entails doing what it takes to survive, but also to thrive by taking care of ourselves in ways that center experiences of joy and love” (Lara, 2018; Gumbs, Martens, and Williams, 2016).

### **Introduction: From the Margin to the Center, *Madres al Centro!***

Institutions of higher education maintain an analogous relationship to heteropatriarchal social structures of racism and sexism by historically marginalizing Mothers and Women of Color in the academy. Systemic sexism and racism impact Motherscholars of Color, who carry, like a veil, a “presumption of incompetence” (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Flores Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Téllez, 2013) about perceived commitments and performance in higher education: or after graduate professional school (Anaya, 2011), well beyond professional careers and tenure track pathways. Black and Chicana Feminists, however (Hill Collins, 1994; hooks, 1984; Latinas Telling to Live, 2001; Delgado Bernal, 2006) remind us of the agency and power of sharing our corporal realities through *pláticas* (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023) dislodging oppressive and painful experiences by elevating “voice, documenting silenced histories” (Latinas Telling to Live, 2001, pg. 3). By sharing such moments of empowerment, resistance, and feminist research praxis, a healing process of resistance prevails. In this paper, I share snapshots of *pláticas* of three first-generation Chicanas/es Latinas/es who pursued doctoral degrees while parenting as Motherscholars at universities in the Southwestern United States.

The journey through the Educational Pipeline embodies multiple pathways, including those characterized by uneven terrain and shady, dark *caminos* that threaten the journey towards degree completion. In this way, the Educational Pipeline represents what Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) calls “passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives” (p.1). The journey through the Education Pipeline with companions, equipment, and support is feasible. I also believe there are multiple pathways within the more extensive Educational Pipeline journey; when one pathway is journeyed and completed, a new one begins. Anzaldúa reminds us, “[b]ridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds, spaces I call *Nepantla*, a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio*. Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p.1).



Building on mindfulness and theological definitions of sacred pause, I illustrate sacred pause as moments of joy, gratitude, and love as experienced by Chicana/e Latina/e<sup>1</sup> Motherscholars journeying towards a doctorate, allows and acknowledges recognition of themselves, their children, and their “mommy wins” amongst the demand, chaos, and stressors of parenting while in the academy. Bridge makers nod to Chicana feminist scholars, philosophers, and thinkers, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Audre Lorde, and its contemporaries, such as Dolores Delgado Bernal and Michelle Téllez. In addition, bridge makers are braiders (Caballero et al., 2016) of time and space, forging possibilities, and opportunities, such as great femtors<sup>2</sup>/mentors, allies, friends, students, and our children.

Impacted by the illustrative quantitative data of various iterations of The Chicana/o Educational Pipeline as a newly transferred undergraduate at UCLA, I was shaken to my core to visually witness the numerical representations of pushed-out first-generation Chicanas/es, Latinas/es, and other BIPOC folx. After teaching the Chicana/o Education Pipeline for over 14 years and traversing through the pipeline, I have found femtors and mentors, *comadres*, Motherscholars, and lifelong friends support my family and I navigate the academic bridges. Additionally, to acknowledge the importance of naming oppressions and systemic violence, I sought to elevate my scholarship. I applied what Eve Tuck (2009) reminds scholars approaching research in Communities of Color in “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” of the power and self-determination to selectively pivot from the pervasive impacts of colonization in research and focus on desire, agency, power, and survivance.

Let’s face it. Some folks out there are always going to think of us as damaged, and not because they are so convinced of the devastating after-effects of colonialization. But it is crucial to recognize that our communities hold the power to begin shifting the discourse away from damage and towards desire and complexity. We can insist that research in our communities, whether participatory

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term Chicana/e Latina/e as my personal preference to challenge gender roles of mothers. Mothering is a social construction, as is gender. Therefore, to honor the multiple identities at the crux of mothering, gender, and sexuality I offer such spelling. Chicana and Latina remains unaltered if authors and scholars applied this spelling in the literature or studies I draw from.

<sup>2</sup> Femtors is a social, political, and *feminista* way of honoring femme labor in mentorship relationships. The first use of the term I heard was from scholar-activist Kimberly Soriano. It was then used and applied by a collective of femtors at UCLA throughout their praxis, in which it nods femtoring as an ‘*hermanitas*’ framework via the work of Claudia Cervantes-Soon.

or not, does not fetishize damage but, rather, celebrate survivance (Tuck, 2009, p. 422)

Tuck's above statement validates the necessity to celebrate moments of joy, agency, and love in the face of challenges and adversity. Chicanas/es and Latinas/es Motherscholars expressed parallel sentiments in their activism aimed at supporting graduate Motherscholars at the university.

Acknowledging that universities are not equipped with the resources to receive, support, retain and graduate parenting students, the onus to demand change often lands on the backs of parenting students for academic change (Caballero et al., 2016; Cisneros et al., 2016; Hidalgo et al., 2022). Mothers of Color in Academia (MOCA) assert in “Fierce Mothers: The Cords that Bind Us” (2022) that MOCA expresses the power of mother mobility and activism in their organized efforts. For over seven years MOCA demanded institutional change at their university. This included accessible and affordable daycare for parenting students, access to clean and stocked lactational spaces, and availability of lactation supplies at strategic locations on campus. While MOCA focused their fierce Mothering activism to transform practices and policies that excluded them on campus spiritual activism was similarly important. In part, this included the collective celebration of each other through moments of agency and love. MOCA activists shared:

“[S]piritual activism are the cords braided that bind us to one another through similar lived experiences, such as isolation within different departments, colleges, and disciplines. We came together and merged our academic journeys as Mothers of Color seeking to make changes through organizing, through our children, through our testimonios” (pg. 127).

MOCA demanded and materialized a different university (Hidalgo, Vega, Cisneros, & Reyes, 2022) even as they navigated degree completion deadlines, coursework, teaching obligations, as well as caretaking responsibilities, and dissertation writing. MOCA's *activism and comadrisimo*, fostered moments of sacred pause —ease, joy, celebration, and validation of each other amidst a hostile neoliberal university.

Such refusal is a compelling strategy that refuses the onus on Motherscholars in the neoliberal university by taxing Women of Color labor. As such, the moments of organizing and activism can serve as bridge making for future generations of Women of Color, mainly by

pausing for moments of rest, joy, gratitude, and love in the unforeseeable terrain of the Educational Pipeline. The term 'sacred' as defined by Merriam Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2023) adjective means to "devote exclusively to one service or use," "entitled reverence and respect," and "set apart in honor of someone." A sacred pause is a recognized moment to stop, breathe, and recollect in acknowledgement. Building on Irene Lara's (2001) *bodymindspirit* and Cindy Cruz's (2006) epistemologies of the brown body, a sacred pause is awareness through an embodiment of a Chicana/e Latina/e experiences as multiple micro and macro situations. Sacred pauses allow us to pause, stop and breathe, recognize a moment, accept the moment, breathe through the moment, and a body scan of the self, to move on to the next thing. Sacred pauses are also moments of recognition of micro-affirmations (Solórzano, Perez-Huber, Banks 2020). Below is a brief conceptualization of sacred pause according to mindfulness, theology, and the medical praxes.

Through the practice of sacred pause, we are better able to build academic bridges that allow Motherscholars to create spaces of belonging in a neoliberal university hostile to caretaking at large. Academic bridges, then, include the social infrastructure that Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) describes as the "passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives" (p. 1) which guide us to more just realities. Simultaneously, academic bridges are also constituted by the femtors, mentors, and students who help Motherscholars traverse from degree completion milestone to milestone. These bridge makers, then, become the sealant that prevent leaks in the educational pipeline for Motherscholars of Color.

### **Conceptualization of Sacred Pause**

I first learned of the "sacred pause" through lectures, podcasts, and meditations from teacher and therapist Tara Brach. In an audio-recorded meditation led by Brach (2015), she asks meditators to re-imagine a world with necessary pauses. Her argument reminds us that anxiety drives society, consistently 'doing,' feeding the neoliberal capitalist machine of over-exertion.

There is an anxiety or restlessness in us. So, instead of pausing when we are stressed, we do the exact opposite — the primitive brain drives us into activity to defend ourselves or to grasp onto what we think we need. As a result, we engage with doings that cause harm and lock us into a doing-self. They lock us

into a feeling of a self in trouble — deficient, separate — that needs to keep doing (pg. 4, Brach, 2015).

In parenting workshops of mindfulness, the sacred pause is the critical moment of instant self-reflection to recollect ourselves from challenging and emotional situations. The moment is impeccably essential, and a pause is necessary for the parent and the child. According to Wiederkehr (2008), a theological approach to sacred pause are the moments throughout the seven hours of the day intended to stop and pray as significant moments devoted to prayer and mindfulness. To be mindful, Wiederkehr suggests, is "striving to live mindfully is the art of living awake and ready to embrace the gift of the present moment" (p.2). A medical study by Kapoor et al. (2018) identifies the ritual of sacred pause intended to assist the staff in addressing unresolved and cumulative grief from deaths and burnout in the intensive care unit (I.C.U.). A "sacred pause" in several medical units' studies, are ritual to honor a patient's passing recognizing the healthcare teams' efforts. It brings closure and improves professional satisfaction by lowering burnout syndrome.

Building from the concept in teachings of mindfulness, theology, and medicine, a sacred pause are moments of celebratory acts of joy, gratitude, and love. My vision is a re-workings of a definition of a sacred pause applicable through a Motherscholar journeying the Educational Pipeline, honoring agency, self-determination, resistance, and refusal to keep hyper extensions of labor production. In my analytical coding of existing data from *pláticas* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016) with three Motherscholars, I sought moments illustrating love, gratitude, and joy. A sacred pause at times, was as simple as a Motherscholar catching their breath, a quiet minute to have a meal while I held their baby, a meditation, or the recognition of exchanging love between parent and child. These are everyday acts of love and joy emblematic of resistance and refusal against the mechanisms of the corporatization of academic hyper productions in our society. The pivot to acknowledge the sacred in the 'every day,' surpasses challenging moments indicative of what Anzaldúa (2002) affirms "[b]y redeeming your most painful experiences you transform them into something valuable, *algo para compartir* or share with others so they too may be empowered" (p. 540).

Therefore, the following questions guide this paper: What were the sacred pause moments of joy, gratitude, and love for Motherscholars traversing the educational pipeline? And what can we learn from the examples of bridge makers for Chicana/e and Latina/e Motherscholars?

### **Traversing Bridges through a Motherscholar Identity**

Throughout my graduate studies and becoming a parent in the early stages of my doctoral program, I organized with Motherscholars in and out of my campus. Now, as a junior faculty and after the labor of love as a campus organizer with Mothers of Color in Academia and The Chicana M(other)work Collective, my sense of agency was rooted by my parenting and my Motherscholar activist identities. To be clear, the stigma of a Chicana Parent in the tenure track remains racialized and gendered, and it does not limit my experiences of discrimination in various spaces – also known as Maternal Microaggressions,<sup>1</sup> a term my *comadre* and fellow Motherscholar in the struggle Dra. Cecilia Caballero and I identified. To be a Mother of Color in academia is an encumbered politics of intersectional identity, responsibility, and *movidas* because our bodies are markers of discrimination. To embody an epistemology in my parenting status, I hold deeply onto the words of Cindy Cruz (2006) while I continue to traverse the Educational Pipeline as a Faculty of Color:

“[O]ur production of knowledge begins in the bodies of our mothers and grandmothers, in the acknowledgement of the critical practices of women of color before us. The most profound and liberating politics come from the interrogations of our social locations, a narrative that works outward from our specific corporealities” (Cruz, p. 61, 2006)

The corporal reality of Motherscholar traversing the Educational Pipeline affirmed the need to research the everyday lives of Chicanas/es and Latinas/es Motherscholars, beginning with the body as a location of knowledge. Driven to investigate maternal studies and theorization, came during my pregnancy and the birth of my son, which coincided with the release of “Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women of Color in Academia” (2012). Additionally, Michelle Telléz’s (2013) “Lectures, Evaluations, and Diapers: Navigating the terrains of Chicana Single Motherhood in the Academy” formative article exposed the reality of pregnancy, Motherhood, and the tenure track. Reading imperative work and reflecting on my experiences and encounters heavily fixated on racial, gendered, and maternal microaggressions, provided me with scholarship and vocabulary to validate my experience and pursue my

research on parenting students. My spiritual and academic community uplifted, supported, and listened to my critiques and elevated my stance in ensuing this work. A Chicana Feminista Methodology reinforces that naming such oppressive and painful moments is accompanied by joy, laughter, love, and uncovering *los papelitos guardados* (Latinas Telling to Live, 2001), activates a healing process.

### **Women of Color Strolling and Straddling the Education Pipeline**

At a national scale, Chicana/es and Latinas/es women are less likely to complete postsecondary degrees compared to other groups. The Ph.D. attainment rate for Chicana/e Latina/e women remains the lowest among other racial and ethnic counterparts. Chicana/e and Latina/e women represent less than one out of every 100 Ph.D. recipients (Perez-Huber et al., 2015). Out of 100 Chicanas/es who begin their schooling at the elementary level, 63 will graduate with a high school diploma. Additionally, 13 out of 100 will receive a bachelor's degree, 4 out of 100 will receive a graduate degree (master's, professional), and 0.3 out of 100 will obtain a doctoral degree. For every 100 Latinas/es, 60 will receive a high school diploma, 11 will receive a bachelor's degree, three will receive a graduate degree, and 0.2 will receive a doctoral degree (Perez-Huber et al., 2015). The numbers are staggering. In a study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research found that in 2017, more women than men earned Ph.D.'s, however, the pay was far less (2018). Motherscholars with children under five pursuing faculty positions are less likely to receive tenure (Hidalgo, Vega, Cisneros & Reyes, 2022; Caballero et al., 2019; Téllez, 2013). While these related educational pipeline numbers are powerful on their own, without a complementary narrative, quantitative analyses risk homogenizing experience (Covarrubias, et. al., 2018: pg. 256). Therefore, the stories Motherscholars share about their academic journeys are critical in complicating their pathways through academia.

MOCA reminds us that "[t]he intangible traditions of individuality, meritocracy, and overworking Women of Color that permeate academic culture are rooted in white supremacy and heteropatriarchy." (Hidalgo, Vega, Cisneros & Reyes, 2022, p.123). In addition, Doswell (2004) states, "[t]he intensity of the Ph.D. process requires a candidate to continuously self-motivated and focus their attention on the task at hand" (pg. 4). To trek this process requires monumental motivation, particularly in isolated moments. Doswell continues to state the illusive political dimensions of impacting *ganas*, the will to push forward:

These dynamics contribute to an elusive political landscape. A political culture exists in most professions, and higher education is no exception. Being a person of Color further complicates navigating these already murky waters. The status quo maintains the "perfect" edges of the landscape. Thus, minority women in higher education often find themselves precarious. Our presence chips away at the established order (Doswell, 2004, p. 4).

Indeed, it is an elusive political landscape where our presence is a refusal to repute the status quo of the academy. Doswell asserts the importance of bridge making and the call to action and anthologize voices of and from Women of Color are heard and forge a place and space of existence and success. In response, the anthologizing of books, podcasts, and discussions in and outside the classrooms is an act of collective resistance from and by parents and Mothers of Color in and outside the academy. In the last decade and with a raging pandemic, we have witnessed the necessary and welcomed works of collective voices, such as the two-part anthology "Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia" (2012) in conversation with newer edited versions of works from Women of Color cannon not limited to "This Bridge Called my Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color" (2015) and "The Chicana M(other)work Collective Anthology: Porqué Sin Madres No Hay Revolución" (2018). A common thread between the groundbreaking work is the collective voices of critical narratives and bridging the everyday lived experiences between each other.

### **Chicana/e & Latina/e Pláticas Methodology in Motherscholar Research**

The qualitative data used for this paper is part of a larger research project collected during my five years of scholar-activism. This included in-depth Chicana/e and Latina/e in-depth *pláticas* and ethnographic field notes. I participated as a participant observer at parenting student actions, protests, meetings with college and university students, administration organizations, and community organizations. I completed 11 in-depth interviews of Chicana/e and Latina/e Motherscholars. For this paper, I focus on three *pláticas* where joy, gratitude, and love were central themes to interviewees. The *pláticas*, were often over two hours long, where rich and intimate moments of personal exchange reciprocating healing felt validating for me as well as for the Motherscholar. Chicana Feminista scholars remind us, that *pláticas* occur in

“unconventional spaces, and for parenting students in my study, I had pláticas between small availability gaps within busy schedules. Accommodating them was critically important to me, where at times, sojourner, or what scholar Gaxiola Serrano (2023) calls, walking pláticas was my method of catching a conversation. When walking pláticas was the best option, it allowed me to catch parenting students in moments of transit and walking between places.

At times pláticas included check-ins about school, our children, and our progress with the dissertation. Other interviews took place during t-ball games, in empty classrooms after class, or while holding babies while I asked my series of questions to ease the responsibility for mothers. While much academic writing has rightly focused on the various ways mothers in academia are regarded as broken, incompetent, and irresponsible, this paper seeks to turn inwards to focus on the celebratory moments of joy, gratitude, and success. Within my own corporal reality as a parent myself, I employed *Movidás* that were intentional to collect data with special care, and attention to parenting students. Thus, those narratives are importantly written about. Therefore, my research analysis of sacred pause and bridge makers are part of Tuck’s (2009) invitation to re-imagine how and about our research. Tuck states, “I invite you to join me in re-visioning research in our communities not only to recognize the need to document the effects of oppression on our communities but also to consider the long-term repercussions of thinking of ourselves as broken” (pg. 409). I coded and analyzed transcripts from interviews, for moments where Motherscholars experienced joy, desire, and celebration through their Educational Pipeline journeys.

In my research analysis, I apply a Chicana/Latina Feminista Pláticas Methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023). Fierros and Delgado Bernal’s approach as a practice honors researchers’ and research participants’ intersectional and complex epistemological positions. For Motherscholars, the transformative embodiment of parenting and caretaking serves as a place of knowledge production – not solely in birthing or carrying a child, but in its multiple manifestations. There are five contours<sup>3</sup> that compose Chicana/Latina Feminista Pláticas: (1) Rooted in Chicana/Latina Feminist and other critical theories; (2) Honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge; (3) Bridges between the everyday lived experiences and research inquiry; (4) Foregrounds the potential space for healing and (5) Relies

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<sup>3</sup> I understand contours as a blending of one another, and one may inform the other while all principles may build from each other and are significant for the functionality of each other.



on reciprocity, vulnerability, and reflexivity. Most recently, Morales et al. (2023) asserted that pláticas rooted in Chicana/Latina feminist epistemologies provide “opportunities for healing, connection, kinship, theorizing, laughter, joy, pain, and a myriad of other emotions because they center a reciprocal relationship between the researcher(s) and collaborator(s)” (Morales et al., pg. 3). In the following, I offer examples of sacred pause in addition to brief profile narratives of Chicana/e Latina/e Motherscholars to demonstrate how and where these sacred pauses were fostered moments in their lives—with special attention to moments of joy, gratitude, and love.

### ***Somos Las Madres de Esta Generación: Motherscholar Profiles***

Ayari identifies as a Chicana and Motherscholar Activist and is the mother of three children. As a doctoral student, she lived in various cities until finally settling in California to complete her dissertation. She had her first child during the second year of her Ph.D. program and had her second child while writing her dissertation. Her third child was born as she completed and defended her doctoral degree. Ayari is a senior lecturer in Southern California and a founding member of a Motherscholar-Activist advocacy group.

Born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, Libertad is a single Motherscholar of three boys. She is completing her Ph.D. in Southern California. Libertad identifies as a Chicana and has deep roots with her Mexican and Salvadorian parents. During her youth, Libertad was affiliated with gang life and has since transformed her powerful epistemological truth towards critical research while being awarded numerous accolades, prestigious fellowships, grants, and international recognition.

Xochitl is a fierce Motherscholar who identifies as Mexican American. Xochitl is a first-generation immigrant in the U.S. with bi-cultural parents who traveled and lived between their hometown of Jalisco, Mexico, and South Central Los Angeles. Xochitl was not the first in her family to attend college, however. Within her family, a few of her siblings attended various universities graduating from Ivy Leagues and University of California schools. She attended R-1 universities in Nuevo Mexico, and became a mother to her one child during her doctoral studies.

### **Sacred Pauses: Love by Any Means Necessary**

#### ***Libertad***

To love as a parent, a Caretaker of Color, and a mother while traversing the Educational Pipeline, is filled with anxiety and uncertainty. Nevertheless, per Angela Davis

(1981) and Patricia Hill Collins (1994), birth, caretaking, adopting, fostering, and raising Children of Color in U.S. society is a political act of revolution led by love. During this current political climate, Parenting and Mothering as Folx of Color reinforce solidarity with grief while children and mothers (parents) are separated, and the children are caged at the U.S./Mexico border. The collective response to such violence and societal injustices are rage and frustration. Nevertheless, the new possibilities of hope for transformative love, organizing, and advocacy are represented in the children we care for and raise. Libertad's sacred pause is located within the everyday practices of love she shows her children.

As a mother, you can do everything. You can be a guide. You can be . . . a doctor; you can be a cook. You can be a teacher. You can be so many things at once, and you can raise little minds however you want. You can mold them. All of that is done with one primary purpose, which is to give love. Always to give love and to guide them to become whatever it is that they want to become.

That's the approach that I take in my teaching and my being a friend and being a daughter. My passion for my research. I am doing this with the idea of giving and spreading love. (Libertad, *plática*, May 15, 2018)

Libertad is clear that giving love is a sacred pause for her every day as a parent, teacher, friend, or daughter. Additionally, she indicates how valuable her research is as she fosters a practice of love. Critical moments of sacred pause are compatible to critical teaching and conducting ethical research as they allow Libertad reflexivity to do good work or, as Gloria Anzaldúa suggests, doing work that matters. Libertad shares how everyday acts of love cumulatively become a guidepost for her life.

All I know is love helped me get here. The love of my ancestors, the love of my mom, the love of my dad, my siblings. Teachers, people that cross my life at certain points. Although they might have not said I love you, the love that they gave me and the support they gave me at that time I got a ride, the time I got whatever.

Libertad shared additional examples of supportive love such as when her advisor leaves a meal in the lunchroom for her and her three boys. For Libertad, such actions are affirming as they help accomplish one task from her extensive to-do list by saving her from cooking for an evening. While such actions may seem minor at first, her advisor's actions are important because they make the invisible visible. Spiritual activism's call to action, according to Anzaldúa,

is accountability to support each other and make the invisible visible. Similarly, Vega (2019) states, "Likewise, to be seen and be visible lends itself to the important interventions of femtorship and mentorship by others who may have also experienced marginality" (pg. 76). These acts of kindness inform and feed our *bodymindspirit* (Lara, 2003) and allow us as Motherscholars to pause and recognize that we are whole beings. Libertad continued by including how we, as researchers and Motherscholars, can lead with love in our careers. The critical impact of completing our degrees and being true to our authentic selves can provide for our children and our communities through our career paths. She continued:

I think we materialize careers, and I get it. Finances help us survive and all. However, if we do not do it with love and with passion, as we do our Mothering, then what is the point? What is the purpose of life? It is always about love. How can I give my kids love so that is what they know? That is what they spread. Ultimately, I will end up where my love takes me. My love for the people...My home girls who passed away, [I] have a lot of love for them. And that shows through my work. My brother who was deported who is hurting and continues to hurt for many years, have a lot of love for him. (Libertad, *plática*, May 15, 2018).

Libertad has been deeply motivated by her love for her students as an educator. During her *pláticas*, she equates her love and responsibility for her children translates in her pedagogy translates in the classroom. Similarly, her love and commitment to her South Central LA community translate into how she conducts her research. bell hooks (1994) remind us that when passion is present in the classroom, "rooted in a love for ideas, we are able to inspire, the classroom becomes a dynamic place where transformations in social relations are concretely actualized, and the false dichotomy between the world outside and the inside world of the academy disappears" (hooks, 1994, pg. 195). Libertad's commitment to ethical and critical research rooted in love motivates her research pursuits. Her love for her community and those who have been hurt and faced the implications of violence and criminalization continually motivates her. Therefore, her sacred pauses are her children, her students in the classroom, her research of her community, and her daily meditation practice that keeps her grounded. Libertad closes with a message for Motherscholars: "Mother with love and everything else follows" means that we must continue to allow the work to move the *bodymindspirit*, and we

will ultimately end up where we need to be. Libertad highlights the power of teaching her children about love, mindfulness, and well-being while reciting daily affirmations.

### **Ayari**

Ayari shared how her love for her children drove her work and motivated her to continue researching. However, she also described the realities of not wanting to leave her children behind to conduct research, especially when the institution does not reciprocate the same love or respect.

Suddenly I would not have the drive to work with [my research] ... I would not care about it. It is not that I would not care, but I would not have those same passions. Something about me biologically and chemically changed to where my love would be my children. That would be my whole life. And I would get swallowed up in that. Then I would not care about grad school. In my mind I thought, maybe that is why so many mothers drop out. [Because] they love their babies so much. They do not want to leave their kids, so their academic pursuits become less important. That is why they drop out, right? That was what I naively thought. (Ayari, *plática*, May 15, 2017)

Ayari talked about love and sacred pauses differently when she explained her fears and the anxiety of loving too much and not completing her career path as a researcher in a Ph.D. program. Biologically, the body grapples with an influx of hormones and chemical changes after birth. For some mothers like Ayari, there is a desire to be with their babies and bond.<sup>11</sup> These sacred pauses, or "stopping out," are moments of deep reflection and reconsidering what is valuable. At times frightening to think that perhaps, Motherscholars stop out of higher education because the desire is to remain at home caring for the new baby and to pause and heal. Although in reality, these stories remind Motherscholars that mothering our children also requires the same kind of love and patience to love and mother ourselves by any means necessary. Our identities are no longer at the margin; instead, we bring all the Motherscholars with us from the margin to the center along with all the children, othermothering, doulaing, nurturing, healing, and loving ourselves into existence. Our children and our bodies are sacred, and to acknowledge this is the most potent form of resistance, sacred pause, and self-care activism any person can enact in the face of survivance.

In my *pláticas* with, Ayari talks about access and equity for her students as they advance through the Educational Pipeline. Her love and commitment to her students led her to continue her advocacy work. Ayari's sacred pause is bridging a gap as an educator who advocates and braids the leaks and cracks of the Educational Pipeline on behalf of students. She states, "For those of us who are getting through the pipeline, at least for me, I am very committed to making institutional change. As much as an individual can rally the resources around them, the university [must] be held accountable." The importance of her student's success is one example of sacred pause. When they succeed through the difficulty of completing their programs, she witnesses their joy and accomplishment, illustrating the importance of her role as a bridge maker and the moment of joy as a sacred pause. Likewise, Ayari's goal is to be mindful of students who may not feel a sense of belonging as "non-traditional" students, such as parenting students, Women of Color, Veterans, and other identities at the crux of intersectional identity. She continued with a critical stance on the responsibilities of the university, as she embodies bridge-making:

They [the institution must] be held accountable to the fact that there [are] students who . . . are no longer White men who have wives that stay at home. So, that is not who the university is for anymore. Especially universities that are like state universities. I think more than anything I would tell them [parenting students] that as someone who is making it through the pipeline that, I am committing to advocating for those institutional changes so that they're not alone . . . that these are structural problems. (Ayari, *plática*, May 22, 2017)

### **Xochitl**

During Xochitl's time as a returning and re-enrolling student at a public state university in California, Xochitl was exposed to powerful Mentors of Color through her reentry to the Educational Pipeline. Xochitl credits the director of a program called *Nuevos Encuentros* that supported students subject to dismissal by providing a nurturing space to receive and retain students. As a result, she faced a second opportunity to return and re-enrolled in academia. She then provided support services and nurturance for students who returned to complete their Educational Pipeline journey. Xochitl explains that she was grateful to have been exposed to mentorship and sacred pauses in the daily while doing important work with students.

Like Libertad's example of feeling visible to her adviser, Xochitl's experience in witnessing firsthand the care work and love were built by her mentors to ensure a successful education journey as a returning to school. Simultaneously, she supported students' return to higher education as a bridge maker herself. Her experience working with *Nuevos Encuentros* daily reminds me of sacred pauses that espoused joy and gratitude by providing support services for returning students; not only were these sacred moments important for her healing, but it was through her nurturance of students while also feeling nurtured (reflexive), that she understood the core of social justice as an act of retention by providing support, as a bridge maker herself. As a result, her journey through the Educational Pipeline encouraged her to apply and attain her Ph.D. Below she states how this impact was part of her coming to consciousness through femtorign, is another example of sacred pause and bridge-making.

The students touched me and had the most impact on me. I mentored students on the brink of academic dismissal, creating, along with undergrads and graduate students, a peer mentoring program that allowed more students on academic probation to graduate, so retention. Moreover, walking them through and pairing them up with projects that they were engaged with. (Xochitl, *plática*, June 2, 2018)

Xochitl, a bridge maker, reflects how important her students became for her bridge makers as they succeeded and graduated through the leaks and cracks of the educational pipeline where they pushed out. Working alongside students who mirrored her experience provided Xochitl to celebrate moments of joy, gratitude, and love. Sacred pauses encouraged her to reflect, recollect her thoughts, and surrender to the possibility of her success traversing the Educational Pipeline.

### **The Educational Pipeline as Reflexión**

*“Academia and motherhood are crucibles that provided us with moments of rupture, moments that called into painful clarity the impossibility of moving forward with the status quo.”* Mothers of Color in Academia (Hidalgo, Vega, Cisneros, & Reyes, 2022 pg. 129) – Feminist Formations

Since my first encounter with the Educational Pipeline as an undergraduate transfer student at UCLA in 2004, I paused in rage and reflection, questioning my educational trajectory to address the leaks. For over two decades, the Chicana/Latino Educational Pipeline became a visual representation validating the marginal experiences of Students of Color in the U.S. I became invested in the pedagogical practice of teaching the curriculum surrounding the

Education Pipeline, theorizing the cracks and leaks, and through my advocacy and research work, to name and address the pushout culture. As a transient of the pipeline, I simultaneously journeyed with other Motherscholars and learned the importance of solidarity and carework for each other. It became apparent the need feverishly as I witnessed first-hand the unjust experiences Mothers of Color and parenting students were experiencing.

From the short but powerful examples illustrated by the three Motherscholars, Ayari, Xochitl, and Libertad, moments of pause were sacred in their classrooms, with their children, and as femtors/mentors. During the surge of COVID-19, a global pause forced us to look inward and reassess the over-exertion over production of the neoliberal machine. Ladson-Billings (2021) reminds us of the four pandemics, including COVID-19, racism, the threat of economic collapse, and impending environmental catastrophe. The world was in pause. Homeschooling became overwhelming and exhausting within the confines of COVID-19. My sacred pause became the outdoors, signaling moments of pause and reset for my then seven-year-old child and me. We ventured into local Los Angeles hikes and made camping a sacred ritual with other Families of Color. These moments bring maximum joy to our family while maintaining our refusal to overexert ourselves. In addition to taking to the outdoors, the aforementioned above were examples of Motherscholar organizing for change. MOCA's agentic and solidarity activism of fierce mothering solidifies transgression and survivance through their activism and pushout culture in the Educational Pipeline as bridge makers, stating, "Mothering and activism are complementary endeavors...[o]ur work is a leap of faith, an act of hope, and an investment in a future tantalizingly different from the one we know" (MOCA, pg. 123). Their spiritual activism unified and solidified activists' relationships with each other and their children as they navigated the Educational Pipeline.

In alignment with the multiple years of research, I engaged in collaborative organizing with Motherscholars in and outside the University, I re-imagine what it means to practice a sacred pause to celebrate joy, gratitude, and love. I aimed to honor those small moments that can change the course of a journey and serve as a moment to recollect oneself before continuing an arduous voyage. My analysis shows how each mother had at least one person who motivated them to pursue higher education and could be considered a bridge maker. Continuous academic journeys as first-generation Women of Color pursuing a higher education continue to enroll in Ph.D. programs in the U.S. Pláticas elaborated on a Chicana Feminista

methodology, where they “argue that Chicana/Latina Feminista pláticas are a methodological disruption...to heal from and resist research approaches rooted in whiteness, colonial logics, and white supremacy” (pg. 3). hooks remind us how love counters capitalism while describing the dialogues in her classroom with students thinking deeply about capitalism and how it informs how we think about love and care. She asserts, “the way we try to separate mind from the body” (pg. 199), and as an example, a Motherscholar identity is deeply corporal. It is impossible to separate our mind and body while navigating higher education when our experiences are rooted in the body. The sacred pause reminds us about a pedagogy of self and communal love, the call to action in recognizing bridge makers while honoring the important moments to acknowledge the silence in moments of joy, gratitude, and love.



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**An Undocumented Student's Quest for Acceptance: A Testimonio Analysis  
Traversing the Chicax Educational Pipeline**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the educational trajectory of a multiply marginalized undocumented Latinx student. Utilizing a Critical Race Quantitative Intersectional + *Testimonio*, this article brings to light the experiential knowledge often not visible in quantitative data approaches, helping to contextualize educational pipeline numbers. This study draws on a *testimonio* methodology revealing challenges and illuminating educational pathways from high school to the doctorate. The findings show important considerations for policy and practice that account for social instability, consider the importance of mentorship, and offer implications for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion leaders to create greater belonging across campuses throughout the educational pipeline.

*Keywords:* undocumented, graduate students, educational pipeline, Latinx, *testimonio*

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*I had fear and was emotionally affected because I remember being depressed, anxious, and nervous about not knowing what would happen next. How am I going to live? [This question] was constantly [on] my mind. But I always [found] the right people at the right time.*

-Joaquín

In the epigraph above, Joaquín alludes to the state of fear he experienced, which forced him to flee his hometown in Mexico, leaving behind everything he had known in his 15 years of life. As an unaccompanied minor, his *testimonio* of migration to the United States is one of persistence and resistance in search of liberty/freedom and acceptance of his intersectional identities as a gay, working-class, undocumented Mexicano who was the first in his family to attend a university. Each step of his migratory and educational journey was taken in a perpetual state of uncertainty around employment and housing. Joaquín's story of navigating the U.S. educational pipeline is revelatory of the power of serendipitous moments and the generosity of numerous caring institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) who made his journey possible. Having reached near completion of a doctoral degree in 2011, Joaquín's case helps illuminate how students' sharing their identities struggle and resist across the educational pipeline and where and to whom they turn for support.

Over the last decade, several research studies (Covarrubias, 2011; Covarrubias & Lara, 2014; Covarrubias et al., 2018; Huber, et al., 2015) have examined the educational attainment of Chicana/Latina students at different junctures across the educational pipeline, highlighting the dismal numbers of students that ultimately attain higher education. Yet, there is limited research on undocumented students like Joaquín who achieved high levels of formal education before the 2012 passage of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals<sup>1</sup> (DACA) or who don't meet the eligibility requirements (Lara, 2014).

Building on the work of educational pipeline scholars (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2006; Pérez Huber et al., 2006), this paper applies a Critical Race Quantitative Intersections + *Testimonio* (CRQI + T) analysis, and seeks to answer the following research question: How can the educational *testimonio* of an undocumented, unaccompanied

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<sup>1</sup> The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals is an Obama era policy that grants administrative relief from deportation to those that qualify and apply for it. Eligible immigrants are able to receive protection from deportation and are also provided with a permit.

minor help expand analysis of the educational pipeline as a conceptual tool? This article draws on a larger ethnographic research study conducted over two years examining the life journey and educational trajectory of a Chicana undocumented graduate student enrolled in a Ph.D. program at a research-intensive institution on the East Coast.

### Literature Review

#### *The Educational Pipeline*

The educational pipeline has been utilized as a tool to highlight educational attainment across different racial and ethnic groups. By utilizing census data, educators and researchers have highlighted the pivotal points in education where students depart, calling attention to the importance of retention and support for Latinx students at all levels of the educational pipeline. More importantly, the educational pipeline literature has prompted further exploration of different junctures and different experiences for various racial and ethnic groups. The initial pipelines (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano et al., 2005; Pérez Huber et al., 2006; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006; Rivas et al., 2007) utilized the 2000 decennial Census data to illustrate educational inequities through completion rates for an education at the high school, community college, four-year college or university, and graduate school (master's and doctoral) levels.

In a novel approach to the educational pipeline, Alejandro Covarrubias and Argelia Lara (2014) extended prior articulations by focusing on what they term Critical Race Quantitative Intersections (Covarrubias, 2011; Covarrubias & Velez 2013; Covarrubias & Lara, 2014). Covarrubias and Lara employed this Critical Race Quantitative Intersections (CRQI) framework to examine the educational outcomes of people of Mexican origin. Using 2010 Census data, they developed an innovative methodology to estimate the number of undocumented people of Mexican origin to reveal significant differences in educational attainment outcomes associated with legal status.

Building on CRQI, Covarrubias and colleagues introduced CRQI + *Testimonio* (Covarrubias, et al., 2018). Here, the authors argued for the importance of incorporating the stories of those at the margins to fully understand the intersectional experiences of student access to education and related opportunities. They addressed the importance of marshaling evidence from statistical data to quantify how patterns of educational inequality are compounded for marginalized students of color.

Most recently, the work of the educational pipeline has been extended to the state of Texas, where Aleman and colleagues (2022a) have applied its function as a critical race heuristic. They utilize the pipeline as a visual representation and instructive tool to inform their pedagogy, leading educators to attain a conscientization about the factors contributing to disparities within the educational system. Additional pipelines on the state of Texas have begun to emphasize the importance of middle school as a key transition point for Latinas/os and Chicana/os (Aleman et.al., 2022b). While these are important contributions to the literature, no additional pipelines have been published examining educational outcomes for Latinx undocumented populations.

#### *Undocumented Students in Higher Education, DACA, and Its Limitations*

The Plyer v. Doe 1982 case was instrumental in providing access to a free public education for undocumented students in the K-12 school system. Access to higher education, however, remained limited. It was not until 1985 that the case of Leticia A. v. UC Regents and CSU Board of Trustees supported the right of undocumented college students to pay in-state tuition. This case was overturned in 1990 by Bradford v. UC Regents, once again blocking their eligibility for in-state tuition. In 2001, Assembly Bill 540 (AB540) was established, reinstating the eligibility of undocumented students in California for in-state tuition.

Student activism (Gonzales, 2008; Negrón-Gonzales, 2015; Escudero, 2020; Terriquez et al., 2018) and resistance movements (Buenavista, 2018; Pérez Huber, 2017; Rodriguez, 2022) were instrumental in demanding equitable opportunities and resources for undocumented students, drawing significant attention and leading to policies like DACA that temporarily widened access to employment and higher education. A recent report by the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (2021) found that there were approximately 427,000 undocumented students, with about 181,000 of them who were DACA-eligible. The literature on undocumented college graduates and their employment opportunities is limited and needs to examine further the experiences and perspectives of students who, for example, do not meet the age requirements of DACA, come from mixed-status families, or do not meet the high school requirements for eligibility.

Recent studies on undocumented graduate students found that they face challenges obtaining funding and finding support networks (Lara, 2014; Lara & Nava, 2018; Escudero, 2020) in their respective graduate programs, often drawing on familial savings to fund their studies

(Escudero et al., 2019; Lara & Nava, 2022). When navigating the graduate school process, undocumented graduate students were found to rely on their peers and mentors for guidance and were motivated by justice concerns (Lara & Nava, 2018). Undocumented graduate students who are not eligible for DACA continue to be marginalized and find it extremely difficult to take on paid opportunities, or secure financial assistance, given that most fellowships are limited to students who have access to DACA (Freeman & Valdivia, 2021).

Therefore, how most undocumented students navigate exclusionary education structures remains an important research area. The practices and strategies utilized by the student population in navigating higher education can help inform the development of institutional support systems focusing on this group—ultimately creating a more inclusionary campus.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) and seeks to contextualize the lived experiences of a Mexican-origin, undocumented student across the educational pipeline. CRT is a theoretical tool that “challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). Over the last three decades, CRT scholars (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano 1997) in the field of education have sought to disrupt social, political, and educational inequities in part following the inadequacy of multicultural education reforms of the 1980s in addressing forms of marginalization. Building upon the work of scholars in the legal arena (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), critical race theorists have actively sought to create social change by improving the lived conditions of marginalized groups.

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) have outlined five guiding tenets that form the basic perspectives of CRT in education. The first tenet asserts that *race and racism are a central and defining feature of U.S. society and intersect with other forms of social oppression* (Solórzano & Yosso 2001). The second tenet *challenges the dominant ideology* that the “educational system and its institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 472). The *commitment to social justice* is the third tenet, which proposes a transformative response to race, class, and gender-based oppression and offers a context of empowerment for racially minoritized groups. The fourth tenet is the *centrality of*

*experiential knowledge*, framing the knowledge of students and communities of Color as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education” (p. 473). The fifth tenet is *the transdisciplinary perspective*, which draws from across the fields and disciplines of study and “insists on analyzing race and racism in education by placing them in both an historical and contemporary context” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p.473). In what follows, I detail how a Critical Race Quantitative Intersectionality Framework (Covarrubias & Velez, 2013) is grounded in CRT and how it extends CRT.

### Methodology

I utilized Critical Race Quantitative Intersectionality + *Testimonio* (Covarrubias, Nava, Lara, Burciaga, & Solórzano, 2018) as an analytical framework for this study. I begin by building from Covarrubias and Velez’s (2013) CRQI framework and methodological approach that seeks to “account for the material impact of race and racism at its intersection with other forms of subordination (p. 276). I also draw here from qualitative methods to be able to ground the quantitative data from the educational pipelines. I borrow from the work of Chicana Feminists (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012) who define *testimonio* as an “approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories that accompany one’s life experiences as a means to bring about change through consciousness-raising. In bridging individuals with collective histories of oppression, a story of marginalization is re-centered to elicit social change.” (p. 364). Cruz (2012) reminds us that *testimonio* “is a story of a subject who has experienced or witnessed great trauma, oppression, forced migration, or violence” (p. 461) that pushes back against erasure. In what follows, I draw on my prior co-authored work (Covarrubias et al., 2018) to name the four tenets guiding CRQI + T.

#### *CRQI + T Tenet #1: Disrupting dominant data mining – toward an intersectional approach*

While prior educational pipelines lent themselves to centering a racial analysis, CRQI+ T began as a framework seeking to “do more” at the intersections (Covarrubias, 2011; Covarrubias & Velez, 2013). A CRQI + T framework acknowledges that “educational experiences [are] mediated by how racialization interact[s] with gender, social class, citizenship, and other social constructions” (Covarrubias et al. 2018, p. 256). Even with the limitations stemming from using US Census data and the narrowness of specific categories, “the large-scale nature of the US Census allowed us to create reliable portraits of educational (in)opportunity



for Communities of Color at varying scales of geography” (p. 257). The educational pipelines used in this article all pull from data that examines intersecting variables of race, gender, and citizenship status.

*CRQI + T Tenet #2: Numbers do not speak for themselves*

This tenet emphasizes that a CRQI+T framework calls for “quantitative analyses to be critically contextualized, and challenges claims of neutrality” (Covarrubias et al., 2018, p. 257) often associated with quantitative approaches. *Testimonio* can play an important role in critically historicizing and contextualizing quantitative findings to disrupt deficit interpretations of leakage points in the pipeline. Similarly, Carbado and Roithmayr (2014) remind us that “language and theoretical method used to frame an inquiry shape not just the observer’s interpretation of facts, but also what the observer perceives to be a fact in the first place” (p.158).

*CRQI + T Tenet #3: Experientially and materially grounding data*

Critical race scholars employing CRQI+T framework begin with the lived experiences of People and Communities of Color, “[as it] is not only valid and relevant for understanding inequality in American education, but necessary” (Covarrubias & Vélez 2013, p. 279). In this way, *testimonios* highlight the localized knowledge of multiply marginalized students, providing for a more grounded and contextualized analysis of statistical educational outcomes and offering what Covarrubias and colleagues have termed *experiential significance*

*CRQI + T Tenet #4: Commitment to structural transformation of intersectional subordination*

This fourth tenet highlights a commitment to research that is “purposeful in engaging a praxis of structural transformation that is deeply committed to social justice” (Covarrubias et al. 2018, p. 258). CRQI+T, in its dealing with intersectionality, goes beyond merely examining differences in identity but is most concerned with understanding and critiquing how oppression and domination are deployed through the various isms.

*The Chicana Educational Pipelines: U.S.-Born and The Undocumented*

For this study, I selected two pipelines from my previously published work with Alejandro Covarrubias (Covarrubias & Lara, 2014), which I reproduce below. Data from these pipelines come from the Census Current Population Survey March 2010 Supplement<sup>2</sup>. I selected these pipelines because they align with Joaquin’s *testimonio*, which was collected during

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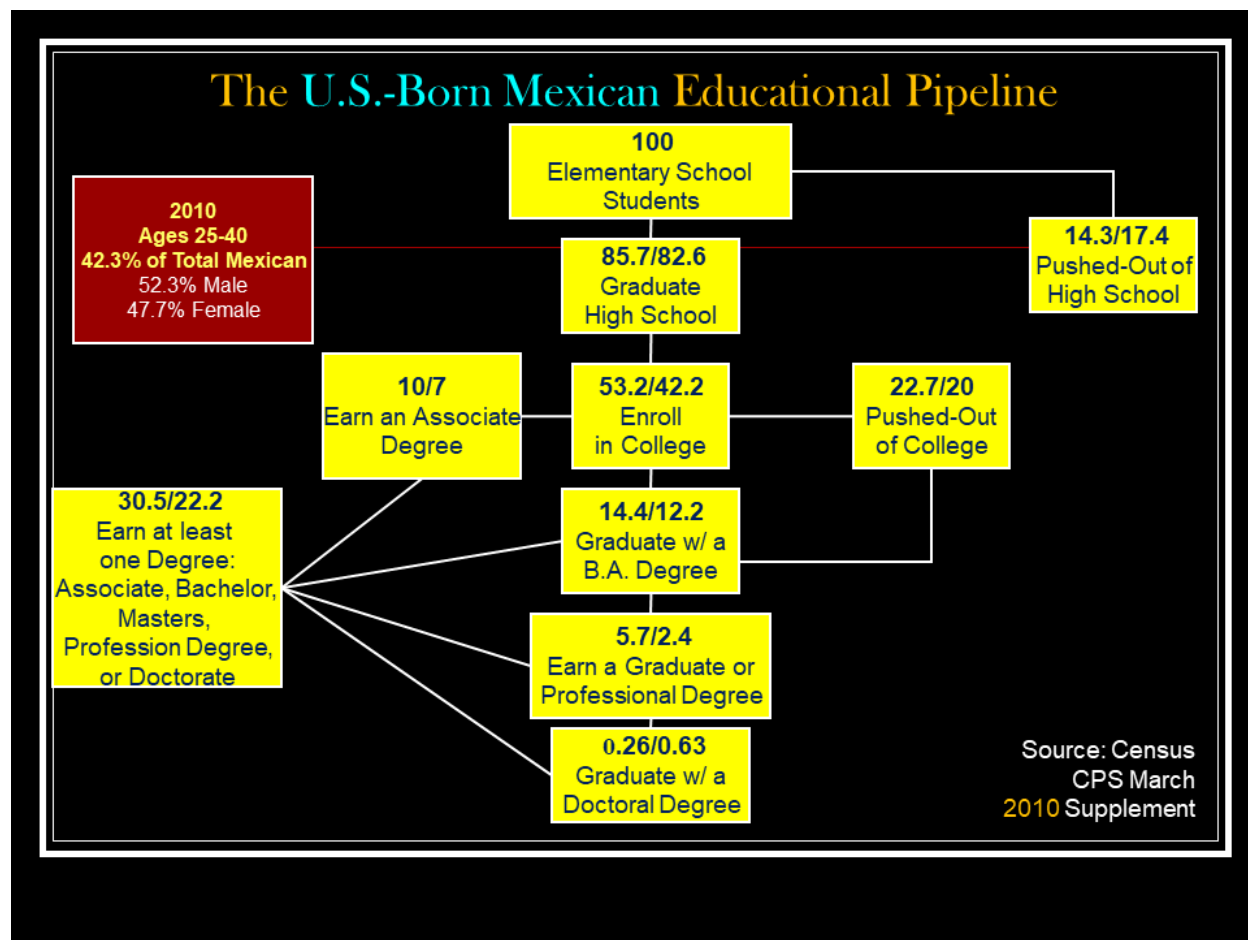
<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the methodological approach used to create these pipelines please see my co-authored publication (2014) with Alejandro Covarrubias.

the 2010 academic year towards the end of his doctoral journey. During the telling of Joaquin’s *testimonio* I present educational outcome data at critical junctures from each of these educational pipelines.

**Figure 1**

*The U.S.-Born Mexican Educational Pipeline*

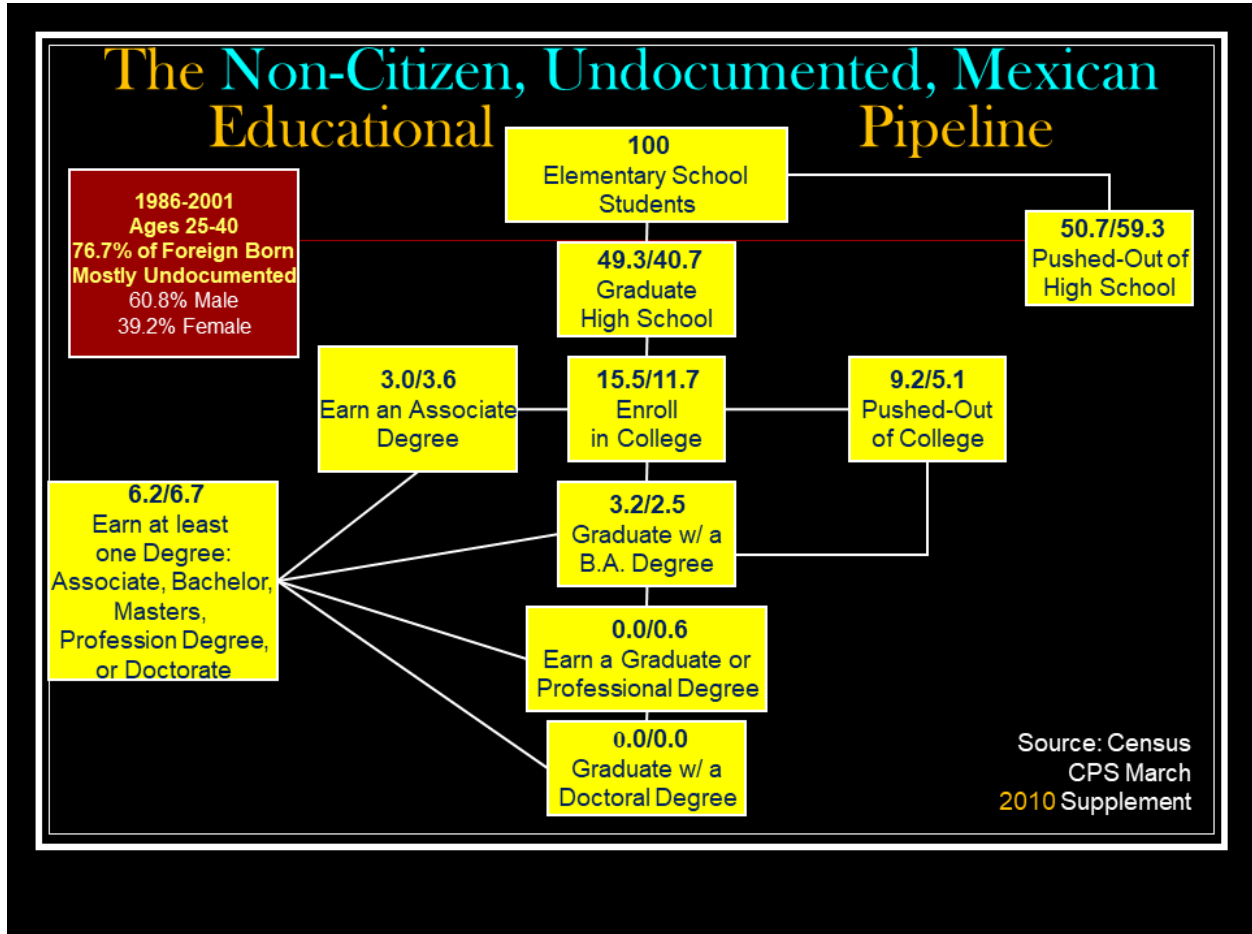
Adapted from "The undocumented (im)migrant educational pipeline: The influence of citizenship status on educational attainment for people of Mexican origin.," by A. Covarrubias, & A. Lara, 2014, *Urban Education*, 49, (1) 75-10 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912470468>). Reprinted with permission.



**Figure 2**

*Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline*

Adapted from "The undocumented (im)migrant educational pipeline: The influence of citizenship status on educational attainment for people of Mexican origin.," by A. Covarrubias, & A. Lara, 2014, *Urban Education*, 49, (1) 75-10 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912470468>). Reprinted with permission.



In the next section, I provide a CRQI + T analysis to understand the above educational outcomes. I utilize Joaquín's *testimonio* to highlight critical junctures in his trajectory across the educational pipeline and identify key factors that made access to education possible despite his many challenges as an undocumented student.

### **The Pipeline in the Context of Joaquín's Testimonio**

*Joaquín's Early Elementary Schooling in Mexico and Sexual Identity*

Joaquín grew up in Michoacán, Mexico as an only child in a conservative catholic family. He described living in a society, a small community, and a family where he regularly heard homophobic remarks. His mother was the main provider for the family, as Joaquín's father was often away, constantly migrating to the U.S. for work. Joaquín has powerful memories of his father always going to the U.S. and returning to Michoacán. Joaquín grew up knowing he was different from other kids and, simultaneously, that he had to find ways to present himself as "normal." He recalled:

So I grew up knowing that I was different and that at the same time that I was different, I had to find ways to pretend that I was normal, to pretend that I was accepted there (in Michoacán, Mexico). You find that you have to protect yourself from them in the way you act, in the way you react to things, in the way you behave, in the way you treat them. I was pretty much growing up in this environment where I was exposed to pejorative comments, bad treatment. It wasn't pleasing.

Early in his schooling, Joaquín felt that people saw something different in him that they did not accept. In elementary and high school, he frequently experienced rejection by his classmates, who made fun of him and called him hurtful names. As a child, he often wondered if moving to another town or a large city where no one knew him could lead to people treating him like any other kid and bring an end to the name-calling and hostile treatment. Relocating would allow for a new opportunity for him to be in a new place where people would treat him differently; they would accept him in that community and in that society.

Joaquín's family eventually relocated to a large city, but he nonetheless continued to experience marginalization. His peers treated him badly, the name-calling continued, and some kids even threw rocks at him. He shared one memorable and terrifying incident in which he was threatened by a classmate's friend who put a knife to his throat. Joaquín explained the incident this way:

I remember one time, *uno de los compañeros de los otros estudiantes me puso una navaja aquí* (one of the other students placed a knife here) (grabs throat), telling me, *dime que* (tell me), *cabrón*, *dime si eres joto* (tell me if you are gay), *joto* is maricon, it is a pejorative word for homosexuals there. Oh my God, it was this kind of behavior you see, and again knowing that I was homosexual and that I couldn't go back home and tell my

family. This is what I'm experiencing, they would discriminate against me more. So my experience was one of sexual discrimination there.

As Joaquín shared his *testimonio*, his reasoning behind his decision to migrate became apparent. This pivotal moment informed Joaquín's decision to leave his community to seek refuge away from home.

His feelings of not belonging and needing to go somewhere else became a reality when he met a group of young people who coincidentally expressed a desire to migrate to the U.S. He clarified:

I needed to go somewhere, whatever that place is, might be the moon, might be wherever, I don't want to live, I don't want to go hide, I have to go somewhere. I just want to run away, and life brought me here like that.

Joaquín had been working an assortment of jobs, having saved money and migrated to the U.S. with the intent to find something better— the safety and acceptance he longed for. His border crossing was a matter of survival as his life had been threatened, and he might not be alive had he not decided to leave for the U.S.

**Table 1**

*High School Graduation Outcomes: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100
Women 85.7/ Men 82.6	Women 49.3/ Men 40.7

*Escaping Violence as an Unaccompanied Minor into the United States*

As an unaccompanied minor at the age of 15, Joaquín attempted entry into the U.S. three times before he succeeded. He was able to settle temporarily near San Diego, where he worked distributing flyers for a small tax business and ultimately obtained a job at a Ross department store. After four months of working and surviving, he reached out to his aunt in Central California, who convinced him to live with her and enroll in school to at least complete high school. Joaquín shared:

I couldn't open up. *So, uno crece así con este*, feeling this way inside, feeling uncomfortable, feeling that if you open up you will probably lose people that you love or

that you are going to be discriminated against once more because you don't know what to expect.

Joaquín described living with his aunt and family in California in similar ways to his immediate family in Mexico, as not being accepting of his sexuality as a gay adolescent. Due to this, he was unable to open up about his sexual identity and did not enjoy his high school experience because he did not fit in. At times, Joaquín felt like he was a burden on his family and had to tolerate living there because he had nowhere to go. A key challenge for Joaquín entering high school was having to learn English. He described this period in his life as a time of “adapting, readjusting to something new.” Although he experienced numerous “internal emotional problems,” he did have some positive experiences in high school.

I had good teachers in high school that inspired me, Ms. Dee, I remember she was an English teacher and was really strict. Oh, but I loved her! She was one of the best teachers that I've had, and she inspired me to continue going to school.

When Joaquín finished high school, he did not feel prepared for the next steps in life and was unaware that he could continue on to higher education. He knew he was ineligible to apply for federal financial aid, but he did not know of other sources of support for which he may have been eligible. Nobody ever told him that he could attend a college or a 4-year university. Joaquín just went with the “flow.” He knew that if he had been documented, he would have been made aware of more opportunities, and he would not have been overlooked by his counselor and likely would have received greater guidance around the next steps of his educational journey. Despite the limited information he received, he enrolled in a local community college.

When the Chicax educational pipeline is disaggregated by “US-Born” in comparison to “Non-Citizen, Undocumented,” we see a 40 percent difference in those that graduate from high school. The secondary school years are foundational for identity development, as well as career and occupational explorations. Having safe spaces inside and outside of schools where students can explore their identities without feeling reproach or judgment is of critical importance. While Joaquín was fortunate to find family members to live with, it came at the cost of not being able to be his authentic self as a gay adolescent.

**Table 2**

*Enter College: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100
Women 53.2/ Men 42.2	Women 15.5/Men 11.7

*Entrance into Community College*

Joaquín's pathway into the community college became clearer to him when a friend gave him a ride to the local community college to ask and learn about enrollment. The friend played a vital role in Joaquín's entrance into higher education, given the limited access to public transportation in rural communities in Central California. During his visit to the community college, he met with a counselor who provided course selection guidance and assisted him with registration and enrollment.

I remember it was really, really cheap. So, first semester I paid tuition and later on I did some research about organizations, and I got into an organization where they paid my tuition and they gave me books [for my class]. Then I found out about a pre-service teacher program and since I didn't want to work washing dishes or anything like that, I figured I better work in something else. I applied for the teaching program and they accepted me, and through my relationship with the teaching program and this organization that paid my books and tuition, I lived like a king you see, my life was a lot better.

At the time, Joaquín aspired to become an educator. The organizations he participated in that offered him support pointed him toward a career in teaching, which promised a good wage, mentorship, and professional development. His first year at the community college came with a degree of stability, creating an opportunity to move out of his aunt's house to live with roommates closer to campus. That would not last long, as by the end of his second year, Joaquín discovered his roommates were involved in illicit activities arriving one day to a ransacked apartment where everything was thrown around and destroyed. Fearing the perpetrators would return to hurt him if he remained in the apartment, he left his roommates

and sought refuge elsewhere. Once again, Joaquín faced the uncertainty of where to turn next. He recalled one particular day feeling immense sadness and described, by happenstance, running into one of his community college professors on campus. He shared:

*Un día* (One day), I was taking a class and this professor approached me. *Estaba tomando una clase de francés y mi profesora Marie G n reuse* (I was taking a French class with my professor), I don't know how she realized that I was sad or something was wrong. So she came to ask me, 'Hey what's the matter, why are you so sad?' and I told her what happened to me. "I don't know what I'm going to do and life is miserable, I don't know what to do. I don't have a place to go." She responded and said, 'Why don't you come to live in my house.' *Y all  empez , y era mi profesora de franc s* (And everything started there, she was my French professor). *Entonces* (Then), she welcomed me in her house, *me dio un cuarto, y me dice* (she offered me a room and said), you don't have to pay rent, your job is to go to school, finish what you have to do.

Joaqu n's French professor, Marie G n reuse, provided him with a space to live at a critical time of need. Additionally, she also guided the next steps of his educational trajectory. With her support, Joaqu n made a realistic and informed choice to attend the local California State University (CSU). Given his undocumented status, professor G n reuse informed Joaqu n that he would need a lot of money to attend Boston College and that a more realistic choice would be to transfer to the CSU. Joaqu n credited Professor G n reuse for sharing this sobering dose of reality while connecting him with key institutional agents at the CSU who could support him as an undocumented student. Joaqu n described Professor G n reuse as a loving grandmother with whom he has remained connected over the years.

Joaqu n's decision to attend a community college was logical given the universal access, proximity to where he lived, and affordability as an undocumented student. Like Joaqu n, 80% of Latinx students begin their postsecondary education in community colleges. Due to various factors including course placement in developmental education, finances, and immigration status, less than a third (32%) of Latinx students transfer to a 4-year university (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). Joaqu n's participation in a support program coupled with living with roommates, comparatively speaking, given his precarious financial status, left him feeling "like a king,"



**Table 3**

*Graduate with a B.A.: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100
Women 14.4 / Men 12.2	Women 3.2/ Men 2.5

*Undergraduate Desires of Teaching & Serendipity*

Joaquín's undergraduate experience was one of living in constant fear of what was to come. He was emotionally drained and in a state of depression as his mental health suffered due to anxiety at the thought of the uncertainty each subsequent semester brought. He shared the worry he experienced after paying his first semester and seeing the specific costs for it.

How am I going to pay the next semester? And how am I going to buy my books? How am I going to pay rent? How am I going to live? So it was constant in my mind, it went on and on and on. But there was always something, I tell you that I always find the right people at the right time. I remember I always looked for scholarships and programs, and I got into the Future Teachers Program in the school of education, where if you wanted to be a teacher, they used to pay your tuition.

The ongoing stress Joaquín experienced required him to always be on the lookout for different types of support. A navigational strategy Joaquín relied on was remaining persistent even in circumstances when individuals constantly told him no job opportunities existed. He elaborated on how he managed to get hired by the Future Teachers Program by going to the employer's office every day. He stated:

I remember *que yo iba a hablar con la señora todos los días y la señora decía no, que no, que no, que no, que no* (I would go speak to the lady every day and the lady would say no, no, no). "We don't need Spanish or French teachers, we don't need them." *Y una vez iba caminando con un señor por allá y yo fui corriendo y le dije* (One time she was walking with a man over there and I went running and told her), guess what? *El señor era su jefe*, (The man was her boss) and I said, "Oh Ms., I just wanted to ask you, because I'm really interested in your program and I want to be a teacher and I'm really worried that I don't

know how I will pay my tuition, I really want to be a part of your program. I have good grades and I'm dedicated, I'm an excellent student." She replied, "I've told you so many times, ask him, he'll tell you, we don't have any position." And guess what the man said? He said "Didn't you hear that at this school, they want a Spanish teacher, they do need language teachers." And I said to myself "*¿No qué no?*" (So, no jobs, huh?) [laughs].

Joaquín's persistence paid off, as he was hired by the Future Teachers Program. Working as a teacher for the program provided Joaquín with the added benefit of having tuition paid for two years. Following that period, Joaquín participated in an exchange program where he spent a year at a state college on the east coast. Upon his return after a year away, Joaquín learned the Future Teachers Program he previously worked for could no longer support him, leaving him unsure of how he would pay for the last year of his undergraduate studies.

A few weeks later, he was walking across the street, full of worry, asking God for help. As he crossed the street, he saw his friend Maria, who greeted him from afar. She yelled "Joaquín, *¿Cómo has estado?* (Joaquín, how have you been?). *I haven't seen you in such a long time.*" She shared with Joaquín that she had applied for a scholarship, and she encouraged him to apply for it as well. Based on that serendipitous conversation with his friend Maria, Joaquín applied for, and, shortly after, received notification that he was awarded the scholarship. This scholarship provided him with the financial support needed to complete the rest of his bachelor's degree.

Prior research on undocumented students has shown that being a *sin vergüenza*, or without shame, is an important resistance and navigational strategy for self and community advocacy (The S.I.N. Collective, 2007). Joaquín exemplified this through self-advocacy by remaining persistent and refusing to take no for an answer until he was able to transform a situation of hopelessness into one of possibility, ultimately leading to his employment in the Future Teachers Program. Undocumented students in the undergraduate segment of the educational pipeline typically struggle while having to work multiple jobs, dealing with mental health issues, in part due to lack of clear policies and limited forms of structural support. Negron Gonzales (2017) has referred to this process as one of *constrained inclusion*, where recent policy changes offer a degree of inclusion while the reality of citizenship status continues to restrict the type of access these students have. Joaquín became one of the 11% of Chicax

students overall and less than 3% of undocumented students who are able to obtain a bachelor's degree at this stage of the educational pipeline.

**Table 4**

*Earn a Graduate or Professional Degree: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b> Start Elementary: 100
Women 5.7 / Men 2.4	Women <b>0.0</b> /Men <b>0.6</b>

*Leaving California for Graduate School*

Joaquín's trajectory into graduate school was again supported by a French professor, this time at the CSU. He was intrigued by the professor's way of being, the way she interacted with her students, and her pedagogical approach. At the time, Joaquín wanted to pursue a master's degree at Boston College or a state university in Michigan. The state of Michigan was high on Joaquín's list of graduate school destinations partly because of his desire to obtain a driver's license. At that time, the state of Michigan allowed undocumented people to obtain a driver's license with alternative forms of documentation, prompting his decision to attend graduate school there. The same week Joaquín arrived in Michigan, new restrictions were implemented by the state legislature that no longer allowed the undocumented to apply for a driver's license.

Despite being unable to drive in Michigan, Joaquín's graduate education was guided by his intuition that better things awaited. Joaquín described the time in his master's degree program as one of his best experiences.

*Fue una de mis mejores experiencias. (It was one of my best experiences.)* I applied for a fellowship and they gave me a fellowship for the first year, so I didn't have to work. I didn't have to do anything, I was living like a king. Woohoo! I'm so grateful about it, and then I had to teach the next year as a T.A. and how the university pays you, gives you a waiver, a tuition waiver, and they pay you like a monthly payment, and that's why I survived.

For the first time in his educational trajectory, Joaquín did not have to worry about the financial aspects of his education. The first year he was supported by a fellowship that provided him with

a degree of financial stability that he had not experienced prior to that. While he was required to work as a teacher assistant (TA) during his second year, his TAship came with a tuition waiver, which involved much less work than what he was used to.

Another key aspect contributing to Joaquín's positive experiences in Michigan was that this was the first time felt he could come out as a gay man.

*Yo empecé a sentirme ya más cómodo* (I began to feel more comfortable), like, nobody knows me here. You see I'm a new me. *Entonces me sentía más cómodo* (Well, then I felt more comfortable), and little by little, at this point, I'm comfortable, I feel very okay with who I am.

This was an important juncture for Joaquín, as he was, for the first time, being offered institutional support that lessened his anxiety and improved his mental health. Similarly, being in a new environment provided him with an opportunity to start over and build the confidence to be his authentic self, contributing to his overall well-being. At this juncture in the educational pipeline, only about three out of every 100 Latinx students graduate with a Master's or professional degree, whereas less than 1 out of every 100 undocumented students achieve the same.

After completing his master's degree, Joaquín applied to several Ph.D. programs and ultimately decided to attend a program on the East Coast.

**Table 5**

*Earn a Graduate or Professional Degree: Comparison of U.S. Born and Undocumented Pipelines*

<b>U.S. Born Mexican Educational Pipeline</b>	<b>Noncitizen, Undocumented, Mexican Educational Pipeline</b>
Start Elementary: 100	Start Elementary: 100
Women 0.26 / Men 0.63	Women 0.0 / Men 0.0

In becoming a Latinx doctoral student, Joaquín represented less than 1% of students enrolled in doctoral programs (Solórzano et al., 2005; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). The Ph.D. program Joaquín enrolled in was in the humanities, allowing him to teach a variety of language courses. During his first year in the program, he taught Spanish classes to first-year university students. Joaquín planned to work as a teaching assistant during the entirety of his program of study. However, he was informed by his department of some inconsistencies existing across his documentation. However, the university was no longer able to offer him financial support,

as he was now expected to pay his tuition and all other expenses to continue as a doctoral student. This immediately impacted his housing situation, and he could no longer afford the room that he rented through a social network when he initially started the program. To Joaquín's surprise, the faculty at his doctoral institution rallied to support him and strategized to find a solution to his dilemma. He shared:

I had to move out because it was too much money for me to pay. So I tell you again that I meet the right people at the exact right time. I was waiting for the bus across the street *de donde yo vivo* (from where I live) and there was this old guy, *así un ancianito, bien viejito* (a little old man), *y me empezó hacer plática* (and he started to chat with me) (laughs). *Y yo también le hago plática* (I too responded and chatted with him). I guess he realized that I had an accent, *y me empezó hablar en español cositas de que hay cómo estás?* (He started speaking to me in Spanish little things like how are you?) *Resulta que bueno pues allí lo conocí y es el señor donde yo vivo ahora* (Well that's where I met him and that is the man where I live now). It works out really, really fine because he's British, so he goes away a lot during the year, and I'm able to watch the house while he's away. *Como, por ejemplo, la semana que viene se va a Inglaterra* (Like for example, next week he is going to England), so I have to watch the house *y cuando* (and when) I have to watch the house, I don't pay rent. So that's good.

This serendipitous moment that led to dialogue with a stranger at a bus stop, transformed into a mutually beneficial agreement to support one another. Joaquín's role in the agreement consisted of house-sitting initially and then extended into him supporting the British man with chores around the house. Joaquín paid the old British man by working around the house, washing dishes, cleaning and vacuuming the floor, taking out the trash, and keeping the house clean. In exchange, Joaquín was not expected to pay rent. This, along with employment at a neighboring university that came with a tuition waiver at his university, allowed him to help his mother rebuild their home in Mexico, which had deteriorated over time. This action alone brought Joaquín a great deal of joy and happiness

Joaquín completed his doctoral studies in 2011, a year before the then President of the United States, Barack Obama, issued an executive order known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). For undocumented immigrants who experienced DACA, several studies indicate positive outcomes associated with the policy, including increased wages

(Gonzalez, Terriquez, & Rusczyk, 2014), greater employment stability (Pope, 2016), improved mental health outcomes (Patler & Pritle, 2018), and a reduction in the number of DACA-eligible household heads in poverty (Amuedo-Dorantes & Antman, 2016). Despite these positive outcomes associated with DACA, the policy was challenged in the courts by Republican state officials across the country, and is presently allowed only to renew the applications of immigrants currently in the program. Similarly, it was still several years prior to same-sex marriage bans across several states being struck down with the Supreme Court ruling of 2015. These two significant policy changes would positively impact the quality of life for immigrant students with similar social locations as Joaquín.

According to the educational pipeline, Joaquín became one out of every 670 Chicax students who obtained a doctoral degree. As for the undocumented Foreign Born Chicax, the number is not statistically visible for undocumented Chicax. Following the completion of his Ph.D., Joaquín would go on to accept a postdoctoral opportunity at a university in the Midwest for one year before heading to Canada. He departed to Canada in hopes of pursuing career opportunities and to be able to legally marry his partner.

### **Discussion**

I began this paper by asking the following question: How can the educational *testimonio* of an undocumented unaccompanied minor help expand the analysis of the educational pipeline as a conceptual tool? Examining Joaquín's *testimonio* across the educational pipeline reveals several important insights. In this section, I discuss Joaquín's experiences navigating three critical junctures of the educational pipeline through a CRQI +T framework, which illuminates challenges at the intersections. They are (1) K-12 schooling and his intersectional identities, (2) undergraduate education and finding his path forward, and (3) graduate school and pursuing new interests.

#### **Entering K-12 and Joaquín's Intersectional Social Locations**

First, Joaquín's arrival and entrance into US schools is important to look at from a critical perspective. As scholars conducting CRQI research remind us, there is a need for "interventions into quantitative studies that wrestle with the importance of localized knowledge and experiences" (p. 258). As an undocumented gay immigrant entering a small rural high school of less than 500 mostly Chicax students, Joaquín's *testimonio* offers important lessons that shed light on his experiences through the educational pipeline. For example, Joaquín's not

being able to feel comfortable coming out of the closet during high school in a politically conservative area in California raises important questions about the homophobic culture of the school he attended, the broader community, U.S. society in general, and his “home life” living with a relative. This is significant, as extensive research associates more positive mental health outcomes when LGBTQ students feel trust and care in the community and in their schools (Diaz & Fleming, 2021).

However, enrolling first at a school with high percentages of Latinx students who are immigrants or children of immigrants and Spanish speakers allowed him, in all likelihood, to have a better linguistic and cultural “fit” than he might have in a different demographic context. Joaquín likewise reported that he was able to connect with a few teachers who were supportive of him while he learned English as a newcomer student. Joaquín received little support from his school counselor, leaving him without guidance to figure out a postsecondary pathway forward (Lara & Nava, 2022).

When comparing the U.S. born Chicanx and non-citizen undocumented pipelines, Covarrubias and Lara (2014) found that:

Across most points in the pipeline, U.S.-born citizenship and the privilege it commands is associated with the statistically highest level of educational attainment, and being undocumented, with the least level of legal and social status, is most associated with the lowest educational attainment rates, even when holding gender and Mexican origin the same. (p. 95)

The “citizenship privilege” the authors above refer to results in high school graduation rates that are for US-born Chicanx male students in comparison to their Non-Citizen undocumented counterparts double (82 out of 100 vs. 40 out of 100). Joaquín’s *testimonio* highlights the greater degrees of social instability typically associated with undocumented students than their U.S.-born Chicanx counterparts. These are significant contextual factors that reveal how “opportunity was mediated by [his] occupation of multiple and intersecting social locations” (Covarrubias et al., p.257).

### **Undergraduate Education and Finding a Path Forward**

Joaquín entered the higher education segment of the educational pipeline through the community college system without the needed guidance and support. While he was fortunate to have Professor Génereuse, a faculty member, offer him a place to stay during a critical time

of need, he still experienced excessive stress given his precarious status. Institutional support programs at community colleges and 4-year universities can make a difference in supporting students to have a smoother transition. For multiply marginalized students, these campus resource centers can often provide a range of services such as tutoring, mentoring, counseling, affinity grouping, and, by extension, a strong sense of community and belonging.

For undocumented students like Joaquín, additional services and support that are responsive to their financial and mental health needs are necessary. Over the last 10 years across the state of California, community colleges and 4-year public and private institutions have begun to create “Dream Resource Centers” to support undocumented students. While the addition of these campus centers is a welcomed addition, more substantive support is necessary. A 2019 survey of the state’s community colleges showed that only 35 out of 111 colleges had dream resource centers, and 16 of those centers had no dedicated support staff (Jimenez, 2019). The centers, when well-resourced and staffed can play an essential role in outreach to students in partner high schools to raise awareness of supports and services, and with appropriate support, can lead the way in marshaling key campus and community stakeholders, offering mental and emotional health services, while providing necessary training and professional development to all campus faculty and staff (Jimenez, 2019).

When Joaquín transferred to the CSU, he was connected to various foundations and organizations that offer services specifically for migrant communities. A variety of paid internships and work assignments in K-12 educational settings as an educator put Joaquín on a path to becoming a teacher. Ultimately, following rich exposure to curriculum and theory Joaquín was exposed to a professor's humanizing and caring pedagogy in his humanities courses. Joaquín decided to pursue graduate studies focusing on languages and culture. Joaquín’s experience as an undergraduate student brings to light the role of caring and supportive faculty as catalysts for student success during this critical juncture of the educational pipeline.

### **Graduate school and Pursuing New Interests**

The narratives of immigrant students like Joaquín reveal the path toward citizenship can be a long, winding, and elusive road. Across the United States elements of immigrant-friendly federal, state, local, and university policies can bridge<sup>3</sup> components on the road that can lead

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to Christine Vega’s deployment of the term Bridging in this special issue, I also borrow from Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2002) notion of bridging to suggest connections and transitions of possibility.



toward greater degrees of belonging. For Joaquín, his decision to pursue graduate school in the state of Michigan came at the time when a promising policy—one that would have allowed him to obtain a driver's license when other states had begun to tighten requirements—was ultimately revoked. However, the move allowed him to reinvent himself to “come out” as his authentic self and immerse himself in studying and learning curricular content that spoke to elements of his lived experience as an immigrant and gay student.

Over the last decade, a flurry of undocumented immigrant-friendly policies have been implemented in states and university systems nationwide. Presently, 23 states offer in-state tuition benefits for undocumented students, and 17 of those also provide “comprehensive access” by offering some financial and scholarships (The Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). Furthermore, 19 states, including California, presently offer undocumented students the option to obtain a driver's license. These policies serve as bridging components for undocumented students, allowing them a greater degree of belonging within the ecosystems of higher education institutions. During this same time-frame, there has also been an increase of Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) centers throughout campuses across the country tasked with creating more inclusive campus environments for students from marginalized communities, including undocumented immigrants in some cases. Anything short of legalization will remain a challenge to undocumented students seeking higher education; however, current mobilization efforts around DEI present an opportunity for advocates to create structures and policies across organizations to include these students into the campus fabric meaningfully.

### **Conclusion**

The Chicax educational pipeline is a powerful tool to help visualize educational outcomes. The evolving nature of the educational pipeline through using quantitative data to explore inequities at the intersections has led to a more sophisticated display of educational outcomes. Joaquín's *testimonio* and the use of CRQI +T framework allow for greater contextualization and grounding of these outcomes. Future research on the educational pipeline should examine the educational outcomes of DACA-eligible students and their completion rates. A CRQI +T framework can illuminate the unique ways that these students resist, survive, and thrive in an anti-immigrant national context.

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## **Interview With Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa: A Journey of a First-Generation Faculty and Mentoring Across the Educational Pipeline**

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In preparing this special issue on Latinx experiences across the educational pipeline, we sought to include contributions from authors addressing innovative approaches. As a teaching tool, the educational pipeline highlights the importance of developing a critical understanding of entry, transition, and exit points in the aggregate. The articles featured in this special issue all point toward the significance of individual educators and mentors who played important roles in supporting students to navigate at various stages of the pipeline. In this conversational interview, we highlight the significant contributions of Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa, a full professor at California State University Sacramento and a first-generation scholar with extensive experience navigating and also mentoring students across the educational pipeline. In what follows, we provide a brief overview of Dr. Lopez Figueroa's upbringing and then proceed with an interview on what led her to become an educator, and her approach to teaching, mentoring, and being mentored.

Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa was born and raised in San Jose, California—on the East Side. Her parents were farmworkers who eventually transitioned to working in the canneries in the area at the time. She grew up in a context of de facto residential segregation in a predominantly Latino and Black neighborhood, yet most educators in her schools were white. Despite being materially poor, her parents, Maria and Macedonio, with an elementary education, were pivotal to her success and played an essential role in nurturing her dreams and aspirations. Julie recalls her parents telling her and her siblings, “We can’t afford to live anywhere else, but we don’t want you to think that your dreams are encapsulated as far as the property boundaries go.” Maria and Macedonio would ask colleagues at work about all the free places where they could take their children to provide enriching activities, including parks and other places. Julie also

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credits teachers like Ms. O'Connor and Ms. Musumeci in her early years with seeing and believing in her potential as a student. These teachers, her parents, and other educators she references in the interview supported her across the educational pipeline and subsequently informed her approach to teaching and mentoring.

I met Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa through my participation as a faculty fellow for the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), where she served as my faculty mentor. Through our conversations, I found we shared similar upbringings as children of immigrant agricultural workers, part of the first-generation in our families to go to the university and graduate, the first to attain a doctoral degree to become faculty, and we both enjoy teaching and mentoring. In 2017, she reached another milestone when she earned the rank of Professor and became one of 197 Latinas out of 2,129 women full professors in the entire CSU system, or about 9% (Figueroa, 2019).

Dr. Lopez Figueroa has been a strong advocate and mentor for many scholars of color in helping them navigate the tenure-track process. Her mentoring approach provides great clarity around the tenure and promotion process and serves as an important reminder to prioritize those aspects of teaching, research, and service that most align with the personal and professional interests of pre-tenure faculty. Dr. Lopez Figueroa's lived experience as a first-generation student and academic, scholarly focus on the experiences of minoritized students in higher education, award-winning teaching, and mentoring, along with her positionality as a Woman of Color raised in the East Side of San Jose provides her with a unique vantage point to offer key insights as an interviewee about the educational pipeline.

On September 25, 2022, Dr. Pedro E Nava conducted a conversational interview via Zoom with Dr. Julie Lopez Figueroa. The edited transcript of that conversation is below<sup>i</sup>.

### **The Interview<sup>ii</sup>**

**Dr. Pedro E. Nava (PEN):** *Dr. Lopez Figueroa, can you share about what led you to become an educator?*

**Dr. Julie L. Figueroa (JLF):** Actually, I was going to be an architect. I was accepted into architecture school at CSU San Luis Obispo and was dead set on it because I had taken about two years of architecture [in high school]. I had done competitions and I was pretty good at it. My high school teacher, Mr. Leong, said, "Hey, I think you're really good at this. You should put an application together and send it to San Luis Obispo." And I thought to myself,

when I think about my exposure to educators as a young child and as a middle schooler, as a high schooler, I decided, “Nope, don’t want to do that.”

I’ll tell you why because I was a very shy person, and I kept thinking [becoming an architect] is a lot of work with lots of moving parts. You got all these people you’re responsible for, so that [role] didn’t enter my mind. Once I realized where San Luis Obispo was on the map, this was way back when maps were paper, I noticed how much [familial] income we had and what was available. If my parents came to see me, we would have to rent a hotel, “*Nunca va a pasar eso*”. So I let that dream go and wound up going undeclared at UC Davis. Between my sophomore and junior year, my high school teacher, Macario Ortiz, invited me to return as a high school alum. That was the first time I was in front of people in a formal sense.

The idea was that I would go and say, “Here is what I did. Well, that is what sent me [to college].” And by that time, I was the third person in my family to go to college. My parents never had the opportunity to receive any formal education. I think my mom went up to the second grade. My dad never had the opportunity to go to school. And so, I didn’t see the school as necessarily responsible for my success – I saw my parents. But I used the opportunity [to return to my high school] to say, “You know, here are ways you could be more inclusive. I shouldn’t be the exception. There should be more people on a panel there. It’s not just me.” They didn’t like that too much. There was only one faculty member that really taught me, a teacher named Anna Musumeci, who had gotten me out of special education. Even though I was tested and put into special education, she found a way to get me out of special education, and that’s a story for another time, but that’s when I realized, “Wait, so how do people use their teaching as an advocate?” I didn’t have any of those words at that point.

I tell you this story because when I realized it’s a combination of Ms. Musumeci and what you can do — that part of it led me to open myself up to be an educator. The idea of being in front of people takes change and knowledge where it could shift or expand our thinking. That was really appealing to me. But it was my parents who taught me to really think about it. Everybody has a purpose in life, everybody. Income doesn’t define that, and, you know, we are all— in their ways of teaching me —spiritual beings that have a calling. You know, the way my dad would teach us is like, it’s not about religion, it’s really about recognizing you as being born for a reason. He always said to us, “*Si no vives para servir, no sirves para vivir.*”

The educator part is very broad. It's not just formal schooling but really, "How do we educate?" in general. But I think about this particular question and all the people along the way who had me reframe what it meant to be an educator. So when you think about faculty culture, it's very individual and can be a very isolating journey. And the way I was raised is in community, in living in community, recognizing strengths versus competing with each other and offering supportive feedback versus criticism. It was just a small pivot, so I would say, my parents, Ms. Musumeci, and my Chicano studies professors at UC Davis [led me to become an educator]. I had the privilege of being educated by Dr. Linda Facio. I had the privilege of being educated by Dr. Beatriz Pesquera and Dr. Vicki Ruiz. People who saw potential! Like here's what you do, and here's what you *can* do. They were laying this foundation for me about how you become a professor. How can you be a professor and look like me? I could see [in them] someone that looks like me.

**PEN:** Could you expand on your experiences through higher education? What led you to end up as a university professor?

**JLF:** I was a student at the time at UC Berkeley and had Pedro Noguera in the social-cultural studies program. He was my advisor. Pedro was the person who taught high school and was a university professor. He was very much about the community. He kept expanding on what I imagined a university professor could be. I could be part of the community, I don't have to be just [at the university]. Pedro Noguera realized that I was interested in higher education. He was my shared advisor and before he left to a different university, he had me transition to Eugene (Gene) Garcia. Gene at the time had the Latino Eligibility Study, and long story short, that's how I got entryway. But just as I had two years to go, Gene said, "Julie I can't let you graduate without having teaching experience," and I was like, "Oh, I'm sunk!" Because I could research, like, nobody! We could go to the library stack, leave me there all day long, I'll get you your answer. And Gene said, "You're gonna have to be in front of the class," and I broke out in a sweat! I remember that day so clearly, and I said, "Okay okay okay okay." So I taught an intro class to Chicano Studies at Berkeley in Ethnic Studies... I mean here's the thing, I got my degree in education in social cultural studies, and I never even knew how to write a syllabus, let alone a lesson plan. I could do conference presentations, but I didn't know how to translate the presenting to [teaching].



Thankfully, I had a couple of friends who were teachers before and who I could reach out to and ask, what do I do? And then Gene said, “Here’s some syllabi, look at what they have to do. Go ahead and call the folks over in ethnic studies and ask them if they can share the previous syllabus with you.” My friend Anne Marie said, “Okay, here’s what you do. Here’s some code. They call it a lesson plan.” I was like, okay, so week by week, I kept meeting with her but just being there. I didn’t know what to do with myself standing in front of all these people. And you’re responsible for not just that, but for building the energy it takes to get from 8:00 to 9:50, or 8:00 to 8:50. It was horrifying.

But you know what? I thought after the first day, I could do this! I wasn’t thrilled about being in front of the class, but I was thrilled about [what I] was learning from [students] and how they thought about the reading. And more importantly, [having students] think about where critical thinking comes from, where they came from, and how that background now [interfaces with] what we’re reading about. The critical analysis begins not outside yourself but within yourself as a lens to think about and discuss what will happen with this material. So the learning part was exciting, and I’ll never forget it. Gene observed my class a couple of times and gave me his own evaluation. He said “I think you can do this. I think you’re actually really good at this.” I said, “I am?” I’ll never forget his advice. He said, “You know, when I first started teaching, I got my teaching evaluation, and one of the evaluations said something like ‘if this was the last day on earth, I would love to be in this class,’ and I was like, ‘I got it. You know this is awesome. What a compliment.’” And then Gene saw a little arrow, and he turned the page over, and the comment read, “‘Because every day feels like forever.’” [Laughter] We’re all going to have days like that, boy. But if you continue being a learner, guess what, you’ll just get better and better and better. Once I could release that I realized I can keep engaging students in a way where we can start with a place of strength and build from there. I think because I was in special education early in my life, it was very confusing to me, and I also loved learning, but I hated school. And I just thought to myself, all these different experiences, if I could provide different experiences for students in that first time I taught, then maybe I think this is what I want to do. When I applied [to become a university professor], there was one job in Northern California that year. I said, “Ooh, this is it, I’m a gambler, in a sense like [the adage] ‘Nothing ventured, nothing gained.’” I can only go from here. I was shocked when they said, “We have a job offer.” I was like, really? Okay, I’m going. But I knew I wanted to have that combination, I have always

had a foot in ethnic studies and another in educational policy. That's why being there in ethnic studies at Sacramento State University was a perfect fit for me. I still get to do both.

**PEN:** *Can you talk about your work as a researcher and as a scholar as it pertains to the broader landscape of your scholarship?*

**JLF:** It is funny because I didn't know I had a scholarship [laughs]. I mean, you define your areas of expertise when you're a doctoral student. Mine were first-generation students and academic success, higher education, teaching and learning was another one, teaching in a cultural context, and qualitative methods. I honestly didn't even know what it meant to develop a scholarship. And so the American Association of Hispanic Higher Education (AAHHE)—before it became AAHHE, it was the American Association in Higher Education—they had a Latino caucus. And it was in that experience [within the organization] that I realized these aren't just areas of expertise but trajectories. At the time, my dissertation was on Latino men in Higher Education, and being on the Latino Eligibility Study that I talked about earlier, my job was to look at data. At the time, Dr. Aida Hurtado was the research director for that project. It brought all these folks together across the University of California to look at this data. I noticed there was a discrepancy in graduation rates and retention rates for Latino men. And nobody was talking about that at the time in the literature. A lot of the literature was still looking at the underachievement of Latinas. That was my starting point, too, just understanding Latinos in higher education and what was going on. What I didn't realize is that it was a theme Gene believed in, Aida believed in, but nobody else did.

After being a graduate fellow [with AAHHE], I became a faculty fellow and stayed in touch with Victor Saenz. I met him, Leticia Oseguera, and Stella Flores; we were all in the same Faculty Fellows cohort. Victor was very kind and gracious because he's the one who let me know, because again a lot of the [academic]work that we do is in isolation, and while our intent is to have a lot of people read what we write, we don't know our reach. It wasn't until Victor [Saenz] invited me to College Board. The College Board at the time was interested in having a Boy and Male of Color Initiative, and they invited me out to present, and Victor was gracious enough to say, here is one of the founding scholars who started this body of work. I heard and turned around and was like, are they talking about me? (Laughs) I had no idea! I remember being at a talk that Aida Hurtado gave, and she said, "I just want to let everyone know that one of the founding people who started this body of knowledge is right here, Dr. Julie Lopez

Figueroa.” And I was like, “Oh my God, it’s a thing.” That’s where my research has gone, but I’ve also been very interested in academic success and also issues of retention. We talk about retention at an institutional level, but where do we talk about retention in the classroom? And what is our role as faculty? And then, most recently, as part of that excavation, I’ve been thinking about my sabbatical project on critical mentoring, a term that came out in 2015, and it’s not rocket science. It asks faculty what happens if you prioritize learning something about your students? It’s not advising but mentoring. What forms of investment can we make in our students, especially when we think about Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs)? When we think about HSIs, we have the money, as Marcela Cuellar and others discuss, but the university infrastructure remains the same. So what are some practices that you yourself, myself, and other folks of color who have the privilege of teaching the students [implement]? What kind of mentoring do we do that we don’t even realize makes a huge impact? And how is the mentoring that we’ve received? I can think about amazing conversations that I’ve had with Michael Omi, who was part of my dissertation committee. It’s about understanding they paid it forward by making sure that I knew things, and so I’m interested in interviewing them [for my critical mentoring study]. They would then select junior faculty that they mentor and have a dialogue around what are the things that we can learn about mentoring first gen-students. That is a simple practice for anyone that is working at an HSI.

**PEN:** *Speaking about your award-winning teaching, what are pedagogical tools you use when you teach? What does Professor Julie’s classroom look like?*

**JLF:** I learned this from Gloria [Rodriguez] who does educational leadership—expectations are everything. I had to learn and think about how I set my students up and ourselves. I remember three things — communication is really important. I came from a generation where at some point at night, there was nothing on TV. And the cell phones did not exist. That helps me acknowledge that my students will generally be the same age, but I’m getting older. The second thing is understanding that no amount of degrees are going to get you the respect of people. You must have common decency to *saludar*, welcome people, and be authentic; that didn’t come from my training. That is who I am in this space because what is teaching and learning if not building relationships?

The third thing is creating learning expectations or learning agreements. We co-construct those so that students have a sense of what we are doing. Most importantly, I always tell my students

I want to be able to write them a letter of recommendation. You may not need one from me, but wouldn't it be awesome if you could say, you know what, I got my third person or, I got my fourth person. So I show them a slide from co-constructing the learning agreements and the different things I have to address in a letter [of recommendation]. Ironically, what is in the letter is not something you are graded on. So, I need to figure out how to position [the student] to speak, to give me evidence while performing the assignment. So before we closed down [due] to COVID, I saw this for the first time when Marcos Pizarro had people perform a reading. I thought to myself, "That's an interesting [performance assignment], right?" So you are creating the skit, you are looking at your lines, you are being reflective, you are thinking about the reading, and you are creating a dialogue here. What is the thing that you are gonna explain and you are going to perform, so that helps you [as a professor] write the letter [of recommendation]? Or sometimes, people look at me like I'm crazy because I'll say, "I'm ready to start when you are ready to learn." I'm always conscious about smiling, not because I am crazy but because I want them to understand there is a sense of humanity. I say thank you so much for coming. I'm so grateful we can gather today. It is a privilege to have this time together, and I am deliberate about saying stuff like that—And I will wait for students. If we are in a physical classroom, I'll say, "Okay, you can sit wherever you want. But remember, what is our learning agreement? You want to make this a welcoming space, so if you keep gravitating towards that corner, how will people on the other side of the room get to know you?" So sometimes I'll just wait. So there is a lot of accountability built in.

When students have not done their reading and still come to class, which is a travesty when I know they have paid their fees, it's my job to figure out what happened. Could you access the reading? This is why, for instance, I have nothing but online readings for the first three weeks. So financial aid is not an issue. I do not have money to buy my books is not an issue. I got three weeks covered. So I tell them you don't have to worry about it. It is right here, so being mindful of finances. Being mindful of getting all the training that are involved. Whether it is Dreamers Resource Ally training, whether it is Pride-centered training. Can I be mindful of how I am talking to students? So instead of saying, "Hey, you guys," [It is,] "Hey everyone, it's great that we could gather," you know, things like that. Thanking people— "Thank you so much for volunteering." Or, "Can I invite you to do this" or, you know, "Can you come to the board and show me can you draw what you're saying? Because I think what you're saying is really

important.” And even Michael Omi taught me this. I mean, how many times has this man read *Racial Formation*? He wrote it right. But in his seminar, he would also tell me, “You know, Julie, I was rereading this thing and thinking about some of the work you do. I’m curious like, how are you making sense of this?” And I’m like “Oh my god. He’s interested in what I think. What?” Though sometimes it is mindfully saying, you know, “I want to come back to something Jessica said last week, which I thought was really important. And that I want to acknowledge the fact that it builds with what Esteban said the week before that.” And to really creating an inclusive space where I am not the only figure in the room. One thing I’ve learned, and some people might say this is handholding, but I’m in the camp with Laura Rendon. When she wrote her book *Sentipensante*, you are not handholding; you are validating.

You are guiding first-generation students to be able to do what they need to do, which is to learn. So I will send a reminder, “Hey looking forward to next week,” “Just as a reminder here’s what we’re gonna do” and then when we finish the week, “Thank you so much for coming.” I don’t know what it takes for you to be here, but I know that I want to thank you and your family and your community for showing up. And it is those little things. Those are the ligaments that become intertwined and a cable that strengthens my connection to them so that when I ask them something, they’re willing to leap off or extend themselves beyond a boundary of learning that they’re unfamiliar with because they trust me. And they know I’m not setting them up to be like “Wrong, nice try, good attempt but like okay. Okay, okay.” Instead, it is more of “That’s a great starting point. So now, let’s take that further.” And still being honest and holding them accountable because that is the one thing we do not do. There is a reason they’ve developed that practice of coming [to class] and saying I am still gonna be fine if I did or did not do the homework and it is because we don’t say to them, (or I’ll use my I statement). I do not remember learning until I started teaching that students need to be reminded. We are partners, and we are going to be partners for 15 weeks, and your success is my success.

I will say to them, “There’s nothing much more powerful and violent than silence. And the fact that you all are compelled to be silent. Sometimes I don’t blame you. It came from somewhere, but I want to let you know that I don’t want you to internalize that because I know you have something important to say.” They don’t even think about it. They just think that it’s respectful, not to say anything. And in reality in college, we want dialogue, dialogue, get into groups, do this, do that, but we didn’t heal them from this habit they developed. Herminda [Garcia], I

remember a long time ago, would teach me, "You know, you have to have wait time." And I'm like, "Wait time, what is that?" And I started instituting it in my classes, so you'll see me doing wait time, I'll throw a question out and students will just sit. And I'll say, "You know, I believe in wait time. Here's what wait time is and we all process things differently and so it's okay." And so I will stand there or be on Zoom and make sure I'm conscious of what my face looks like because sometimes as faculty we're not conscious and we look at our students like, "I'm excited to be here" [with emotionless face]. When I am waiting for a response, I'm usually like this. You know, as calm as open as I can reflect on screen or in person, to remind and send that message. Learning is about vulnerability. Mastery comes through vulnerability and a grade is not just a grade, that what we're doing is bigger than the grade. What we're doing is securing who you are to know who you are. And so I think those are some of the practices I've learned along the way...You're a sophomore, or junior, or senior super senior, and in reality, who's gonna tell them that? Unless it's somebody who understands that journey...you don't have to be from the same background, but you have to be mindful, right? This is the whole critical mentoring part of it.

To understand that, you know, sometimes if something is wrong at home, [our students are] not gonna be in the classroom. So when they return to the classroom, the first thing they say is "Well did I miss anything important?" To which I always tell them from day one "Please don't say that." [laughter] Instead, I would want you to develop a habit of saying, "I was taking care of that" and I always tell this to students or anyone who has met me: If you're absent, I assume you're being responsible somewhere else. What can we do to make sure that you're where you need to be? And sometimes I'll make up extra assignments because sometimes the most difficult thing is to go back to make up an assignment. So I created an assignment. I said, okay. In the next two weeks, here's what you're gonna do, right? And they'll do it.

Part of it is it's just multi-layered. I'm still learning. I mean, yes, I'm honored and humbled that I got that [teaching] award, it just lets me know in a small way, that I'm going in the right direction. But here's my bigger compass. If I can have somebody like you, Rebeca (Burciaga), Frances [Contreras], Gloria [Rodriguez], remain connected to other people that I have mentored, if I can have all of you in my life, I must be doing something right.

**PEN:** *Julie, you've been an incredible mentor to countless people, and so along those lines, I see you as having a wealth of knowledge and a wealth of experiences. I know that you deeply value*

*mentoring and working with students and faculty. Can you share your approach to mentoring and mentorship?*

**JLF:** I think, generally, it's always humbling to be considered a mentor. Half the time I ask myself, "Do I know what I'm doing?" Not because it's a lack of confidence, but because you want to understand it's not a cookie-cutter approach, but a responsive one. And so you're doing a lot of listening and also sharing some lessons learned at the same time but still balancing out for one's respect for the other person. Making sure that folks aren't stuck in something they don't need to be stuck in. If somebody did something to them, said something about their work, I'm like, "Okay? Let me decode that for you. They're crazy." [laughter]. I always tell students, you want to do a research talk on that? Nobody's thought of it. Why? There are so few of us, so keep doing that. When I think about AAHHE and what they've done, I really have tried to follow their model. As a graduate fellow myself, I realized that it's important to have a structure of abundance. To have a way in which you are instrumentally and intentionally wanting to make a difference...My dad has this saying, "*El sol es para todos.*" So I kind of operate that way, like, "You have a dream? Great. I'll be cheering on that dream because somebody did that for me." And I know it has made a huge difference. So when you and I had the opportunity to meet, I'm always nervous when I meet my new mentees. Partly because I'm a shy person. And so of course I want us to get along and I always enter with a strong sense of optimism and positivity and I also know what not being mentored in a kind way looks like. I always told myself, if I ever had the opportunity to mentor, I'm not gonna do that. So you'll never hear me say "Well that's short-sighted." [Laughter] Or What kind of thinking did you do to get to that? Never going to happen, because here is the other thing that I know is we all are gifted with different talents, and you have to respect what people bring. My goal is always to make sure you get tenure, or you go to the next thing you need to do. We can have a space where there's vulnerability on both ends because the truth is, honestly, Pedro, I need you all as much as you need me. Being a full professor's a very lonely experience, and there aren't that many of us nationally. But even as a junior professor, I was the only Chicana in my whole college as a faculty member. And so there are lots of moments of isolation for a variety of reasons. For me, mentoring is a way to revive the spirit and to understand that your success is something that gives my life meaning. Some people might call that selfish. I think of it as creating community and saying I'm invested, because if you fly like you've been flying then you're gonna soar, and if

you soar, then I know down the road generations, some child is going to be better off for what you've done. It may be a teacher, another parent, or a friend. It's the things that we know will be coming that I may or may not ever get to see, but I know that it's gonna make a difference.

**PEN:** *Along those lines Julie, who are some of your mentors? And how did they influence you on how to mentor?*

**JLF:** I would say I have mentors inside and outside of the institution. I think about my parents, for sure. They have been my best mentors, especially when we think about making sure that what's always apparent is a sense of humanity and a sense of welcome and encouragement. I think about how when it comes to pushing the boundaries of driving for excellence, keep doing what you're doing, I think about Aida Hurtado, who I think now is, maybe one of the highest-ranked Latina faculty in the UCs. I think she's now a distinguished professor, step 12 or something like that. You don't get to that level by doing nothing. And even with all that, even when I talk to her, she still wants to hear from me, I say that only because it's a humbling thing. You and I have met people, who get to a certain stature and they're like, I'm sorry, I got too busy, I'm not gonna... So I think about her sense of humility. I think about Laura Rendon, who I had the privilege to meet when I was a grad student. She taught me that it's okay, not to diminish, but rather build this purposeful, intentional, spiritual way of being in connection with your students. Don't be apologetic for it. When you thank students, when you encourage students, when you build students, I think about Laura a lot. And then with Gene [Garcia], he was our dean, and he also taught. I remember he had convened a meeting and there were a lot of people in the room, but some of the people were from Ivy League Schools on the East Coast. After we were done with the meeting, we looked around the table, and those folks had left trash behind. As a grad student, I remember you're like let me help clean the room. All of a sudden I see Dr. Garcia loosen up his tie, take off his coat, roll up his sleeves, and help us clean up the trash. I mean he's the dean Gene Garcia and he was saying, "You can't get so much in your mind that you forget that you're also a human being. And you know, you're watching me do this, but I want you to understand that I know the staff is going to be coming here to do this, to clean the room, I get that. But that's not who I am. I pitch in." That changed me.

I remember Gene had a second conversation with me, [where he said] "When you become a scholar and you are discussing your work, whether it in the classroom or a conference or



whatever, some people might feel entitled to borrow your work and call it theirs, or they might not acknowledge the fact that they got that idea from you.” I remember him telling us – his grad students – to let that go. Don’t get caught up in anger, keep producing the work because they only have the shell. You have the heart of the work. Because you are putting in the time to build it, and I was like okay. That was really helpful because it released me. Then also being generous, I remember when I got this job, people would always tell me when I was in grad school, “Oh, if you could just write the way you talk, your work would be so much clearer.” Then I started understanding what did it actually mean to have a faculty position? And I realized tenure required me to write. And I remember, I was like, you know, my mom tells me to believe in *La Virgen*. And I said “*Virgencita por favor cubreme con tu manto, por favor, Abreme los caminos.*” I want to publish, but I don’t know how to do this. I want to keep my job. Because as a farm-working kid, you’re like “Stability? What? I don’t want to throw the job away.” Within that week, guess who called me? Gene [Garcia]. “Now listen, Julie, how are you doing?” And I said “Fine.” We had a little check-in, and he said to me, “I got a call, I have to write this chapter for a book. I don’t have time, but I knew you could do it, but they need me to still be listed. I’ll be listed as a second author, and you’ll be first because I don’t need this, but I still need to be present and you’re going to take the lead. Here’s our timeline. I’m still traveling but I gotta do this.” So, I had to work around his schedule to check in, so I did it, and he was generous. I learned generosity and in that experience, I also learned humility because what I didn’t realize is that one of the two editors for that book was Derald Wing Sue. He read my chapter and just the way he talked to me, he said, “Tell me a little bit about yourself,” and just made the space because I thought, okay, you know, we’re going to talk about work. So I told him really quickly who I was. And he goes, “I read this particular section. Can you pull it up?” and I said “Okay.” “Just when you talk about this, this, and this, might I suggest, perhaps if you’re open to it, I want to send you a couple of citations I’d like to share.” And I said, “Oh, okay. Okay” and he goes, “It’s this term called microaggression. It might be helpful for your work. So go ahead and read it.” And when I started reading, I was like, “Oh my god.” But he was extending me the grace. And it was only a 10-15 minute interaction, but it was so defining for me. I didn’t know who he was. Obviously, right now, microaggressions is a thing. And then there is Danny Solorzano; I don’t even know where to begin. Had I not gone to Berkeley, I was going to go to UCLA and Danny was going to be my mentor, my advisor. But

he had called me, and he told me upfront, “Look Julie, I’m having a dry spell. I’m not getting any grants right now, and I should probably have something, maybe next year.” Fast forward. He was part of the Latino Eligibility Advisory Council. I remember I had to set it up, and I said to Danny, “Dr. Solorzano, I don’t know if there’s a possibility of actually meeting you, but I would like to meet you to just thank you so much for just not making me feel guilty for choosing Berkeley.” Sure enough, he met me. I couldn’t believe it. From that day, all the way up to my becoming a full professor, he’s always been there. And he was like, “I believe in your work, I believe in what you’re doing. I believe in you.” That was his message to me all the time. “I believe it, I believe it. I believe it.” So much so that I started believing it. It is these different ways of modeling, right? Even Laura Rendon modeled. Aida Hurtado continues to model. There are so many people, but I think the most consistent ones are those folks. And then, of course, I have other folks who are not academics that teach me about humility. The truth is Pedro, and I mean you caught me in my writing day, so I didn’t get all gussied up for this. It’s my writing day; this is what I do. And sometimes I wear things, I’m wearing my Cal shirt to get in a mindset: this is what I’m going to do. But only you know, I’m a professor. The double consciousness that everybody talks about is real. I walk every day, and I remember years back, I was walking, and they had closed the main section where people would typically drive, so now they had to come into the neighborhood where I walked. And I happened to be walking and somebody yelled out of the car. “Hey, don’t forget your Pine-Sol when you go clean those houses.”

I knew they were talking to me cause everybody else who was around was white. But what they don’t know is I’m from Eastside (San Jose). I could just let that thing come off me. But it reminds you that, I don’t look like what other people expect me to look like, so you have to develop your inner person to work through those moments. You have to work on your inner person to work through tenure, you have to work on your inner person to know how to show up to be a mentor, to make space, and to know that this exchange is sacred. So when you call me, when Patricia calls me, or when Rebeca calls me, it’s on. I’m not doing anything else. I’m not thinking about anything else; I am right here because it is that important to me because other people have done that for me, too.

## Selected Publications

### Books

- Baker, B, Figueroa, J.L., Mosupyoe, B., & Mark, G. (2022). Introduction to Ethnic Studies. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Saenz, V., Ponjuan, L., & Figueroa, J. L. (2016). Ensuring the Success of Latino Males in Higher Education: A New National Imperative. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- Berta-Avila, M., Revilla, A. T., & Figueroa, J. L. (2011). Marching students: Chicana/o identity and the politics of education 1968 and the present. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press. Recipient of the Book National Book Award in 2011 from the American Educational Studies Association.

### Other Publications

- Figueroa, J. L. (2019). Becoming a Full Professor: A journey best walked together. In P. Perez (Ed.), *The Tenure-Track Process for Chicana and Latina Faculty: Experiences of Resisting and Persisting in the Academy* (pp. 56-72). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Figueroa, J. L. (2016). Deciding to examine the educational experiences of Latino males in higher. *Ensuring the Success of Latino Males in Higher Education: A National Imperative*.
- Figueroa, J. L. (2016). The Geography of Academic Support: A framework to understand the Latino perception and practice in higher education. In V. B. Saenz, L. Ponjuán, & J.L. Figueroa (Eds.), *Ensuring the Success of Latino Males in Higher Education: A New National Imperative* (pp.4359). Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing.
- Figueroa, J.L. & Rodriguez, G. M. (2015). Latina Faculty Perspectives: Critical mentoring practices to support diverse students in higher education. *New Directions in Higher Education*, 171,23-32. <https://doi.org/10.1002/he.20139>

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<sup>i</sup> The full unedited interview can be found at <https://youtu.be/ImJI0sZKPcA>

<sup>ii</sup> The author would like to thank Emily Ramos and Dr. Alfredo Huante for editorial support of the interview.

***The Chicana/o/x Dream: Hope, Resistance, and Educational Success.* Gilberto Q. Conchas and Nancy Acevedo. Harvard Education Press. 2020. 219 pages. ISBN: 978-1-68253-511-0.**

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In the *Chicanx Dream*, Gilberto Conchas and Nancy Acevedo advance a powerful narrative of the Chicana/o/x higher education context. Their creative use of case studies focuses on the intersectional experiences of Chicana/x students across two-year and four-year universities. Drawing from Chicana Feminist theory and Anzaldúan theory, more specifically, Conchas and Acevedo provide numerous examples of how structural forms of violence impinge on the lives of Chicana/x students as they seek to resist coloniality and its long history in US schooling. From the introductory chapter, and beginning with their own testimonios, the authors introduce the overarching theme of the hope and resistance that evolves from Chicana/o/x students navigating oppressive structures. The testimonios provide an intimate look at their individual schooling experiences and lay the groundwork for a methodology that allows the reader to follow the participants' internal thought process as they reflect on their own lived experiences.

Conchas and Acevedo lay out a clear framework for understanding the myriad ways marginality has shaped Chicana/x educational experiences, and the unique ways they resist and

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generate hope to persist. The book is divided into three sections that examine 1) context of oppression along the borderlands, 2) testimonios from the community college borderlands 3) and finally, testimonios from the 4-year university borderlands.

Conchas and Acevedo introduce the Framework of Atravesada/o/xs Nepantleando (FAN), which provides a lens to examine students' intersecting identities and how they are able to see structural inequities to provide a critique of institutional processes of marginalization. The authors provide a concise and clear overview of Chicana/x experiences and the legacy of coloniality in US schools through the concept of the Education Borderlands. Through othering processes Chicana/o/xs have been positioned as undeserving or non-intended, they are in effect *atrevasados* who are cultural deviants and transgressors in US schools and US society for seeking equitable schooling. Conchas and Acevedo deploy Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad*, a 6<sup>th</sup> sense of sorts that provides the ability to "see beyond surface phenomena into the meaning of deeper realities," a critical consciousness that *atrevasados* use to nurture hope and resistance as they become *Nepantleras*, or "threshold people" moving across multiple conflicting and contradicting worlds. *Nepantleras/os/xs* transform perspectives and possibilities, they are those who are best positioned to build bridges across the multiple worlds they inhabit.

The authors continue to deeply explore Anzaldúa's notion of *la facultad* to explain processes of marginalization. Through a process they refer to as the *Facultad de los atravesada/o/xs*, they draw on student interview data to demonstrate the varied explanations students put forth for explaining their struggles when confronting oppression, helping them to assert that they belong in often hostile spaces. In other words, *la facultad* reveals students coming into a critical consciousness as they now see the legacy of coloniality through structural inequalities and how they privilege others at their expense. Conchas and Acevedo tease out the

negotiation processes students undergo seeking to make sense of the agency students enter formal schooling with, juxtaposed against the hard and cold reality of trying to make it in a white supremacist schooling system. Perhaps the most significant contribution of this section is the powerful way students' emerging critical consciousness is revealed when they push back on structures of marginalization where they previously had internalized dominant notions of schooling and achievement.

Conchas and Acevedo conceptualize community college institutions as educational borderlands that Chicana/x students navigate in pursuit of validation of their higher education journeys. Through testimonios, they intricately describe the community college educational borderlands with an intersectional analysis of students through attention to class, gender, race and ethnicity, criminalization, and (dis)ability. In all of these cases, the impact of support programs, family members, educators, and peer mentors drastically shifts the students' educational goals and definition of educational success to work toward the overarching need of achieving economic stability to provide for their families. The student experiences show that opportunities that support programs at community colleges, like MESA, provide exposure to careers that the first-generation student participants did not see themselves in prior to becoming nepantleras/os/xs, and materializes graduate school pathways as a real possibility. The students' trajectories illustrate the process of *la facultad* directly informing acts of resistance toward the marginalization they navigate in college, and propels them to mobilize institutional resources and agents that provide them with guidance to persist in their college and career goals.

The testimonios of Chicana/o/x students at four-year institutions reflect similar processes of students facing institutional barriers that posit them as *atravesadas/os/xs* in school

as they navigate and resist sexism, racist nativism, ableism, and the heteropatriarchy. A closer look at these testimonios reveals the common trajectory in the students' process to becoming nepantleras/os/xs in three pivotal points: 1) experiencing identity-based oppression in their preK-12 schooling, 2) engaging with a critical mentor, family member, or support program who provided opportunities and community for developing *la facultad*, and 3) developing hope that propels them to give back to their communities through movements for justice that directly impact them.

Through these powerful testimonios that reflect common lived realities of Chicana/o/x students, Conchas and Acevedo outline concrete practices and frameworks for preK-12 and higher education practitioners to enact and provide students with institutional support. To address the lack of belonging Chicana/o/x experience at a structural level, the authors provide sound recommendations to re-evaluate institutional practices such as inaccessible classrooms, hiring practices, and the lack of student career/research opportunities that pay a living wage. As shown in Araceli's testimonio of having a mentor advocate for her to receive a power scooter that was integral to her navigating the campus, the authors also urge educators to develop their own nepantlera/o/x praxis at the individual level. Not only did the mentors enacting nepantlera/o/x praxis in several student narratives play a pivotal role in students persisting in college, but they also provided culturally responsive advising and aspirational hope informed by their own backgrounds and experiences working with Chicana/x/o students. The authors hone in on practical recommendations for educators to disrupt the colonial space in education by resisting practices that posit institutional priorities over student needs, and rather places the onus on faculty to cultivate spaces that foster Chicana/o/x success.

As scholars in the field continue to build on the Framework of *Atravesadas/os/xs* *Nepantleando* that Conchas and Acevedo have powerfully captured through these case studies, we believe an important addition to this work would be the inclusion of testimonios of other racialized Chicana/o/x student experiences. Afro-Chicana/o/x students often navigate anti-Blackness and Indigenous Chicana/o/x students experience anti-indigeneity in Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x communities, further marginalizing them and impacting their ability to feel a sense of belonging in Latinx communal spaces. We believe an additional sample of Chicanx student participants who represent other racialized categories may reveal important insights into their process of developing *la facultad* and becoming *nepantleras/os/xs*. Additionally, as the focus and pursuit of HSI status in the U.S. continue to expand, we wonder how Chicana/o/x students outside of the California higher education context may experience schooling. With the state's highly stratified public higher education system (Community Colleges, State University, and the University of California) that significantly represent the state's college and university choices, it would be important to examine how the institution type may differ for Chicana/o/x students in other regions. In conclusion, we believe the Chicanx Dream is an important contribution for K-12 leaders, higher education scholars and professionals, and other educators working to support Chicanx student populations across the educational pipeline.



## Authors' Biographies

**Pedro E. Nava** is an Associate Professor of Education at Santa Clara University. The focus of his research is in schooling inequality, critical pedagogy and critical race theory, immigration and education, family-school-community engagement, and participatory action research. Pedro has been published in *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *Teachers College Record*, *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, *Latino Studies*, and in other scholarly outlets. Prior to his time at UCLA, he completed a Master's degree at Harvard's Graduate School of Education with a specialization in administration, planning and social policy, and Bachelor's degrees from California State University at Fresno in Liberal Studies and Chicano Studies.

**Ramón A. Martínez** is an associate professor in the Graduate School of Education and the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University. His research explores the intersections of language, race, and ideology in public schools, with a particular focus on literacy learning among multilingual children and youth. He has published articles in the *International Multilingual Research Journal*, *Linguistics and Education*, *Language Policy*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, and *Review of Research in Education*. Before entering academia, Dr. Martínez was a bilingual elementary school teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

**Karla Lomelí** is an assistant professor of Teacher Education at Santa Clara University, School of Education and Counseling Psychology. Dr. Lomelí earned her Ph.D. in Race, Inequality, and Language in Education and M.A. in Sociology from Stanford University. She identifies as a first generation, bilingual teacher-scholar of immigrant-origin. Before pursuing her Ph.D. at Stanford University, she was a High School English teacher for nine years in a predominantly immigrant-origin Latine community in an Urban school setting. Dr. Lomelí teaches courses in Adolescent Literacy as well as courses in Spanish in the Bilingual Education program. Her research interest lies at the intersection of race, class, inequality, language & critical literacy with a theoretical focus on critical race theory and critical care pedagogies. Her work examines teachers' use of critical literacy and the potential impact that culturally competent teaching might have in sustaining culturally and linguistically diverse students in K-12 schools and beyond.

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