

TESTIMONIOS OF UNDOCUMENTED LATINX STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:  
FINDING A WAY FORWARD

by

Carlos Enrique Lavín  
A Dissertation  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
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The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Chair

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Program Director

\_\_\_\_\_ Dean, College of Education  
and Human Development

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Summer Semester 2020  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

Carlos Enrique Lavín  
Master of Arts  
North Carolina Central University, 2011  
Bachelor of Science  
University of Loyola, New Orleans, 2006

Director: Grace L. Francis, Assistant Professor  
College of Education and Human Development

Summer Semester 2020  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA



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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertaton to my loving wife Majo, and my two wonderful children Diego y Sofi, los quiero mucho. Nene, you are my Rockstar y no hubiera podido terminar sin tu apoyo day in and day out.

Te amo.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Culturally and linguistically diverse.....	CLD
Critical race theory .....	CRT
Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals .....	DACA
Emerging bilinguals .....	EBs
English as a second language.....	ESL
Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.....	FERPA
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.....	IDEA
Latino critical theory .....	LatCrit
Mexican American citizens .....	MACs
Temporary Protective Status.....	TPS
Undocumented Latinx students with disabilities .....	ULWD
Undocumented immigrants .....	UIs

## ABSTRACT

### TESTIMONIOS OF UNDOCUMENTED LATINX STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: FINDING A WAY FORWARD

Carlos Enrique Lavín, Ph.D.

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Dissertation Director: Dr. Grace L. Francis

This dissertation focuses on how collective narratives help identify systemic barriers and supports from Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade by examining the experiences of undocumented Latinx students with disabilities. Because of the intersectionality of immigration status, ethnicity/race, and disability, there is not enough research that can help understand this population's strengths and needs. In order to further understand how undocumented Latinx with disabilities navigate their K-12 experience, I used *testimonio* as the research methodology to engage two students who identified as Latinx, self-disclosed having a learning disability, and had Temporary Protective Status. In addition, I also recruited the students' immediate family to complement the students' *testimonio* with their own narrative.

Through collaborative analysis and the use of a critical race grounded methodology, I analyzed the *testimonios* of the study participants and identified the supports and barriers undocumented Latinx students with disabilities face in K-12 settings. When the participants felt they were seen as fully human by school administrators, staff, teachers, and peers, they identified systems of support. When the participants felt the Dominant narrative influenced how people saw them and were only measured by their disability, race/ethnicity, or immigration status, they identified systemic barriers.

My analysis concludes that the *testimonios* of my participants indeed reveal effective counter-stances to the Dominant narrative. It also proposes a way forward. Through the *testimonios* of my participants, a different narrative emerged, offering an alternative to the Dominant narrative's dualistic stance. The dissertation ends with a call to action, challenging educators to identify the ways in which they can disrupt the Dominant narrative in their classroom.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold. Using *testimonios* the study seeks to (1) examine how the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, disability, and immigration status affects the educational experience of undocumented Latinx students with disabilities (ULWD); and (2) understand the types of systemic barriers and systems of support ULWD have experienced in school.

In order to accomplish these goals, this first chapter of the dissertation includes an introduction of the creation of the immigrant narrative in the U.S. and how it affects ULWD; discusses the principal educational policies and seminal court cases that impact the daily educational lived experiences of ULWD; and explains why the research about ULWD in the U.S. is sparse. In addition, this chapter describes the participants that will be involved in the study, sets forth how *testimonios* will be used as the methodology to center the experiential knowledge of ULWD within the UIs' narrative in the U.S, and defines the terminology used throughout the dissertation.

### **Background of the Study**

The Dominant narrative surrounding ULWD is that they are not capable of learning (Dolmage, 2011), that their families are unsupportive (Mora-Lopez, 2016), and that, in some cases, they are genetically inferior to mainstream American students (Dunn,



1988). The Dominant narrative is a narrative where the Dominant group is considered the perfect standard of what is good and appropriate, and where everyone else is ranked according to this group (Mignolo, 2012). This narrative is constructed daily, and adapts to different conditions in order to keep the Dominant culture in its dominant position (Castro-Gómez, 2007). The U.S.-origin Dominant narrative began when Puritans first arrived in North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and claimed the “new” land as their own, ignoring indigenous groups because they were “savages” and did not develop the land as God intended (Loewen, 2018). From the beginning, this narrative was a European-immigrant narrative, one that excluded African slaves brought to the U.S. against their will, excluded indigenous people who inhabited the land before the European migration, and lauded the white immigrants as explorers, heroes, or patriots (Loewen, 2018).

As the narrative of how the Puritans fled religious persecution, arrived in America, and found safe haven took hold, other immigrant groups adopted the same narrative as their own in order to identify with the Dominant group in the U.S. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a shift in immigration patterns created a shift in the narrative. As immigration from northern European countries decreased, and immigration from southern European countries increased, the U.S. found ways to discriminate against these immigrants by the way they looked, effectively creating categories of deviation from the norm, such as *feeble minded*, *low moron*, and *high-grade imbecile* (Dolmage, 2011).

The Dominant narrative has used physical appearance to discriminate against immigrants since the creation of the U.S. (Dolmage, 2011; Ngai, 2014). ULWD face discrimination at the intersection of their racial or ethnic features, their disability, and

their immigration status. In the next section, I describe the educational landscape of ULWD in a context of disability, racial and status discrimination, and the U.S. policies and laws that the government has enacted over the years in order to ameliorate situation of ULWD and other marginalized populations.

***Policy and the Intersection of Disability, Race/Ethnicity, and Status***

The Dominant narrative describes how immigrants landed in New York, and how, through hard work, they joined American society; from 1890 on, however, entrance into the U.S. has always consisted of separating the sick from the healthy, the able from the disabled, and the capable from the incapable, based on perceived differences from the norm (Dolmage, 2011; Markel & Stern, 1999).

**Disability.** Disability categories, initially created to establish who was welcome into the U.S., became part of the narrative of who was allowed in public schools. Schools were not required to accept students with disabilities until 1975 with the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142), commonly known today by its 2004 reauthorization name, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA prohibited schools from denying education to students with disabilities; it ensured that they had access to free and appropriate public education, and that they received specialized instruction to become successful in post-secondary settings (IDEA, 2004).

**Race/ethnicity.** Due to the increase of Mexican immigrants in states like Texas and California in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, white residents began discriminating against them more openly. Students were segregated into different schools based on

Spanish sounding last names (e.g., López, Domínguez, Sánchez), or placed in lower academic classrooms due to their appearance and assumed lack of academic achievement (Sánchez, 1993). Regardless of immigration status, Mexican American citizens (MACs) also suffered from this type of discrimination. Segregation of Latinx students was common in states bordering Mexico.

It was not until 1954 that desegregation legally ended for Latinx students and other Students of Color through the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (Brown v. Board)*. *Brown v. Board* stated that separate facilities were inherently not equal, and that they deprived minority children of equal educational opportunities (*Brown v. Board*, 1954).

**Immigrant status.** Due to the proximity of Mexico and the U.S., immigration between these two countries has a long and convoluted history (Gutiérrez, 1995). Before the Mexican Revolution in 1917, Mexicans were not racialized in the same way as Asian or Southern European immigrants. Due to the Mexican Revolution, an increasing number of Mexican immigrants began to cross the Mexico-U.S. border, looking for a stable life.

A typhoid epidemic in El Paso during 1917 prompted U.S. officials to issue a quarantine and required all immigrants entering from Mexico to be disinfected and deloused. The disinfection and cleansing process at the border continued long after the typhoid epidemic ended, creating the narrative of the “dirty Mexican” (Markel & Stern, 1999). The Dominant narrative expanded on this narrative by dictating that due to their racial complexion, Mexican immigrants were ideal for farm labor, but not much more (Dolmage, 2011). The increase of Latinx immigrants in the U.S. led to restrictive

education legislation in places like Texas that refused to provide education services to immigrants unless they paid tuition to offset their costs (Ngai, 2014). In 1982, in the landmark case *Plyler v. Doe*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that restricting access to public education due to immigration status went against the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and therefore was not allowed (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982). Even though legal segregation ended, thanks in huge part to *Brown v. Board*, *Plyler v. Doe*, and IDEA, ULWD continue to be discriminated against based on how they look, how they sound, or where they are from (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006).

### **Problem Statement**

The Dominant culture imposes a deficit narrative perpetuating stereotypical concepts of ULWD as dumb, lazy, or criminal, and uses this narrative to discriminate against ULWD (Gonzalez, 2019). Although ULWD receive academic services in public schools through English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and special education services, ULWD have unique characteristics that are not considered within these groups. In some instances, researchers only mention immigration status to show diversity among the emerging bilingual (EB) population in their study (Calderón et al., 2001; Callahan, 2005).

The ruling in *Plyler v. Doe*, and the requirement of IDEA to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students, provided an opportunity for Undocumented Immigrants (UIs) to receive a quality education in U.S. public schools (Morales, 2015). Nevertheless, under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA; 1974), school systems are not allowed to ask for immigration status, or for any other information

that would reveal this status, from students or their parents (FERPA, 1974; Mallet et al., 2017). Due to these regulations, numbers on UIs are not always available. Approximately one million students in public schools in the U.S. are UIs (Passel & Cohn, 2011). In 2016, an NCES report stated that 7.7% of students in the U.S were EBs, out of whom 76.6% were Latinx, and 14.2% were documented as having a disability (Condition of Education, 2016). Unfortunately, due to FERPA and other regulations, it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of ULWD in the U.S.

Those ULWD who are identified as EBs with disabilities are not benefitting in the same way as other students from going to school. The results of the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Achievement (NAEP) showed that EBs with disabilities had the lowest score compared to any other sub-group across grade levels (Lavín et al., 2019; NCES, 2018). Yet, for ULWD who may have exited the ESL program at their school, there is no information available to track the success of ULWD (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013). It is crucial to better understand the experiences of ULWD in order to provide educational supports that are congruent with their educational needs.

Research about ULWD is severely limited. In an effort to better understand ULWD and their needs, it is necessary to ask ULWD about their own educational experiences. As a result of *Plyler v. Doe*, ULWD are allowed to receive K-12 public education, and more ULWD are graduating from high school and looking for a college education (Swan & Clark-Ibañez, 2018). There are currently two college student populations who include ULWD within their ranks. Students with Temporary Protective Status (TPS), and students who qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

(DACA). TPS was created in 1990 during the George H.W. Bush administration. The program offered the opportunity of political asylum to a large number of Salvadoran citizens fleeing their country's civil war (Miyares et al., 2019). Undocumented Immigrants who qualify for DACA are temporarily protected from deportation.

Neither TPS nor DACA grant a legal path to citizenship, or legal status in the U.S. TPS and DACA simply allow students who meet their requirements the ability to attend college, apply for a driver's license, and apply for a job. TPS and DACA students can provide insight into the educational experiences of ULWD. By working with TPS and DACA students who identify as ULWD, to co-construct counternarratives that push back against the Dominant narrative, we can create *testimonios* of agency, collaboration, and resilience in the face of discrimination, and can identify different systemic barriers and systems of support that ULWD experienced during their time in school.

### **Professional Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in three ways:

- (1) Working with TPS and DACA recipients who are ULWD will provide the field with a unique educational perspective. The experiences of ULWD will provide much needed insight into the systemic barriers that ULWD face in schools and the systems that supported them throughout. Although the literature on ULWD is sparse, researchers working with UI's in general and ULWD specifically are calling for more research to inform how to better serve them (APA, 2012; Dodds et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019; Mallet et al., 2017).

- (2) ULWD are classified as EBs when entering schools in the U.S., once they become proficient in English, however, there is no other way to identify them. Therefore, it is important to understand the diverse characteristics that are particular to ULWD in order to be better informed and better prepared to provide support services to this population when they arrive.
- (3) Finally, this study seeks to amplify the narratives of the ULWD who participate in this study in order to reach a broader audience. As students with TPS struggle to stay in the country, and DACA recipients continue to fight for access to higher education, I want to provide them with another forum in which to express their ideas and have their voices heard.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

The purpose of this research project was to address the following questions:

1. How do collective narratives by ULWD inform a model for understanding the types of systemic, cultural, or environmental barriers and support systems that ULWD experience in educational settings?
2. How do the counternarratives of ULWD describe the effects of the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, disability, and immigration status on their K-12 educational experiences?

For this dissertation, I used *testimonios* as the methodology to understand the educational experiences of ULWD. *Testimonio* is a type of counternarrative that honors the lived experiences and knowledge of participants/narrators. Using Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) as the framework for this study, this dissertation identified systemic

barriers that ULWD face during their education by centering the experiences of the participants as knowledge. I used *testimonios* to value the experience of the participants as knowledge, while analyzing their narratives through the use of a LatCrit lens that uncovers structural/institutional/historical oppressions.

*Testimonios* allow participants and researcher to establish a dialogic relationship where the researcher and participants can together engage in the co-construction of knowledge, exposing inequities within a larger context in the field of education (Freire, 2000). *Testimonios* ask the reader to take a stance and decry the injustices described within. By asking the reader to suspend judgement, *testimonios* elicit the reader to understand their own humanity and condition in order to see the different ways in which the narrator and their communit(ies) are being oppressed, persecuted, or destroyed. (Zembylas, 2013).

With the population of the United States continually becoming more diverse (Ennis, 2011), special educators must consider different ways to explain the lack of perceived achievement by Students of Color with disability. Examining the systemic regulations and policies that regulate the education of ULWD is an important and necessary step toward this reality. The use of *testimonios* as a research methodology in special education does not imply that other types of research are not important. It simply articulates the need in special education to look for answers to long enduring problems by asking different types of questions and using alternative research paradigms.

I recruited two undocumented Latinx immigrant college students and their family members using purposive and snowball selection (Reybold, Lammert, & Stribling, 2013).



Although the sample size is small, *testimonio* lends itself to a small sample size (Alarcón et al., 2011; Cantú, 2012; Hoy, 2018; Mora-Lopez, 2016). Additionally, the purpose of *testimonios* is not about creating vast generalizable claims, but rather is about honoring the voices and experiential knowledge of participants. I conducted three interviews with each participant, one interview with their family, and one focus group with the participants to gather data and worked collaboratively with the participants to analyze it. The document and narratives that emerged from the work with the participants was analyzed as well.

The analysis followed a three-phase process (Huber, 2010). The first phase took place after the interviews with the participants and their families. In this phase, I looked for emergent themes and for participant narratives that represent these themes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second phase was an online collaborative phase with the student participants during the focus group session. The participants and I reflected on the emergent themes, identified supports and barriers from their *testimonio*, and what they mean for ULWD. In the last phase, I used LatCrit as a theoretical framework to analyze the findings and make connections to provide an answer to the research questions of the study.

### **Study Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. Although the development of general claims is not the purpose of *testimonios*, the findings from a study with a small number of participants is not generalizable. In addition, ULWD are still a heterogeneous group, and the needs of ULWD in the mid-Atlantic region may be immensely different from the

needs of ULWD in California, Florida, or Texas. Furthermore, although this study addresses the educational experiences of ULWD who are enrolled in a university, further studies should consider using *testimonios* to understand the perspectives of ULWD who are not enrolled in school, or who currently attend school in a K-12 setting.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Dominant culture/society.** Throughout this dissertation, I use “Dominant culture/ideology”, “Eurocentric”, “hegemonic”, and “white” to refer to cultural values of the Dominant social group. I use a capital “D” to make a distinction between status and quantity (i.e., the Dominant culture in the school was based on Eurocentric principles of education, whereas the Latinx students were the dominant majority of students).

**Dominant narrative.** A Dominant narrative is an explanation or story that is told in service of the Dominant social group’s interests and ideologies, one that usually achieves dominance through repetition, not truth. Because they are normalized through repetition, they have the illusion of being objective and neutral, when in reality their purpose is to maintain the status quo.

**Emerging Bilinguals (EB).** Often described as English language learners (ELL) or English learners (EL). I chose this term because it focuses on the strengths of this population instead of their shortcomings.

**Eugenics.** Scientific racism that argued there were different races, and that the white race was superior to the rest. Mitchell and Snyder (2006) define eugenics as “the hegemonic formation of exclusionary practices based on scientific formulas of deviancy” (p. 73).

**Intersectionality.** Theoretical framework proposed by Crenshaw (1991) and other Scholars of Color that rejects unitary analyses of categories, such as race, disability, or immigration status, in isolation as primary sources of difference (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013).

**Latinx.** Term referring to people born in, or whose ancestry is from Mexico, Central America, South America, or the Caribbean. In this study I use “Latinx” instead of “Hispanic” for two reasons: (1) I use the “x” instead of an “o” or “a” Latinx to honor the gender, and sex spectrum, of those who identify as having a Latino background; and (2) “Hispanic” is a term first utilized by the U.S. government in an effort to rank Spanish speaking countries, through the use of identity politics, against other ethnic groups in the U.S, while “Latinx” is a term that was not imposed on immigrants, but rather was reclaimed by the same population as a source of strength, culture, and agency (Valdes, 1996).

**MACs.** American Citizens from Mexican descent.

**Microaggressions.** Subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, by the Dominant society toward People of Color.

**Nativism.** A policy of favoring native inhabitants as opposed to immigrants (Merriam-Webster, 2016)

**People of Color.** I use the term “People of Color” to refer to any group or community whose members do not consider themselves part of the white Dominant

culture, and the term “white” as interchangeable with “Dominant,” “hegemonic,” and “western.”

**Race.** I use race to refer to a social construct used to marginalize People of Color in the United States. The participants in this study, used the terms race and ethnicity interchangeably.

**Scholars of Color.** I use the term “Scholars of Color” to refer to any group or community of scholars whose members do not consider themselves part of the white Dominant culture

**Students of Color.** I use the term “Students of Color” to refer to any group or community of students whose members do not consider themselves part of the white Dominant culture.

**Undocumented Immigrant.** Term that refers to a foreign national who is in the United States without proper authorization (Morales, 2015).

**ULWD.** Undocumented Latinx student with disabilities.

**Xenophobia.** Fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners, or of anything that is strange or foreign (Merriam-Webster, 2016).

### **Organization of Chapters**

The purpose of Chapter One is to provide the reader with an introduction to the entire dissertation. This chapter includes the statement of the problem, purpose of the study, methodology, research questions, study limitations, definitions, and organization of the chapters. Chapter Two provides historical background that is relevant to the dissertation, along with a literature review on the topic, both of which together express

the need to conduct this study. Chapter Three describes the methodology used for the study, as well as research questions that will be answered through this study. This chapter includes my ontological and epistemological stance, and explains how the use of *testimonios* through a LatCrit framework is congruent with this stance. In addition, Chapter Three includes the participant description, data collection methods, and data analysis. Chapter Four describes how the *testimonio* interviews and the focus group took place. In this chapter, I include an in-depth description of the *pláticas* with the participants.

I present the findings in Chapter Five and Chapter Six. Following Davies (2000), who suggest that disrupting static knowledge, requires the disruption of static notions of how text is presented, I arranged the findings in this dissertation in non-traditional and unexpected ways. In Chapter Seven I analyze the findings, address limitations and offer future research directions. I end the dissertation with a small call to action for educators everywhere.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

This chapter focuses on five topics: (1) How race and disability as social constructs affect ULWD; (2) The creation of a U.S Dominant narrative that influenced the U.S. immigration policy, the racialization and classification of immigrants coming into the United States, the Latinx threat narrative, and the effects it has on ULWD today; (3) how national laws and education policies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided educational access for ULWD to receive an education; (4) current Latinx immigration trends that do not support the Dominant narrative; and (5) a scoping review of the existing literature on ULWD. Through these topics I situate the educational experience of ULWD at the intersection of Dominant narrative, national immigration and educational policies, and special education law.

### **Race and Disability**

In order to understand race, racism, disability, and how their intersection affect the Latinx population, it is important to define these terms. In Biology, scientists have irrefutable proof that there is only one human race (Long & Kittles, 2009). However, race is a social construct that plays an integral role in everyday life of people, especially People of Color (i.e., people who do not identify as white in the U.S.; Artiles, 2013; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harry & Klingner, 2006; hooks, 1990; Huber et al., 2008).

Along with other Scholars of Color (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1990), Crenshaw (1991) explored how race and other factors affected People of Color - specifically for her research, African American women- in more intense ways. She contended that although white women were discriminated against in everyday society, Black women were discriminated against for being Black and for being women, and that these two ideas informed each other and compounded the implications of each other. She called this phenomenon intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1990)

Although race is not a biological marker of difference, race, as a social construct, is used to marginalize People of Color in the United States. As Huber et al. (2008) expressed: “Race not only differentiates between racial groups, but it promotes a hierarchy that justifies the superiority of one race over others” (p. 40). In fact, race was a determining factor for who could become an American citizen for over a hundred years (Smith, 2012).

The treatment of Mexican American citizens (MACs) in Texas and California as whites and non-whites during the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> century is one example of how race was used to benefit the Dominant society over other groups in the U.S. (Ortiz & Tellez, 2012). Initially, when California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas became part of the United States, MACs were considered white. As more Mexican immigrants traveled across the Mexico-U.S. border into the U.S. to work in agriculture and settled down, all people who looked Mexican began to be treated as non-white, thus denying MACs rights granted to other American citizens (e.g., owning land, voting; Gutiérrez, 1995)

Legal battles over race, whiteness, and belonging in the United States can be traced back to 1790, when citizenship was restricted to free white people only (Bell et al. 2007; Haney López, 2006). These battles included people from African, Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and Armenian descent, Native Americans, and people from southern European countries looking for equal rights to citizenship, land, and education (Haney Lopez, 2006). Although the legal system has come a long way since then (e.g., lifting immigration bans from southern Asia in 1952 through the McCarran-Walter Act, moving to desegregate schools through *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, outlawing poll taxes, literacy tests, and other measures to prevent Black people from voting through the Voting Rights Act in 1965; Bell et al. 2007), race and racism are still present in today's schools and society. For example, a study conducted by Fuller et al. (2019), showed that Latinx immigrant children attend more segregated schools than their peers today than they did 10 years ago.

In the United States, the definition of disability varies depending on whether you are in the medical field, part of the education system, or an adult who is no longer part of the school system. Annamma and colleagues (2013) define disability as the “specific inability to perform culturally-defined expected tasks (such as learning or walking) that come to define the individual as primarily and generally ‘unable’ to navigate society” (p. 24), ascribing a social/cultural quality to what it means to have a disability. In schools, according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), in order for students with disabilities to receive special education, their identified disability must adversely interfere with their education. In this paper, I use Annamma and colleagues’ definition as



it adds a cultural component to the meaning of disability (Artiles, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2017).

One example of how disabilities are socially constructed relates to the identification of intellectual, emotional or learning disabilities in schools. Criteria for these disabilities is subjective and can vary based on the interpretation of the professionals identifying them (Artiles 2013; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gage et al., 2013; García & Ortiz, 2013; Harry & Klingner, 2006). The subjective identification criteria provides an explanation as to why Students of Color are overrepresented in categories such as intellectual or behavior disabilities, as opposed to sensory or physical disabilities like blindness or orthopedic impairment (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2008). A history of overrepresentation of African American students in the category of intellectual disability (then called mental retardation; Dunn, 1968), and Behavior Disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gage et al., 2013) demonstrate how disability and race have compounded, resulting in more referrals for special education and other services for Students of Color than their white peers (Artiles, 2013; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Fenton, 2016).

In the U.S., societal norms are based on constructs of good and evil, normal and abnormal, abled and disabled, stemming from a Eurocentric/western point of view (Annamma, 2013; Artiles, 2011). This point of view is repeated with such frequency that it becomes the norm and creates a narrative about what is accepted in society and what is not accepted as a way to maintain the Eurocentric point of view at its center. Since the inception of the U.S., this Dominant/western narrative centers the experiences of white

Europeans, while devaluing, denying, ignoring, or erasing different understandings of how the world works (Brabeck, 2003; Castro-Gómez, 2005; Mignolo 2009).

In the next section I broadly describe the creation of the Dominant narrative of the U.S. as nation of immigrants and how this narrative influenced immigration policy in the U.S. across time. Then, I explain how the Dominant narrative altered the immigrant narrative, specifically for Mexican immigrants to describe UIs as dirty, violent, lazy, or dumb, and the immigration policies that informed this narrative during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, I describe how this narrative affects Latinx immigrants, ULWD, and Latinx citizens in the U.S. today.

Throughout this section I use the terms “Mexican” and MACs instead of the term Latinx because the majority of immigrants crossing the Mexico-U.S. border from 1917 to 2017 were Mexican (Krogstad et al., 2019). Furthermore, long-time residents of Texas and California identified themselves as Mexican or Mexican American, not Latinx or Hispanic. Additionally, although some of the authors cited in this chapter refer to immigrants as illegal aliens or illegal immigrants, I use “UI” when referring to this population because using “the word Illegal criminalizes the person, not the action they supposedly committed” (Rubio, 2011, p. 51). I reintroduce the term Latinx later in this chapter as the population in the U.S. shifted to include other Latinx groups, the U.S. laws and policies began affecting a broader population of Latinx, and the immigrant narrative expanded to include other Latinx populations in addition to Mexican immigrants and MACs.

## Creating a National Immigrant Narrative

For the U.S, the Dominant narrative was created by the Puritans who landed in what is now Massachusetts in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Loewen, 2018). When Puritans engaged with the Indigenous Peoples inhabiting the area, Puritans dehumanized and demonized these Peoples and their cultures by branding Indigenous customs and traditions as barbaric, rudimentary, or pre-civilized because their way of life did not conform to the European standards and to justify eliminating them and taking their land (Castro-Gómez, 2005; Hughes, 2018; Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Appendix A shows how the creation of the immigration narrative in relation to the immigration policies of the U.S throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Immigration, therefore, is an essential part of the United States' origin story (Loewen, 2018). From Christopher Columbus, to the first Thanksgiving, to the melting pot idea in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the narrative of how the United States came to be relies on the story of successful (white) Europeans braving the elements or suffering persecution, to arrive at the shore of this new world full of possibilities (Loewen, 2018). In his book *Myths America Lives*, Richard Hughes (2018) explores the notion of how the Puritans who first arrived to the U.S. believed to be the chosen people of God, and therefore, anyone who did not look like them, or believed in their savior was indeed an “agent of Satan” (p. 42). The idea that the Puritan colonies had become God's chosen nation also gave them the justification to occupy indigenous land by calling it vacant since there were no Christians occupying the land. According to the Puritans' understanding of the Bible, since nobody was toiling with the earth, making it render

fruit, or following the Lord's decree, Puritans as God's chosen people, were called upon by God to populate the inhabited land (Hughes, 2018).

As more immigrants from Europe continued to arrive, and the population in the colonies increased; other European immigrants adopted the story of how the Puritans were led by God away from oppression to a promised land as their own because they found the story compelling (Hughes, 2018). From the beginning, this Dominant narrative ignored, erased, or minimized the impact European illnesses had in the Indigenous populations of the American continent after the Europeans arrived, and the millions of African slaves brought to this continent against their will. This story, however, labeled white people as explorers, heroes, or patriots (Bell, 1992; Hughes, 2018; Loewen, 2018). The narrative also justified the possession of Native American land, and for over 500 years "justif[ied] and legitimate[d] the enslavement, brutalization, oppression, torture and marginalization of African men, women, and children" (Hughes, 2018, p. 11). The Dominant narrative perpetuated of the myth how the Puritans and other immigrants left Europe fleeing persecution and arriving to America as a safe haven. It excluded, however, the voices of People of Color from the narrative and minimized the policies enacted to deter immigrants who were sick or had a disability from entering into the United States (Dolmage, 2011).

### **Ellis Island and the Creation of the Race and Disability Narrative**

It is estimated that 40% of the U.S. population can trace their ancestry to Ellis Island in New York (Dolmage, 2011). Although the portrayal by the Dominant narrative of how immigrants landed in New York, worked hard, joined society, and fulfilled *the*

*American Dream* continues to this day, entering into the U.S. has always been about separating the sick from the healthy, creating categories to rank others to the norm, and developing an identity based on the physical differences (Dolmage, 2011). One of the first examples of this separation is the Immigration Act of 1891. This Act mandated the exclusion of persons that looked or were sick because of the dangers of spreading contagious diseases without conducting medical examinations (Markel & Stein, 1999). Though the criteria of who looked sick was broad, immigration officers used terms such as *feeble minded*, *low moron*, and *high-grade imbecile* to describe arriving immigrants (Dolmage, 2011). These terms were later defined and solidified in the *Dictionary of Races and People* created in 1909 to categorize arriving immigrants to the U.S. to describe those immigrants who did not fit the standard of who was deemed acceptable (Dillingham et al., 1909; Dolmage. 2011). In addition to the categories previously mentioned, the dictionary separated human beings into five basic categories “familiarily called, the white, black, yellow, brown, and red races” (Dillingham et al., 1909, p. 3), placing “negroes” in the least developed group of mankind (Dillingham et al., 1909, p. 3).

Although the average yearly deportations hovered around 3% from 1890 to 1924, with the new dictionary and policies in place, the percentage of rejections due to medical reasons rose from 2% in 1898, to 69% in 1915 (Yew, 1980). This increase in medical rejections did not occur because of an increase of disease among those immigrants who were traveling to the U.S., “it was related, instead, to expanded scrutiny for, and identification of, chronic disabilities that were deemed likely to make an immigrant

dependent on the state or a ‘public charge,’ as codified in the immigration act of 1907” (Markel & Stern, 1999, p. 1319).

The prominence of the eugenics movement (i.e., believing that certain forms of human regeneration are better and restricting the continuation of certain races, ethnicities, and social classes; Dolmage, 2011) in the U.S. during this time period promoted the notion of racial superiority of the northern European white immigrants (e.g., German, British, French), and warned against increased immigration into the U.S. by Southern or ethnic Europeans (e.g., Irish, Italians) and other races (Dolmage, 2011). Ellis Island served as a live eugenics’ laboratory where guards and medical staff developed categories of difference that impacted U.S society for many years after Ellis Island was no longer the main port of entry. The argument eugenicist scholars made was that increased immigration from ethnic whites and other races would threaten the racial purity of the United States population (Ngai, 2014; Huber, 2010). Through this type of narrative, the U.S. continued to craft the idea of the American citizen being white; effectively ignoring the Black population that had been forced away from their lands and into slavery in the U.S., other immigrants that had settled in the southwest, and the Indigenous Peoples who inhabited the land before the Europeans arrived (Ngai, 2014).

After World War I ended, fueled by a newfound nationalist sentiment and the eugenics movement, the United States first issued the Immigration Restriction Act of 1921 limiting immigration numbers by country of origin (Ngai, 2014; Yew, 1980). This Act only allowed for 3% of the U.S. population to be immigrants, but it used data from the 1890 census to calculate to total number of immigrants allowed instead of the more

recent data from the 1920 census. By 1924, the policy was so restrictive that the yearly quota allowed for Italian immigrants equaled the number of Italian immigrants who came to Ellis Island in one day in 1907 (Yew, 1980). During this time, immigrants would wait on boats or in Ellis Island for the next month's immigrant quota for their country to open (Dolmage, 2011).

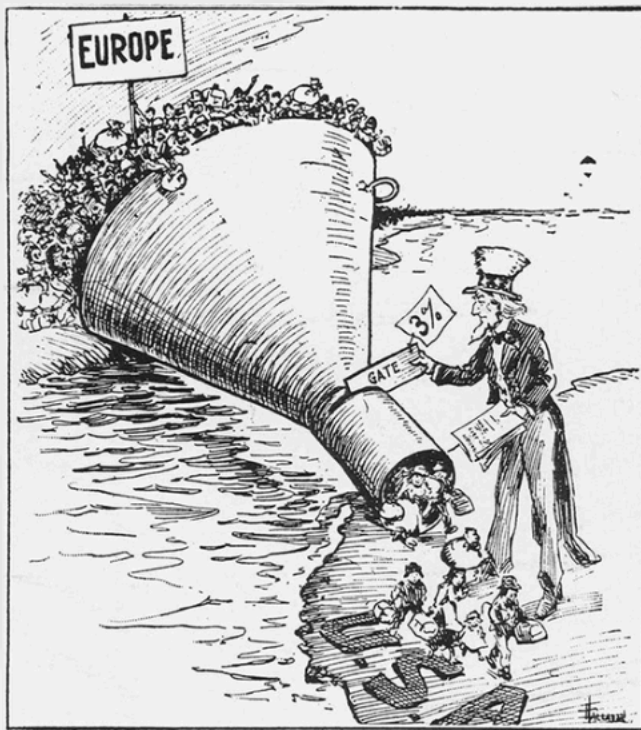
At this time, admission policies into the U.S. were based on racial differences that had no medical foundation (Dillingam, 1910; Dolmage, 2011; Ngai, 2014; Yew, 1980). These immigration policies subjected immigrants "to divergent public health practices and were distinctly perceived depending on skin color, nationality, citizen status, and relationship to the labor market" (Markel & Stein, 1999, p. 1316). These policies applied in Ellis Island, were also applied in other ports of entry into the U.S.

### **Narrative of Asian Difference**

In San Francisco, from 1910 to 1930, immigrants from China went through inspection at Angel Island in San Francisco. There, Chinese immigrants and those from other Asian countries were inspected, disinfected, and at times detained before entering into the U.S. (Markel & Stern, 1999). Chinese immigrants were considered too different to assimilate into American culture. One example of this idea is the number of Chinese immigrants deported compared to the number of European immigrants sent home. During the 30 years Angel Island was in operation, 17% of Chinese immigrants were deported (i.e., 10,000 of 60,000), as opposed to 3% of deportations that happened at Ellis Island. The immigration officials in Angel Island considered Chinese and other Asian immigrants naturally prone to diseases such as hookworm and leprosy (Molina, 2006).

With the immigration quotas set by the Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921, 1924, and 1928, fewer non-white immigrants were welcomed into the U.S. These policies influenced the immigration rate from Europe and Asia, “reducing the flow of immigrants from Europe and Asia to a mere trickle” (Markle & Stern, 1999, p. 1329). Figure 1 is a cartoon from 1921 depicting the effects of the new immigration quota on immigration from Europe.





**Figure 1**

*Immigration Cartoon*

*Note:* This cartoon portrays how immigrants from Europe can no longer arrive into the U.S. freely. Only 3% of the U.S. population in 1890 are allowed.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/1911-report-set-america-on-path-screening-out-undesirable-immigrants-180969636/>

The Dominant narrative surrounding immigration policy into the U.S. focused on pre-conceived racial differences that established who was allowed into the country and who was not (Dillinger, 1909). The definitions in *Dictionary of Races and People*, as

well as the depiction of certain types of immigrants as more susceptible to disease, or physically unfit to enter, furthered the narrative that white Europeans had been given the land to make their own; and those who were different were not entitled to be part of the new country. Because of the immigration caps enacted through the Immigration Restriction Acts of 1921, 1924, and 1928, immigration from European countries decreased drastically. Immigration from Mexico, however, was affected differently because of the complicated history between the two countries.

### **Mexican Immigration and the Origin of the Mexican Immigrant Narrative**

Due to the history between the U.S. and Mexico and the economic interests in the Southwest, Mexican immigrants were not subjected to the same type of racialization that Southern Europeans or Asian immigrants experienced (Gutiérrez, 1995; Ngai, 2014). Mexican immigrants were already considered by the U.S. government as lesser than American citizens, even if the law recognized them as white.

Initially, immigration was not restricted for Mexicans working as manual labor. In fact, before 1910, inspection procedures at both official points of entry (i.e., Laredo and El Paso) were relatively lax (Sánchez, 1993). Immigration officials were more concerned with people from other countries (e.g., Greece, Italy) trying to pass as Mexican in order to find a way into the U.S. (Markel & Stern, 1999; Molina, 2006). In fact, compared to other ports of entry, fewer than 1% of immigrants entering into the U.S. from Mexico were denied entrance due to medical conditions. These numbers remained consistently low from 1900 to 1930.

In 1917, however, the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico became strained due to the Mexican Revolution. Mexican refugees started to cross the Mexico- U.S. border in search of a more stable life (Sánchez, 1993). During this time, U.S. health and immigration officials became concerned with the lax of regulation at the Mexico- U.S. border and the increasing number of refugees and laborers crossing from one country to the other (Markel & Stern, 1999).

In January of 1917, a Typhoid epidemic in El Paso prompted U.S. immigration officials to issue a quarantine to contain the disease. Due to the quarantine, all persons entering into El Paso from Mexico had to be disinfected and deloused. Immigration officials believed the outbreak started in Mexico and considered Mexican immigrants to be infested with vermin (Gutiérrez, 1995, Markel & Stern, 1999; Sánchez, 1993). Mexicans crossing at the points of entry were required to strip and bathe in a mixture of water and kerosene while their clothes were disinfected at special disinfection plants (Markel & Stern, 1999; Molina, 2006). After the Typhoid epidemic was eradicated a few months later, the border quarantine continued to be in effect until 1924 (Markel & Stern, 1999). Requiring Mexican immigrants to go through a disinfecting bath as part of the entry process into the U.S. gave rise to narrative of Mexicans being filthy and riddled with disease (Markel & Stern, 1999; Molina, 2006). This narrative continues to be used by anti-immigrant proponents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Chavez, 2013; Gonzalez, 2019; Ngai, 2014).

Through the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, the U.S. created a formal immigration service, whose charge was to ensure people crossing the Mexico-U.S. border

did so only through its established points of entry (Gutiérrez, 1995). Immigration officers pursued immigrants within the U.S. and had the authority to arrest UIs without a warrant (Ngai, 2014). Although immigration officials were charged with the deportation of UIs from any country, European and Canadian UIs were not normally associated as undocumented (Ngai, 2014). This lack of association helped to them assimilate as white American citizens, while at the same time allowed for the “illegal status [to] become constitutive of a racialized Mexican identity and of Mexicans’ exclusion from the national community and polity” (Ngai, 2014, p.100). UIs were physically present in the U.S. conducting everyday activities. Yet, they had no lawful status as residents of the U.S.; UIs became “a social reality and a legal impossibility” (Ngai, 2014, p. 37)

U.S. immigration officers did not heavily police immigration into the U.S. from Mexico until the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act (Dolmage, 2011; Gutiérrez, 1995; Sánchez, 1993). Before 1924, only immigrants crossing at El Paso or Laredo were inspected or sanitized. The difficulty for immigration officials of patrolling over 2,000 miles of border, coupled with the economic interests of farmers in the Southwest and the need for labor due to World War I, created a unique situation for Mexican immigrants. A situation where immigrants were needed as labor but were never accepted as equals (Gutiérrez, 1995).

Agricultural advances in the early 1920s created a demand for farm labor in the Southwest that had not existed before (Sánchez, 1993). Barren desert land that was not previously available for use suddenly turned into fertile farmland. This new economic opportunity opened the door to immigrants from Mexico. U.S. business owners pressured

their local governments to develop the agricultural economy in the southwest, resulting in laxer immigration inspections at the Mexico-U.S. border. By 1928, California had the largest Mexican population of any state in the U.S. (Sánchez, 1993). This increase of immigrants working in farms helped perpetuate the narrative of Mexican immigrants as good for farm labor due to their complexion, stature, and posture, but not much more (Sánchez, 1993).

Initially, Mexicans coming in to the U.S. were considered “flocks of migrant birds” who would not stay for long. In the late 1920s the immigration service at El Paso began charging a head tax for migrant workers who desired to enter the U.S. and some of the immigration inspectors were known members of the Ku Klux Klan (Sánchez, 1993). These officials would denigrate immigrants entering the U.S. and created an atmosphere of racism at the Mexico-U.S. border. These racist practices and the implementation of the head tax increased the number of UIs in the U.S., as immigrants chose not to cross the border through El Paso or Laredo or decided to stay in the U.S. between seasons instead of returning home to avoid harassment by immigration officials and save money (Sánchez, 1993).

### **MACs Perpetuating the Immigrant Narrative**

The surge of Mexican immigrants in Texas and California after 1917, created problems for long time Mexican residents in the area. MACs had been fighting for equal rights and against discrimination for years, and this new wave of immigrants incited white Americans to retaliate against Mexican culture (e.g., music, language, dress). MACs and Mexican immigrants were discriminated against based on how they looked

whether or not they spoke English (Gutiérrez, 1995). This discrimination had been part of the daily lives of many MACs who arrived to the U.S. before the Mexican revolution and settled down either in California or Texas. For them, it was important to assimilate to the American way of life by learning English and distancing themselves from their cultural heritage in order to be accepted by the Dominant culture (Ngai, 2014; Sanchez, 1993).

In an effort to achieve equality, MACs tirelessly fought for integration in Texas and California for decades while advocating for a hard stance on illegal immigration. The proximity of Mexican immigrants to them made it difficult for MACs to distance themselves. As a result, MACs were discriminated against because the Dominant narrative did not differentiate between immigrants and citizens when enacting discriminatory policies such as segregating students in schools based on last names, or Latinx appearance (Gutierrez, 1995).

### **The Dominant Narrative Turns against MACs**

As the economic hardships of the Great Depression were felt across the U.S. with six million people unemployed, the Dominant narrative blamed foreigners for the economic hardships in the U.S. Mexican Immigrants and MACs became the scapegoat of the problem (Gutiérrez, 1995). By the early 1930's cities like Chicago, Detroit, Denver, and San Antonio “had organized campaigns to oust Mexican workers from their communities” (Gutierrez, 1995, p. 72). One of the biggest campaigns of repatriation took place in Los Angeles, California between 1930 and 1931.

The U.S. Department of Labor, county, and city officials mounted a concerted campaign in which tens of thousands of Mexicans and MACs were pressured into

returning to Mexico (Bell et al., 2007; Huber, 2010). Although repatriation is not the same as deportation because deportation involves lengthy administrative proceedings, it is estimated that from 1930 to 1940 between 350,000 and 600,000 persons of Mexican descent returned to Mexico. By the end of the 1930's, Los Angeles had lost over one third of its Mexican residents (Sánchez, 1993).

In the 1940's the U.S. entered World War II and into an era marked by staunch American sentiment that rejected anything foreign (Cosgrove, 1984). For example, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese and Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps for the remainder of the war (Ngai, 2014; Huber, 2010). As the war progressed, there was a shortage of labor around the country. To fill the labor shortage, in 1942 the U.S. Government established the Emergency Labor Program, better known as the Bracero Program (Gutiérrez, 1995; Huber, 2010). This federal program allowed for the employment of hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants to work in agriculture. Because of the nationalist sentiment pervading politics during this time, the U.S. government did not publicize program (Ngai, 2014).

By this time the Dominant narrative about Mexicans had taken hold of the American public. The same way that 20 years earlier the narrative signaled Mexicans as sick and riddled with filth, and later in the 1930's when Mexican immigrants were blamed for the poor economy, because of their different traditions and language, MACs were now seen as the "enemy within" (Sánchez, 1995). This growing antagonistic view of difference by the Dominant culture in the U.S. became violent in June of 1943. U.S. forces servicemen physically assaulted MACs resulting in what today is known as the

Zoot Suit Riots. These riots refer to a period of violence when U.S. servicemen sought out MACs around the City of Los Angeles in movie theaters, in streetcars, and on the street; stripped off their clothes, cut their hair, and in many cases beat them (Cogrove, 1984; Gutiérrez, 1995; Sánchez, 1993).

### **The Creation of the “Wetback”**

By 1954 the Bracero program and undocumented laborers were fundamental sources of manual labor for the southern agricultural economy (Ngai, 2014). Due to the Bracero program hiring restrictions, however, growers in several states (i.e., Arkansas and Missouri) were not allowed to participate in the Bracero program and recruit braceros because of the discrimination policies against Mexicans in those states. As a result, growers in these states recruited undocumented laborers to work in their fields, thus encouraging more undocumented workers to travel to the United States in search for work. The distinction of bracero workers and undocumented workers was not always clear. Bracero workers would often bring their families with them in order to stay together. In some cases, families were composed of both types of laborers, braceros and undocumented workers, working in the same farm (Ngai, 2014).

The continuing issue of undocumented immigration led to the most aggressive deportation initiative by U.S government officials to date (Ngai, 2014; Huber, 2010). The Immigration and Naturalization Office (INS) deployed Operation Wetback in order to deport UIs back to Mexico (Bell et al., 2007). The project started in June of 1954 and by the end of the year, had already apprehended and deported over one million UIs back to Mexico. During the project, undocumented workers were returned to Mexico in terrible



conditions. In Nuevo Laredo, these immigrants were treated like cattle and dumped 15 miles from the Mexico-U.S. border on the side of the road. Other immigrants were sent by boat to the port of Veracruz in ships that were likened to slave vessels from the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Ngai, 2014).

Although the Mexican American community continued to see the bracero program and the increase of UIs in the U.S. as a barrier to full integration (Gutiérrez, 1995; Ngai, 2014; Sánchez, 1993), the Dominant narrative about undocumented Mexican immigrants did not differentiate between MACs, bracero workers, or UIs. Prior to 1954, the term wetback was used referring to immigrants who crossed the Rio Grande. Due to Operation Wetback, however, the Dominant narrative extended the use of the term to include all Mexican immigrants, other Latinx immigrants, and MACs as well implying they all were in the country illegally and were prone to violence and crime (Gonzalez, 2019).

### **The Narrative Becomes Perceived Reality**

The League of United Latin-American Citizens (LULAC) played an important role fighting for the equality of MACs. LULAC believed that the best strategy was to distance MACs from braceros and UIs (Sánchez, 1993). During the 1950's LULAC advocated for the citizen privileges of MACs by locating MACs with Black Americans suggesting that even if they were second class citizens they were still above braceros and UIs (Ngai, 2014). This logic, however, continued to socially rank MACs, like Black Americans, below white Americans, thus perpetuating the Dominant narrative of whiteness as the norm or standard (Castro-Gómez, 2007). The work done by LULAC and

other organizations to gain civil rights by distancing MACs from UIs, helped create an immigrant underclass that was not considered part of American society, and yet, it was needed for the economic growth of the country (Ngai, 2014). By denying basic rights such as education, healthcare, and fair wages to UIs, the U.S. generated the cause and perpetuated the narrative of UIs being dirty, poor, sick, and criminals (Dolmage, 2011; Gutiérrez, 1995; Molina, 2005; Ngai, 2014, Sánchez, 1993).

In 1964 the Bracero program came to an end. Ending an era of regulated immigrant wage labor but not the end of undocumented immigration into the U.S. Farm growers in the south continued the practice of employing undocumented laborers to work in the fields, even when the INS implemented more stringent immigration measures against UIs.

### **Nation Under Attack**

In 1965, Congress passed the Hart-Cellar Act, which eliminated national origin quotas previously established in 1924, establishing regional quotas instead. The intention was to increase the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S. and gave priority to immigrant family reunification (Chavez, 2013; Ngai, 2014; Huber, 2010). The policy, however, still maintained a general numerical quota of how many immigrants were allowed into the U.S. This quota was not enough to accommodate the demand for manual labor from Mexico and other Central American countries by U.S. businesses. As a result of the labor demand, the number of UIs entering into the U.S. continued to grow (Gutiérrez, 1995).

Due to the quota on documented immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, laborers in the U.S. from these regions were largely undocumented. The increase in UIs rekindled nativist sentiments among white Americans who felt the nation was “under attack” (Chavez, 2013, p. 2). Celebrities, reporters, and scientists relied on this myth and faulty statistics to stoke fear of Mexican immigrants reconquering the U.S. and diluting traditional American values such as hard work, respect for society, and community living (Rytz, 2008).

In 1986 Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). IRCA was an attempt to fix to the 1965 act that created a vast number of UIs in the country by granting amnesty to over 2.7 million UIs and establishing harsher measures to curb future border crossings from Mexico (Daniels 2004; Ngai, 2014; Huber, 2010). For example, IRCA created sanctions to employers who knowingly employed UIs. However, Daniels (2004) described the IRCA policies as designed to protect wealthy U.S. business owners while targeting immigrant-owned businesses with INS raids.

Even with increase of the militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border (e.g., spending \$2 billion yearly to build 700 miles of fencing, increasing the amount of border patrol agents; Ngai, 2014), IRCA failed to curb undocumented immigration into the U.S.: “It simply made the journey from México even more dangerous” (Huber, 2010, p. 26). Further, due to civil unrest, regime changes, and violence across Central American countries, people from these countries began arriving in significant numbers to the U.S. in search for better lives (Miyares et al., 2019).

Mexicans, Central Americans and Latinxs- immigrants or citizens alike- became the antagonists in the narrative of menacing immigrant communities within the country (Chavez, 2013). In recent years, the word ‘Mexican’ has evolved from just denoting nationality into a racial slur used to demean people who are Latinx or look Latinx (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). Today, the narrative surrounding Mexican immigrants as people who are dirty (Markel & Stern, 1999), riddled with disease (Molina, 2006), prone to crime (Dolmage, 2011), and unintelligent (Sánchez, 2003) -created over the last hundred years- has extended across immigrant status or nation of origin to include anyone of Latinx descent, affecting Latinx communities all over the country (Chavez, 2013; Gonzalez, 2019).

### **The Failed Narrative of Education as the “Great Equalizer”**

Many years MACs community leaders in California and Texas believed that through education and assimilation MACs would be welcomed into American culture and they would no longer discriminated against (Gutiérrez, 1995; Sánchez, 1993). Although MACs expressed hopes for integration through education, the numbers showed a very different outcome. By 1940, 80% of the students with a Spanish sounding last name attended one of six elementary schools in East Los Angeles. In San Fernando Valley, students were segregated due to language deficiencies. Additionally, since the 1920s teachers had been using IQ assessments as tools to prove MAC students were mentally disabled and thus needed to be educated in different facilities. Even when MAC students attended the same schools as white students, they were separated into different classes for

students who were considered slow, perpetuating the Dominant narrative of all Mexicans as a disabled group (Sánchez, 1993).

Although segregation is illegal today, the Dominant narrative continues to influence education policies that affect ULWD. In the early 2000s Arizona schools began teaching Ethnic studies courses as part of the high school curriculum. Throughout the duration of the program, academic achievement from Latinx students rose significantly. Influenced by the Dominant narrative, school administrators perceived these academic successes as a threat, and effectively dismantled the program in 2010 (Camarota, & Romero, 2011). When minorities in the U.S. become successful outside the Dominant narrative, they are shut down by those in power with the excuse that they are subversive or they stand against American values (Chavez, 2013).

As we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Dominant narrative continues to discredit ideas that challenge the status quo by repeating their same arguments (e.g., immigrants are dirty, we are under attack, all Mexicans are illegal; Castro-Gómez, 2005; Chavez, 2013). Instead of outright declaring that anything unfamiliar is a danger to society, however, the Dominant narrative is hidden in passive aggression or in microaggressions (Call-Cummings, 2017). Examples of this are seen in the discourse employers use to justify not hiring People of Color because they do not believe in affirmative action, or when educators frame the education of Students of Color using a deficit lens and blame the students' families, cultures, and backgrounds, as the reason for the student not making any progress (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999).

As demonstrated on Appendix A, the major trends in immigration shifted through the years reflecting an increasing number of immigrants from Mexico and currently from Central America. As a result of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, UIs, including ULWD, received certain protections under the law (Bell et al., 2007). The U. S. enacted laws and policies aimed to protect the rights of these immigrants. In doing so, the U.S. continues to provide some legal protection to UIs who currently reside in the U.S. while at the same time discouraging undocumented immigration. The next section describes the laws, U.S. Supreme Court decisions, and policies that have impacted the education of ULWD in chronological order. Although this description is not exhaustive, it is meant to provide context to the study in explain how these policies or laws affect the educational experiences of ULWD.

#### **National Laws and Education Policies that Influence the Education of ULWD**

As Appendix A shows, the history education for Latinx students in the U.S. is riddled with inconsistencies, racist policies, and civil rights cases (Gutiérrez, 1995). At the turn of the twentieth century, Texas and California required that all instruction in schools be conducted in English even if most of the population in those states were Mexican or of Mexican descent (Gutiérrez, 1995; Ngai, 2014; Bell et al., 2007; Sánchez, 1993). In addition, in 1918 Texas made it a legal offense to use any language other than English during instruction (Bell et al., 2007). Conversely, in 1930 *Texas Independent School District v. Salvierra* and in 1931 *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove*, parents of Mexican students in Texas and California argued effectively against the lawful segregation of their children and other MAC students based on race. Before this decision, Texas effectively

operated three school systems: one for white students, one for African American students, and one for MAC students (Foley, 2010).

Even if lawful segregation of students had ended in Texas, in reality MAC students in Texas and California attended racially segregated schools or were taught in lower academic level classes for students of intellectual disabilities (Gutierrez, 1995). The segregation of students with Spanish last names (e.g., Gómez, López, Sánchez), into separate schools or lower academic classrooms perpetuated the narratives of Latinx voluntary cultural isolation away from mainstream American values (Chavez, 2013).

### **Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka**

In 1954, the Supreme Court delivered its opinion on the segregation of students based on race. The Supreme Court asked and answered the question:

Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does (*Brown v. Board*, 1954).

The Court's decision continued by expressing that the separation people of based on race denotes the "inferiority of the of the negro group" (*Brown v. Board*, 1954). The Court recognized that the separation of same age peers based on race, under the sanction of the law, "has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system" (*Brown v. Board*, 1954). In addition, the decision established that separate facilities were inherently not equal, and held that those who had been

segregated into separate schools had been deprived of the protection guaranteed by the U.S. Constitutions to all U.S citizens.

The unanimous decision of the Court to rule separate but equal as no longer acceptable created an opportunity for all Students of Color in the U.S. to access educational opportunities previously not at their disposal. It is important to note how the language used in the Court's opinion points to systemic discrimination of students by race as having a "detrimental effect upon the colored children" (*Brown v. Board*, 1954). In their decision, the U.S. Supreme Court mentions injustices toward Students of Color, and points toward the educational system as the culprit of educational inequities.

Although the decision of *Brown v. Board* is the reason for educational integration in the U.S., it also suggests that once people are integrated, the "delayed mental development", and other "detrimental effects" of segregation would just come to an end. It did not take into account how the Dominant narrative would influence the reaction by school administrators, parents or students.

Schools, were not completely desegregated until the 1970s (Strunk et al., 2017). From 1959 to 1964, Prince Edward County in Virginia closed all public schools rather than proceeding with the desegregation of its public schools (Turner, 2004). While white students attended private institutions, Black students were left without schools during this time. For the Black families living in Prince Edward County, the closing of the schools created terrible social conditions. In other places like Texas and California, because MACS were legally considered white, public schools circumvented *Brown v. Board* by integrating Black and MAC students into the same schools. Therefore, Latinx and Black



students were placed in the same schools while white students continued to attend their own schools (Contreras & Valverde, 1994; Foley, 2010). In 1970, *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School System* finally recognized MACs and other Latinx populations as an ethnic minority, thereby upholding the that the same principles enunciated in *Brown v. Board* applied to Latinx students (Contreras & Valverde, 1994).

### **Lau v. Nichols**

In 1974 Latinx students benefited from another supreme court ruling (Contreras & Valverde, 1994). The decision in *Lau v. Nichols* contended that students not proficient in English were not receiving an equal education and schools must remedy this by providing English instruction or bilingual instruction for these students. This resulted in the creation of English as a Second Language programs to help students who were considered Limited English Proficient (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974).

### **Every Student Succeeds Act**

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The purpose of this law was to “provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps” (ESSA sec.1001, 2015). ESSA comprises eight titles or sections that address different educational issues in order to accomplish its main purpose of educating the nation’s youth and closing the education gaps. Within Title I and Title III, ESSA established guidelines to address the needs of students with disabilities in conjunction with IDEA (Title I), and the needs of EBs (Title III). This last reauthorization also requires school systems to disaggregate achievement

data for EBs with disabilities (ESSA sec. 3121 (a) (1), 2015; DCL, 2015). This is significant because the requirement emerged as a response to educators across the country asking for more clarity on data about the academic achievement of EBs (Hopkins et al., 2013). Further, the disaggregation of data by disability under this requirement, provides important data that can further inform policy decision making in the future for EBs and ULWD (Jennings, 2015).

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

Another law that impacted the education of all Students of Color, including Latinx students, was the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94–142), commonly known today by its 2004 reauthorization name, Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA was created with the four main purposes of (1) ensuring “all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living” (IDEA, sec.1400, p. 850, 2004), while ensuring the rights of parents and students are protected; (2) assisting the states in the implementation of intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families; (3) ensuring that parents and educators have the necessary tools “to improve educational results for children with disabilities by supporting system improvement activities” (p. 850); and (4) assessing and ensuring the effectiveness of the efforts made to teach the students with disabilities.

IDEA ensured no student could be turned away based on a perceived limitation by the school. By providing a free, appropriate, public education in the least restrictive environment, IDEA sought to equalize the education field for students with disabilities.

### **Plyler v. Doe**

In 1982 the Supreme Court ruled against the State of Texas in the groundbreaking decision of *Plyler v. Doe* by ruling that UIs are by any means people and therefore merit the protection of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982) as “shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (14<sup>th</sup> amendment). Justice Brennan delivered the opinion of the divided Court upheld the right of all children -documented or undocumented- to receive an education. Additionally, Justice Brennan mentioned during his commentary that the rising costs in educational expenses was not due to the number of UIs within schools but legal immigrants. Finally, the Court noted “that the illegal alien of today, may well be the legal alien of tomorrow” and without education these children “will be permanently locked into the lowest socio-economic class” (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982).

### **Educational Landscape for ULWD**

Although the intention behind these laws was to level the playing field for students from non-dominant cultures, in reality, these same policies have aided in the segregation and discrimination of the populations they tried to protect. When IDEA first passed in 1975, students with disabilities were extended rights in order to ensure educational equity (e.g., free and public education, individualized and appropriate

education, least restrictive environment; Turnbull & Turnbull, 19). However, research shows that for Students of Color, having a disability label further compounds the structural inequities and barriers endured by them in the first place (Annamma et al., 2013; Artiles, 2013; Skiba et al., 2008). One example is the overrepresentation of African Americans in the Intellectually Disabled (ID) category (Donovan & Cross, 2002).

After IDEA, Students of Color went from being segregated into different schools based on race (i.e., Texas had schools for Mexicans, for African Americans and for white students; Gutiérrez, 1995), to being segregated in different classrooms within integrated schools based on disability (Artiles, 2011). Although one can argue that these students benefitted from special education services, one can also argue that these students were sent to a strange school to learn from teachers who did not like them, to interact with students who did not look like them, and to conform to Dominant cultural and educational norms they did not understand (Annamma 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Skiba et al., 2008). Additionally, the numbers of students in categories where the identification of a disability is not physical (e.g., learning disability, emotional disability), vary enormously based on race and ethnicity, while the numbers in physical disability or blindness are proportional to the student population (Connor & Ferri, 2005; Skiba, 2008).

In K-12 educational settings, ULWD fall into the category of EBs if they are not proficient in English. When they are identified with a disability they receive special education services under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education). Their immigrant status is no longer considered for educational services, except for clarifying how funds can be spent (ESSA, sec. 3115(e)) and for keeping track of how many immigrants are in school

(ESSA, sec. 3201(5) (c)). By law, when immigrant students enroll in U.S. schools, they get referred to ESL testing, and, if needed, for ESL services. If identified as an EB, the school must inform parents of how they will address the educational language goals of the student within 30 days of enrolling (ESSA sec. 1112 (e) (3) (a)). While this identification ensures all ULWD who are EBs receive English language instruction, it prevents ULWD from being identified as having a disability until school personnel rule out the lack of English instruction as the reason for the student's lack of achievement (IDEA, 2004)

In many cases schools choose not to dually identify students as being EB and having a disability because of a lack of resources (Hoover et al., 2018), although failing to do so is against the law (DCL, 2015). In other cases, immigrants who are EB are placed 'at risk' for a learning disability due to their EB status regardless of their academic achievement (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013). The end result is the same; these students are placed in EB instruction that limits their engagement in the general education classroom (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013) and when these students enter middle and high school they are placed in lower academic classes (Rojas-Sosa, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999). These educational experiences perpetuate the narrative of difference and lack of achievement by Students of Color and immigrants. Although ULWD get subsumed into the category of EB with disability, it is important to understand the added stressors of being an UI in addition to being an EB as intersectional identities for ULWD (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013).

In addition to the Dominant narrative of underperformance that surrounds EBs, ULWD are dealing with other environmental factors that affect their daily lives (APA, 2012). Immigrant students in schools only receive services for being EB or having a disability, this aspect of their identity often gets neglected (Morales, 2015). As ULWD do not have lawful status within the U.S., the uncertainty of their future in the U.S. also takes a toll on their education performance (APA, 2012, 2012; Francis et al., 2019; Mallet et al., 2017). Although present throughout their educational experience, this lack of status becomes a more concrete reality as students move into high school and begin to think of life after graduation. Because of FERPA regulations, it is difficult to identify UI students while they are in a K-12 setting.

### **Postsecondary Education for ULWD**

Thanks to *Plyler v. Doe*, undocumented students are granted access to public education in K-12 settings. However, this legal limbo where ULWD attend public education, but are not allowed to get a driver's license or apply for a job creates difficulties for ULWD as they age (Mallet et al., 2017). The reality that their status is no longer recognized after graduating high school is hard for many ULWD. In many cases, when ULWD leave school their identity formation is affected to reflect more traits from their native countries and immigrant community where they find a sense of belonging instead of the American community where they are no longer welcomed (Cuadros, 2005; Ellis & Chen, 2013, Mallet, 2017). Because of undocumented students attending public school, the number of undocumented students -including ULWD- who want to further their education is growing (Swan & Clark-Ibañez, 2018). Before 2012, only

undocumented students in California could to attend college paying in-state tuition.

Undocumented students in the rest of the country needed to pay out-of-state tuition and had no access to financial aid. This changed in 2012 when President Obama enacted an executive order named Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

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

In 2012, President Obama signed the DACA executive order enabling long time UIs who met certain criteria the opportunity to attend college, get a driver's license and apply for a job (Swan & Clark-Ibañez, 2018). UIs whose application for DACA was accepted were temporarily protected from deportation (i.e., immigration authorities do not pursue DACA recipients as UIs).

In order to qualify for DACA, UIs had to fulfill certain characteristics: (1) arrived to the U.S. before having turned 16; (2) lived in the U.S. for longer than five years; (3) be 31 years old or younger as of June 2007; (4) have no criminal record; (5) pose no threat to national security or public safety; (6) be enrolled in school or have graduated from high school, or be part of or have been honorably discharged by the armed forces; and (7) had no lawful status on June 2012. This permit needs to be renewed every year (Swan & Clark-Ibañez, 2018; USCIS, n.d).

According to Krogstad et al. (2019), as of 2017, almost 790,000 UIs received DACA authorization. The majority of DACA permit holders were Latinx (98%) including Mexican (79.4%), Salvadoran (3.7%), Guatemalan (2.6%), and Honduran (2.3%) immigrants. Most enrollees were 25 years or younger (56%) when applying for DACA, and more women (53%) received DACA status than men (47%).

Currently, the future of DACA recipients is in jeopardy. In 2017, President Trump announced he was ending the DACA program. Through a series of court injunctions, DACA recipients are still allowed to apply for renewal, but the United States Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS) is no longer accepting new applications (USCIS, n.d.). In addition, in November of 2019 the Supreme Court heard initial arguments for and against DACA. The Supreme Court's pending decision on DACA recipients will have a tremendous impact on the educational future for over a million UIs, including ULWD (Krogstad et al., 2017)

Along with DACA recipients there is another group of immigrants whose status is in peril. Immigrants who received Temporary Protected Status (TPS) have faced the termination of the TPS program since 2015. Using the invasion narrative as an excuse, Donald Trump has justified the termination of TPS protection to individuals from different countries in Central America and the Caribbean (Gonzalez, 2019; Miyares et al., 2019).

### **Temporary Protective Status (TPS)**

TPS was created in 1990 during the George W.H. Bush administration. The program offered the opportunity of political asylum to a large number of Salvadoran citizens fleeing their country's civil war (Miyares et al., 2019). This civil war was the catalyst for the exodus of one sixth of El Salvador's population. As with DACA recipients, TPS holders need to meet certain criteria in order to be eligible. These requirements are: (1) be a national of a country designated for TPS, (2) file for registration during the open period for the country designated as TPS, (3) have been



continuously present in the U.S. since the date the country was designated as TPS, (4) have a clear criminal record, and (5) do not fall into any category that can bar an immigrant from asylum (USCIS, n.d.).

Immigrants living with TPS cannot receive citizenship through this program. However, as long as TPS recipients are not convicted of a felony, do not leave the U.S., and pay the renewal fee, they are allowed to remain in the U.S. (Miyares et al., 2019). TPS beneficiaries pay taxes and contribute to Social Security and Medicare. Their status, however, does provide a path to permanent resident status, or allow them to request for their family members as legal residents can (USCIS, n.d.). TPS recipients live their lives in two different planes. They carry on with their daily activities, “investing in life in the United States and saving for life at home” (Miyares et al., 2019, p. 211). In November of 2019 the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security announced the decision of extending TPS until January of 2021 (USCIS), extending TPS recipients’ ability to remain in the country, while at the same time leaving them uncertain of their future if the program does not extend beyond 2021.

Due to FERPA regulations that are in place to protect the privacy of students, identifying groups of ULWD in public schools is difficult. TPS and DACA recipients, however, are college-aged student populations that can be identified as undocumented due to that designation. DACA and TPS students provide an opportunity for educational researchers to better understand the educational realities of ULWD. By working with ULWD within the DACA and TPS student population this study will provide valuable insight into ULWD educational experiences.

Even though national laws and education policies in the U.S. are inclusive of People of Color and people with disabilities, they were within the context of the Dominant narrative. While the policies and laws were aimed to ameliorate to educational conditions of marginalized students, once these policies were enacted, the expectation for success was laid solely on the shoulders of the minority populations. When Students of Color, including ULWD do not meet the educational expectations set by the Dominant culture, these students are seen as less and deficient (Castro-Gómez, 2005). Influenced by the Dominant narrative, teachers, administrators, and other school personnel justify the exclusion of ULWD (and other Students of Color) from equitable educational opportunities by signaling to these students' lack of achievement without analyzing how society, school, and other institutions marginalize this population and systemically undermine their success (Annamma, 2013; Artiles, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2017).

The Dominant narrative describes UIs from a deficit perspective and does not take into consideration their voice nor their culture. While understanding how the Dominant narrative, policies, and laws continually affect the lives and education of ULWD is important, they do not provide a complete picture of the educational experience of ULWD. The next section provides actual data about UIs and ULWD immigration trends. Finally, the last section is a review of existing literature concerning ULWD. By examining what other researchers have done in the past, we can better inform educational practices that work for ULWD.

## **Current Immigration Trends Do Not Support Dominant Narrative**

This section provides data about Latinx UIs in the U.S. that contradict the Dominant narrative. Each fact contradicts one aspect of the Dominant narrative about UIs: (1) about all Latinx immigrants being undocumented, (2) how Latinx immigrants invading the country, and (3) how all immigrants, specifically UIs, are criminals. The section ends with the information available on ULWD.

Although the Dominant narrative describes the U.S. being invaded by immigrants (Chavez, 2013), data from the census and other sources suggest otherwise. In 2017, around 46 million, or 13.6% of the U.S. population, were immigrants. Krogstad et al. (2019) estimates that UIs account for 3.2% of the U.S. total population immigrants in the U.S. In 2017, there were 10.5 million UIs in the U.S. It is estimated that DACA recipients account for 690,000 of these immigrants and TPS recipients account for 318,000.

Compared to the 12.2 million UIs that resided in the U.S. in 2007, the current numbers represent a 14% decrease of UIs, or 1.7 million fewer people (Krogstad et al., 2019). In addition, for the first time since the 1965 Immigration Act, UIs from Mexico constituted less than half of the undocumented population in the U.S., dropping from 57% in 2007 to 47% in 2017. Another change in immigration patterns shows that most UIs apprehended at the Mexico-U.S. border are families traveling together from Central American countries (Krogstad et al., 2019). The majority of UIs have resided in the U.S. an average of 15 years or longer (78%), while only 23% have been in the U.S. less than 10 years. In 2017, 79% of the almost 59 million Latinx living the U.S. were American citizens (Krogstad et al., 2019).

Additionally, in contrast with the Dominant narrative that states all immigrants are violent criminals (Chavez, 2013; Gonzalez, 2019), data suggests that immigrants are less prone to commit a crime than American citizens. In fact, the rate of incarceration for all immigrants for non-immigration offenses is about one third of American citizens (Landgrave & Nowrasteh, 2017). The Dominant narrative also describes immigrants as dumb, less intelligent, disabled, or not capable to meet rigorous educational challenges (Dunn, 1988). However, in 2010 when Arizona banned ethnic or Mexican American studies from public and charter school curriculums, evidence from a report commissioned by Arizona's superintendent of public instruction found that ethnic and Mexican American studies increased positive school performance of the Latinx population in schools (Cammarota, & Romero, 2011; Chavez, 2013).

Although data in the U.S. does not support the Dominant narrative about UIs and ULWD, there is not enough information available on the educational experiences of ULWD in order to counter it. As previously mentioned, FERPA regulations prohibit school personnel from asking for, or disclosing information about, the immigration status of students and their families. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education mentions that UIs receive services in schools through ESL services and special education services, subsuming ULWD into ESL and special education categories without considering their specific circumstances (USDOE, n.d.). In order to better understand the ULWD population, I conducted a literature review on ULWD. The next section describes the literature review methodology, findings, and discussion.

## Literature on ULWD

I conducted a scoping review of the literature that included dissertations and peer reviewed articles published between 2002 and 2019. This timeframe was selected because in September of 2001 the World Trade Center in New York was attacked. After the attack, the United States immigration policy changed, becoming more stringent (Chavez, 2013). The research questions guiding the literature review were: (1) What was the purpose of research studies concerning ULWD, (2) Who were the participants, what were the research methods, and theoretical frameworks used, and (3) What were the common themes across the studies?

To identify relevant articles for this review, I conducted a search through the academic databases *Academic Search Complete*, *Anthropology Plus*, *Educational Administration Abstracts*, *ERIC*, *Essay and General Literature Index (H.W. Wilson)*, *Family Studies Abstracts*, *Fuente Académica*, *Legal Collection*, *LGBT Life with Full Text*, *MedicLatina*, *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection*, *Teacher Reference Center*, *Women's Studies International* using the following combination of search terms: (“undocumented students” OR “UIs” OR “Illegal immigra\*” or “Latinos” or “Hispanics” or “Chicanos” or “Latinas” or “Mexican” or “Latinx” AND “special education” or “special needs” or “disabilities” or “autism” or “learning disabilities”). This search yielded a total of 24 articles and four dissertations. In addition, I conducted a search using *Psych Info* with the terms suggested by the APA thesaurus, “Latino/Latinas” AND “disability” AND “immigration,” which yielded zero results. I amended the search term to “Latinos” from “Latino/Latina,” and the new search yielded 26 results. After I

discarded duplicate results, the total was 35 articles and four dissertations that included the search terms in the title or abstract.

I conducted a more thorough review of the articles adhering to the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria of being peer reviewed or dissertations from 2002 to date in the United States, and addressing the needs of the Latinx undocumented population dealing with a disability. After this second round, the total number of articles and dissertations that met the criteria was 15. I expanded the date to from 1990 and did an ancestral search which yielded five additional articles and one report. The final count was 15 articles, four dissertations, and one report. Although three additional papers provided general advice to work with immigrant populations and specifically mentioned ULWD or immigrant parents of a child with disability, these were not peer reviewed nor dissertations thus did not meet the requirements of the review.

After reading the literature on the topic, only four studies and two dissertations met the inclusion criteria of addressing the need of UIs with disabilities. Table 1 shows the articles that met all criteria.

**Table 1***Articles That Met Literature Review Criteria on ULWD*

Topics of Articles	Authors	Type of Research	Participants (n)
ULWD	Annamma, (2013).	Case study	1
Undocumented parents of students with disabilities	Alvarado, (2004).	In depth interviews	2
Latinx parents, some who are UIs, of students with disabilities	Francis, Gross, Lavín, Velazquez, & Sheets (2018).	Semi structured interviews	13
Latinx parents, some who are UIs, of students with disabilities	Francis, Gross, Lavín, Cazarez Velazquez, & Sheets (2019).	Semi Structured interviews	13
Undocumented parents of students with disabilities	Mora-Lopez, (2016).	Narrative	8
Undocumented parents of students with disabilities	Morales, (2015).	Grounded Theory	5

**Results**

Six peer-reviewed articles or dissertations met the inclusion/exclusion criteria for this literature review. Out of these publications, only one specifically addressed the experiences of ULWD. In this section, I present the results of the literature review by answering the questions: (1) What was the purpose of research studies concerning ULWD? (2) Who were the participants, what were the research methods, and theoretical frameworks used? and (3) What were the common themes across the studies?

### ***Purpose of Research Studies***

Annamma (2013) examined the intersectional identities that impacted the experience of one student in the juvenile system. Five studies (Alvarado, 2004; Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019; Mora-Lopez, 2016; Morales, 2015) examined the experiences of undocumented parents of children with disabilities. Alvarado (2004) examined the experiences of Latinx parents trying to provide services for their infant with disabilities. Two articles (Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019) examined the transition experiences of caregivers for students with severe disabilities. Francis et al. (2018) and Francis et al. (2019) explored the perception of Latinx parents about their sons or daughters' transition into adulthood. It is important to note that the main purpose of these studies was not related to immigration status, but this information emerged from the interviews collected by the researchers.

Two studies were dissertations (Mora-Lopez, 2016; Morales, 2015). Mora-Lopez (2016) investigated the experiences of Latinx UIs parents and their access to services for their children with Autism. The author wanted to examine how being in triple jeopardy (i.e., undocumented, monolingual, and having a child with a diagnosed disability; Mora-Lopez, 2016) hindered the parents' ability to advocate for their children and the services they needed. Morales (2015) studied the involvement barriers undocumented Mexican parents of students with disabilities faced in schools in California. Morales (2015) wanted to develop a grounded theory regarding the perceived or experienced barriers by these families.



### ***Participants, Research Methods, Theoretical Frameworks Used***

Annamma (2013) presented a case study of one ULWD in the juvenile system. Annamma (2013), used CRT and some of its branches (e.g., Feminist Critical Theory, LatCrit, Disability Critical Theory) to analyze the intersectional position of the participant within the juvenile criminal system. Veronica, the participant, shared with Annamma (2013) her experience as an ULWD and the way her immigrant status impacted her education. In addition, the author shared the lack of cultural awareness by the staff in the detention center, and captured Veronica's feelings on how she was coping with her disability, status and reality. Furthermore, Annamma points out how the Dominant narrative plays a role in the incarceration of Students of Color, by portraying them as more dangerous and more deserving of incarceration than their white peers.

Alvarado (2004) used in-depth interviews to examined the experiences of two undocumented Mexican mothers trying to provide services for their infant with disabilities. Alvarado used a phenomenological analysis of the interviews to examine the regularities in the participants' descriptions by identifying patterns in their retelling of their experiences in an early intervention program while being undocumented.

Two articles (Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019) examined the transition experiences of Latinx caregivers for students with severe disabilities. In both articles the authors used a basic qualitative interpretative design (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016). The 13 participants in these studies identified as Mexican, Salvadoran, or Puerto Rican. The authors interviewed the same participants over time to analyze how the transition of their young adult progressed through time. In the first round of interviews all 13 participants

were interviewed. For the second round, six participants were selected due to transition related milestones. For the third round four of the six participants interviewed in round two were interviewed again. In addition, Francis et al. (2019) applied Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Person–Process– Context–Time (PPCT) model to analyze the data. It is important to note that the purpose of this study was not to examine the experience of undocumented Latinx parents. This information arose from the interview data as the study progressed.

Out of the two dissertations (Mora-Lopez, 2016; Morales, 2015), Mora-Lopez (2016) used narrative inquiry to document and examine the experiences of eight Latinx UIs parents on the access to services for their children with Autism. Mora-Lopez (2016) used Bronfenbrenner's (2005) Person–Process– Context–Time (PPCT) as the framework for the data analysis. Morales (2015) used a grounded theory methodology to examine the barriers five undocumented Mexican parents faced in order to get involved in the education of their children with disabilities in California. Morales identified the “Gauntlet Theory” (p. 65) as key to parents' participation in school; describing this theory as navigating the school system trying not to anger anyone with power that may affect the education of their children in a negative manner (Morales, 2015).

### ***Common Themes Across the Studies***

The seven studies in the literature review shared several themes in common. Although these themes cannot be generalized to all ULWD, it is important to recognize that they can be present in the daily lives of ULWD.

**Myth That Parents Are Not Engaged in Their Children's Education.** All six studies articulated the problem that arose from school personnel believing Latinx parents

are not engaged in the education of their children. Alvarado (2004) described how the lack of cultural understanding by educators and service providers of the participants enabled them to make judgements based on assumptions that did not match the families' reality.

**Fear of Authorities/Deportation.** For participants in all the studies, the fear of deportation was real. This fear became a stressor in their daily lives and interfered with the family's ability to interact with school personnel. The literature review revealed how big of an impact fear of deportation, and fear of authorities in general, play in the daily lives of families where someone is undocumented. Annamma (2013), described Veronica as "cheeking her meds" (p. 36) as a coping mechanism instead of thinking of being deported to an unknown country without her family. Francis et al. (2019) mentioned one of their participants thinking of asking a close friend who was a U.S. citizen to adopt her child in order for him to receive services after he graduated high school. Alvarado (2004), described how due to fear of deportation, the undocumented status of the participants impacted every aspect of their lives, even more so than having a child with a disability.

**Deficit Perspective.** In many cases, families noticed how the service providers would treat their child as not capable, and limit the children's participation in school activities due to their inability to perform certain required tasks. Annamma (2013) related how her participant was only seen as a criminal, instead of valuing her as a student. Francis et al. (2018) mentioned that in some instances participants were seen as "too disabled to qualify for services" (p. 345). Morales (2015) also showed how educators adopted a deficit perspective when working with the participants' children, saying the

student did not belong in school because he was not performing at grade level, even though they had a disability.

**Perceived Discrimination/ Language Barrier.** Although schools are required by law to make all accommodations possible in order to ensure effective communication with parents of children with a disability, parents in these studies reported it has hard communicating with school personnel due to a lack of interpreters. Language was a perceived barrier across studies. Parents also commented on how they felt school personnel and medical personnel discriminated against them throughout their interactions. The discrimination was manifested as disrespect for participants culture, denial of services, questioning the legal status of the parents or intimidation. The participants in Alvarado's (2004) study, mentioned they felt discriminated against by service providers once they found out they could not speak English well. Francis et al. (2018) mentioned their participants losing trust on educators after feeling they were being discriminated. Francis et al. (2019) mention many of their participants felt discriminated due to speaking Spanish as a first language. Due to discrimination, Alvarado (2004) and Mora-Lopez (2016) stated that minority families who have children with disabilities face a challenge in finding quality health care compared to white families.

## **Discussion**

The literature review focused on answering the following questions: (1) What was the purpose of research studies concerning ULWD, (2) Who were the participants, what were the research methods, and theoretical frameworks used, and (3) What were the common themes across the studies? In this section, I address these questions.

### ***Purpose of the Research Studies***

Only one study in the review (Annamma, 2013), addressed ULWD as the main population. This article focused on the lived experiences of one participant while in the juvenile detention center, and how the intersectionality of race disability and status interfered with her wellbeing. Although the study was not conducted in a traditional public education setting, it does provide readers an example of how immigration status plays a central role on the lives of ULWD. The purpose of the other five of the studies in the literature review was to examine and better understand the experiences of Latinx parents of children with disabilities. Because of the range in educational experiences of the participant's children, the articles in the review provide great insight into the experiences of undocumented Latinx parents of children with disabilities. However, the studies do not robustly address the experiences of UWDLs in education settings, from the perspectives of UWDLs. These five articles expressed the need to research these experiences due to the lack of research in the area.

### ***Participants and Research Methods***

Although participants in the studies were undocumented, in two instances, the immigrant status of the participants was not explicit. Francis et al. (2018) and Francis et al. (2019), did not explicitly interview undocumented Latinx parents. The participants in these studies shared their status when answering questions about the types of barriers they faced when trying to access services for their children. Even though due to the population characteristics and the methodology used for the studies in this review, the number of participants in this review was small (e.g., less than 50), the participants in

these studies ranged from parents with children ages 0-3 years (Alvarado, 2004), to parents caring for young adults after high school (Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019). Most of the participants in the studies identified as Mexican immigrants although in Francis et al. (2018) and Francis et al. (2019) there were also participants from El Salvador and Puerto Rico (these participants were documented as people from Puerto Rico are considered U.S. citizens). However, due to confidentiality assurances, the authors did not disaggregate participants by country of origin. Although Mexican immigrants are the largest Latinx immigrant group in the U.S. it is important to consider other Latinx populations. For example, in Florida most Latinx immigrants identify as Cuban and Venezuelan, in Massachusetts, they identify as Dominican, and in Washington D.C. most Latinx immigrants identify as Salvadoran (Ennis, 2011). More research on other Latinx populations needs to be considered. Out of the studies in the review, only one study (Annamma, 2013) examined the experiences of ULWD. Although Annamma does address systemic inequities and how they affect ULWD, the setting is not a traditional educational setting.

All the studies in the review were qualitative. In addition, researchers in all the studies established trusting relationships with the participants, as Alvarado (2004) mentioned it is the duty of researchers to represent participants “with dignity” (p. 528). Francis et al. (2019) applied Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) Person–Process– Context–Time (PPCT) model to analyze the data in their basic interpretative study, Francis and colleagues call for a critical approach to further research (e.g., LatCrit, CRT). Mora-Lopez (2016) utilized narrative inquiry to understand the experiences of the participants

in her study. Mora-Lopez (2016) however, did not utilize a critical perspective to analyze the findings. Morales (2015) used grounded theory to analyze the experiences of the participants in his study. Through the use of grounded theory Morales identifies the Gauntlet theory as the reason undocumented parents face barriers when trying to access special education services for their children. Alvarado (2004) used in depth interviews in her study. Due to the nature of the topic and the trust needed between researcher and participants, Alvarado cautions researchers that this type of research is difficult. If the researcher is not willing to establish a relationship with the participants, the results may be superficial and participants will not share their real stories (Alvarado, 2004). This dissertation is an important addition to the field because it does not only recognize the experience of ULWD as valid knowledge, but it seeks to co-construct knowledge with participants through the collective analysis of the participants' experiences (Huber, 2010; Rendón, 2005).

### ***Common Themes***

Although the studies in the review span 15 years (2004-2019), participants revealed the same type of barriers interfering with their participation in the education of their children with disabilities as Latinx UIs. Alvarado (2004) mentioned fear of deportation, discrimination and lack of quality healthcare services. The same trend continued as Morales in 2015, Mora-Lopez in 2016, and Francis et al. in 2019 also found these recurring themes across participants. Although there is a 15-year span between Alvarado (2004) and Francis et al. (2019), the outlook for undocumented families who have children with disabilities seems to remain constant. Fear of deportation was

mentioned in every study, and impacted the lives of all participants. Annamma (2013), mentioned fear of deportation was creating an unbearable situation for the participant, which led the participant to seek relief by overdosing on medicine.

The five studies about parents talked about their immigration status interfering with their involvement in their child's education. Alvarado (2004) expressed how the undocumented status of the participants interfered with their quality of life and ability to earn decent wages, even if they were working two or three jobs. The participants in Francis et al. (2018) and Francis et al. (2019) were all identified to be from low socioeconomic status, and mentioned that being undocumented was one of the reasons for this. Although parents wanted to provide the best services possible to their children, due to their economic reality and job requirements they were not always able to pay for services or attend meetings with school personnel. This lack of appropriate services and meeting attendance, when not thoroughly examined, reiterates the Dominant narrative about Latinx parents not being involved in the education of their children, when in reality, it is the systemic barriers imposed on these families that interfere with the child's education.

Morales (2015) identified the Gauntlet Theory to explain that the discrimination and other barriers mentioned by the participants were part of a system that provides for some but not for others. This Gauntlet theory also can also be explained as the Dominant narrative influencing the way in which special education services are provided to students whose parents are undocumented. These families remain at the margins of what is accepted and because of their immigration status cannot assimilate to the Dominant



culture, even if they wanted to. This lack of possibility creates a situation where for some students special education services become a tool for success, while for others they become a barrier, or a way to continue to stay in the margins (Artiles, 2013). While the influence of the Dominant narrative is apparent and alluded to in each study, only two authors alluded to systemic barriers (Annamma, 2013; Morales, 2015), and of these two only Annamma mentioned the influence of the Dominant culture (dominant discourse; p.33) affecting these discrimination practices.

Another theme that provides an example of this marginalization is the language used during special education meetings with parents. Language was identified as a barrier across all studies. The fact that parents of children with disabilities are not receiving information in their own language is especially problematic because IDEA (2004) mandates that schools and educational agencies ensure parents who do not speak English participate in the educational planning of their children, and understand the procedures and services that will be provided. It does, however, provide school personnel with an excuse to maintain certain types of students in more restrictive environments and ensure parents have a harder time advocating for the services the student needs (Morales, 2015).

The lack of cultural understanding by service providers and educators was another recurring theme in the review (Alvarado, 2004; Annamma, 2013, Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019; Mora-Lopez, 2016; Morales, 2015). For service providers to actually help their clients it is necessary that they are trained on how to provide culturally appropriate services (Annamma, 2013; APA, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). When providers fail to engage non-Dominant patients or students in this manner, the

services, delivery, and expectations may not reflect the needs or may not be understood by the patients or students (Annamma, 2013; APA, 2014). Additionally, not engaging in culturally responsive practices reiterates the Dominant narrative that everyone must conform to the norm, (i.e., Eurocentric values of what is right and wrong), regardless of where the participants are from, the language they speak, or the belief system they ascribe to (Castro-Gómez, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

Although there are limitations to this review (e.g., studies may be missing, only reviewed gray literature and peer reviewed articles). This review demonstrated that there is limited research about the experiences of ULWD in educational settings. Within the literature reviewed, there were no studies that examined the educational experience of ULWD in public schools. With approximately one million UIs attending public schools out of which over 70% are Latinx, understanding the educational experiences of ULWD is critical. Due to FERPA regulations schools are not permitted to report immigration status of students or their parents to government agencies (Mallet et al., 2017). However, the studies in this review ranged from parents with children aged 0-3 years (Alvarado, 2004), to parents caring for young adults after high school (Francis et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019) providing an ample range of educational experiences. Additionally, although there is substantial research on parental perceptions about their child's transition from high school to adult life, most of this research does not focus on culturally or linguistically diverse populations (Francis et al., 2019). These studies state that undocumented parents and children do not always trust the school are afraid of the school

personnel reporting their status. This fear of authorities, coupled with discrimination based on their race, immigrant status, and disability, affect ULWD educational experiences in unknown ways that are not addressed by the literature in this review (Annamma, 2013; Alvarado, 2004; Morales, 2015).

The Dominant narrative perpetuates negative stereotypes of immigrants. From the first independent days of the U.S. the Dominant narrative has influences the way immigrants and people with disabilities are perceived. Immigrants who looked different, sickly or had a disability were not allowed in the country (Dolmage, 2011; Molina, 2005; Yew, 1980). Although there are laws that protect ULWD, these laws are not enough to affect change until the Dominant narrative understands and addresses the systemic barriers that perpetuate injustices against ULWD and other marginalized populations. Currently, there is limited research that provides insight into the school experiences of ULWD. This means that the only narrative on ULWD is the Dominant narrative.

Five of the six studies provide insight into the experiences of undocumented Latinx parents. In order to challenge the Dominant narrative about ULWD, it is important to conduct research with ULWD that can serve as a counternarratives, and provide insight into the academic lives of these students (Yosso, 2006). Therefore, it is critical, however, to include the voices of ULWD in the discussion (APA, 2012; Dodds et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2019; Mallet, 2017). In order to counteract the Dominant narrative, it is essential to conduct research in ways in which highlight the accomplishments of ULWD while exposing systemic barriers that discriminate and oppress UWLD in schools in order to create an effective counternarratives to the Dominant narrative on ULWD. Creating

counternarratives through *testimonio* is one approach begin shifting the Dominant narrative on ULWD.

### **Why This Study**

As the literature review shows, research about ULWD is sparse. Additionally, the literature available for this review did not investigate the experiences of ULWD in schools. The review also uncovered most of the research investigated the experiences of undocumented Latinx parents of children with disabilities. Furthermore, throughout the research articles, the Dominant narrative was evident in the themes participants identified as barriers (e.g., participants identified discrimination against immigrants, a lack of authentic engagement by school officials as barriers to their children's academic success). The purpose of this dissertation is to use *testimonio* of ULWD as counterstories within a LatCrit theoretical framework to center the ULWD experience as an important component of the immigrant experience, and provide better insight into the realities of ULWD in educational settings. By documenting the experiences of ULWD, this dissertation will add to the understanding of how ULWD navigate the educational system, what barriers ULWD face, and how to eliminate these barriers so more ULWD students can be successful. In addition, because when ULWD exit ESL programs it becomes extremely difficult document their progress or experiences (Saunders & Marcelletti, 2013), conducting a study with ULWD in order to identify systemic barriers that interfere with their success can provide resources for educators across the U.S. Finally, it is important to explore and understand how ULWD have experienced their

education within the U.S. to understand what supports they relied on to become successful and graduate from high school.

Scholars across the field of education are calling for different types of research focusing on the experiences of marginalized populations (APA, 2012; Domínguez, 2019; Francis et al., 2019). Educational research outcomes for immigrants, often get subsumed in EB literature (ESSA, 2015), and the literature exploring the experiences of EB with disabilities is sparse as well (Lavín et al., 2019). Using *testimonio* to counter the Dominant narrative about ULWD -honoring their lived experience while providing insight into the types of systemic barriers ULWD face in school- answers this call.

This dissertation adds to the field in four important ways: (1) it builds on previous studies about the educational experiences of undocumented students (Huber, 2010) by adding the point of view of ULWD to the conversation, (2) it answers the call from scholars across education research field for strength-based research in marginalized populations (Domínguez, 2019; Tuck, 2009), (3) it answers the call to better understand the ULWD population (APA, 2012; Francis et al., 2019) and, (4) it utilizes a research methodology that includes ULWD as co-participants and centers their experience as valuable knowledge (Bernal, 2012; hooks, 2003; Huber, 2010).

### CHAPTER THREE

The purpose of this dissertation was to understand the following questions:

- (1) How do collective narratives by ULWD inform a model for understanding the types of systemic, cultural, or environmental barriers and support systems that ULWD experience in educational settings?
- (2) How do the counternarratives of ULWD describe the effects of the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, disability, and immigration status on their K-12 educational experiences?

In the first section of this chapter I outline my ontological and epistemological stance as a researcher providing an explanation as to how I arrived at my ontological stance and describing the three components of this stance: (a) the recognition of the whole humanity of participants and their experiential knowledge as valid, (b) the creation of knowledge through a dialogical process, and (c) the hope that research can affect change for a more equitable future. Further, I explain how my ontological stance positions me within a Critical Race Theory (CRT)/Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) framework, and what this theoretical framework entails.

In the second section, I provide an in-depth explanation of *testimonio* as counterstories, discuss how the use of *testimonio* as research methodology is congruent with both my ontological stance and a LatCrit theoretical framework. And explore some

of the critiques of counterstories and *testimonio*. First, I explain the theoretical underpinnings of *testimonio*, and the value of this methodology within a LatCrit/CRT framework in education. Next, I describe the method of *testimonio*, explain the influence of Chicana Feminist epistemologies on *testimonio*, and address the importance of a researcher's positionality when using *testimonio* in order to prevent the Dominant ideology from co-opting *testimonio* as a way to infuse culture into the Dominant narrative.

Finally, in the third section, I describe my positionality and concerns I address throughout the data collection and analysis of the project. I describe the criteria for selecting participants, the methods for data collection and data analysis. I identify the different processes I used to ensure the findings are consistent with the participants' stories, the theoretical framework, and the methodology used the project.

### **Arriving at my Ontological Stance**

The purpose of research is to provide answers to questions about how the world works. These questions vary in dimension, style, and rationale (Crotty, 1998). For some, the answers to these questions can only be answered from a positivist point of view, where the researcher can detach him or herself from the object of study (Hatch, 2002, Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This idea, that one can detach oneself from a situation, can be understood in the dialectical way of thinking of Western hegemonic states (e.g., thinking/feeling, either/or, good/evil, us/them; Tuhiwai Rendón, 2008; Smith, 2012). Conversely, when exploring experiences and ideas from Scholars of Color (e.g., any group or community of scholars whose members do not consider themselves part of the

white Dominant culture, and the term “white” interchangeable with Dominant, hegemonic, and western), one quickly realizes that cultures around the world see this separation as false or artificial. Indigenous cultures in North and South America, the Pacific Islands, and other places around the world share similar perspectives on knowledge and on our relationship to this knowledge (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1990; Rendón, 2008; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). In the ways of knowing woven through Global south culture, there is no knowledge construction without a relationship between the researcher and the researched (Wilson, 2008).

For over 500 years, the Eurocentric notion of reality has been placed as the ideological center to view the world while devaluing, denying, ignoring, or erasing different understandings of how the world works (Brabeck, 2003; Castro-Gómez, 2005; Mignolo 2009). Western researchers required a justification for not including other types of knowledge construction within their paradigm. This process began the moment Europeans were confronted by the *other* (e.g., indigenous people; Rendón, 2008; Smith, 2012). In this encounter Europeans had a choice: they could understand the *other* and see them as equally human, or, as history shows, they could dehumanize and demonize these people and their cultures in order to eliminate them and brand their customs and traditions as not valid, not knowledge: (i.e., barbaric, rudimentary, pre-civilized; Castro-Gómez, 2005; Mignolo, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

Until recently, other ways to understand the world remained in the margins of western society. As the population in western countries diversified, and the confrontation between the west and the *other* started to happen on a daily basis, these marginal ways of



knowing are being explored by more scholars (Anzaldúa, 1987; Castro-Gómez, 2005; Bernal, 2012; Domínguez, 2019; hooks 1990; Pillow, 2003). Education, in spite of honest and purposeful efforts to make research more equitable, continues to be a Dominant culture endeavor where Students of Color and their performance are examined and measured against western standards of success that are imposed on them (Domínguez, 2019). Questions on why an intervention failed, or on which population struggles the most in an academic area, reiterate the hegemonic norms of success defined by Eurocentric ideals of education; and do not address issues of inequality, culture, or adequate education resources (Ladson-Billings, 2005). The fact that as teachers we can decide whether students are measuring up to certain standards without questioning our position as educators, judge, or jury is reflective of the idea expressed by Castro-Gómez on the *hubris of the zero point* (2005). This core belief (*the hubris of the zero point*) validates western ways of being, and privileges knowledge emerging from ways of knowing coherent with their values, while at the same time discarding any other knowledge that does not meet the requirements of the western analytical or experimental methods (Castro-Gómez, 2005; Domínguez, 2019).

Educational researchers often look at data and pursue lines of questioning that echo the Dominant logic. When asking questions of academic performance by groups, or comparing the achievement of subgroups to the norm, researchers fall into the narrative explained by Castro-Gómez (2007). This western narrative dominates the discourse in educational institutions as a way to maintain the racial status quo, one in which western/white ideals of success and those who adhere to them are highlighted as

examples of goodness and excellence (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), while those who do not comply with the previously mentioned values, are seen as less than or different (Artiles, 2013), and their ideas are devalued and seen as cultural baggage instead of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005). When the western ideals are Dominant, students from the Dominant groups (e.g., white, English speaking, European) end up at the top, while those from other groups end up at the bottom of the ranking (Darder, 2011).

Conducting research that asks questions that center ontologies and epistemologies from the margins, instead of making the marginalized something to pity or fear, disrupt the western ideas of success, achievement, and merit (Tuck, 2009). Additionally, only by turning our gaze from the participants toward the system can we honestly begin to shed light on the racist practices ingrained in our educational systems (Artiles, 2013). The sole purpose of these racist practices is to serve as gatekeeping policies, allowing admittance only to those few who are able to fulfill the Dominant expectation of success and achievement under the Dominant gaze's terms. This recognition of marginal ways of knowing is the result of years, decades, centuries of struggle by People of Color to have their humanity recognized and valued. This struggle for the recognition of humanity, one that continues to this day, is important to me.

### **Honoring the Humanity of Participants**

The recognition of the whole person is at the foundation of my ontological stance. It is not enough to follow a “do no harm” policy, or to inform participants of risks involved in the research process. I believe that when conducting research, I need to be

able “to live with” my research decisions every day after I finish with a project. I believe in a subject-subject relationship (Freire, 2000) instead of a subject-object (Descartes, 1999; Bruner, 2003) approach to research, meaning the specific positivist practice of our categorizing research participants as objects to be studied. I refer to the practice of mining for information and not worrying about the participants beyond the scope and purpose of the project (Limes-Taylor Henderson & Esposito, 2017). Instead, I believe participants in research provide meaningful contributions when establishing relationships with the researcher and by forging a dialogic dynamic (Freire, 2000).

Like Freire’s dialogical approach (2000), Laura Rendón’s (2008) *Sentipensante* (Feeling-thinking) pedagogy focuses on the wholeness and nonduality of participants, where instead of research being conducted within a subject-object paradigm, research becomes a subject-subject relationship. I believe this concept to be the foundation of my ontological approach: To recognize the whole humanity of the people participating in my research projects, to consider participants in my research project as equally human.

Laura Rendón (2008) used the word *sentipensante* to refer to her relationship as an educator toward her students. “A key ontological principle of *Sentipensante* Pedagogy is that it asks [teachers and researchers] to work with individuals as whole human beings—intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual” (p. 135). Within this approach, intellectual understandings acquired through the scientific method or acquired through creativity, intuition, and imagination, are equally welcomed and valued. The welcoming of these different understandings is seen as looking at two sides to the same coin, or two parts of a whole: complementing each other instead of being in opposition to each other.

In addition to recognizing the whole-person, western and non-western values and ways of knowing, a *Sentipensante* approach values the individual search for knowledge, while it also recognizes the importance of dialogue and shared construction of meaning:

“[*Sentipensante* pedagogy] is integrative in the sense that it focuses on wholeness and non-duality. For example, it represents the reunification of sensing and thinking to foster the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom” (p.134). These dual ways of knowing become tools to enhance the meaning of the topics researched, and aid in the connection among the experience, the researcher, and the participants.

Although the statement of recognizing humanity is expressed by researchers generally, and protecting human subjects is now an imperative in social research; researchers in many cases, are taking or mining for information, not entering into a relationship with participants as people, but rather treating them as objects. This type of research is what Linda Tuhiwai Smith refers to in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies* “one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (2012, p. 1).

Scholars across disciplines are asking to shift the research narrative away from damage-centered research, urging researchers and communities to reimagine and reformulate the type of research conducted with marginal populations (Fine, 2018; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Tuck, 2009), This call asks researchers to focus on the whole person (complex personhood), including participants’ strengths and flaws. This shift is necessary for communities in the margins to change the narrative that currently prevails when addressing them (e.g., poor, broken, damaged, addicts, criminals). In order to avoid falling into this category, I continuously engage in reflection on whether or not my

actions within a research project honor the humanity of the participants, and on whether or not the project perpetuates stereotypical renditions of the communities with whom I am working. In this sense, I echo the sentiments put forth by these scholars. Research cannot continue to promote solely the idea of broken/damaged communities, or of participants as victims or superhuman agents (Gordon, 2008). We need to look at participants as complex, as people who are beset by contradiction, with ideals, hopes, and visions for a different future, instead of just as members of broken communities. By recognizing the humanity of participants, and understanding their complex personhood, we begin to appreciate how the lives of our participants are “simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning” (Gordon, 2008, p. 5).

### **Co-constructing Knowledge**

In a research project, the participants and researcher share and experience the research process together (Freire, 2000; Lavín & Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2019; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Researcher and participants build knowledge through a collaborative dialogue examining issues of power and equity. Freire used the term “subject-subject” when referring to an equal relationship between subjects within the quest for knowledge, recognizing participants as holders of knowledge (Morrow & Torres, 2002). In Freire’s (2005) own words “I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing” (p. 379). This dialogical relationship between participant and researcher enables the project to become a mutual undertaking in the search for a shared objective. Bernal (1998),

through the use of Chicana feminist epistemology, recognizes this knowledge construction as methodologies, experiences, and realities that are accepted as the foundation of knowledge.

The co-construction of knowledge through a dialogical approach is not possible without recognizing the humanity of participants in a research project, for as Freire (2000), expressed “dialogue cannot exist without humility...dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility” (p. 90). When the dialogical approach becomes a just method (i.e., a way to extricate information, instead of building relationships and community between researcher and participants), the goal of creating a process for learning and knowing that involves theorizing about experiences shared during the dialogue no longer takes place. Instead of engaging in a subject-subject dialogue, the engagement of one becomes superficial, turning the process back into a subject-object relationship. Thus, the dialogue loses its sincerity and depth, focused only on acquiring information instead of creating knowledge together.

### **Hope That Research Can Affect Change**

The last concept that constitutes my ontological stance is hope. Participating in research projects that expose inequalities and systemic barriers is hard work and takes an emotional toll on the researcher (Huber, personal communication, 2019). Hope is the mediator that allows me to continue with the research. I believe that through this work, and in collaboration with my participants, we can affect change and improve the conditions of othered communities (Valdes, 1996). Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) wrote about

the idea of working together with those who do not agree with one's stance. In her book *Borderlands: The new mestiza =La frontera*, Anzaldúa expressed the need to look to the future and act for change "because the counter-stance stems from a problem with authority...it's a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life" (p. 78).

Other scholars also mention hope as a necessary component in their work. Feminist scholar bell hooks (2003) states that when we name a problem without focusing on how to solve it, we are taking away hope and thus sustaining the work of the dominant culture. Hope implies working for a better future. Freire (2007) mentioned that "hope is an ontological requirement for human beings" (p. 44). The recognition of participants as equally human, the co-construction of knowledge, and hope interact with and complement each other creating different possibilities for research and collaborative practice.

One of these possibilities for research where these three components are included is using CRT and LatCrit as a theoretical framework. In education, CRT and LatCrit are used to uncover systemic inequalities toward marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). CRT and LatCrit align with my ontological stance by validating the experiences of participants as knowledge, constructing knowledge together, and working for a more equitable future.

### **CRT, LatCrit, and Counterstories as Knowledge**

CRT is a field interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Originally a movement within law, CRT

has spread out into other disciplines (e.g., social work, sociology, education). “Today, many in the field of education consider themselves critical race theorists who use CRT’s ideas to understand issues of school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, controversies over curriculum and history, and IQ and achievement testing” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p.3).

CRT draws mainly from two previous movements, critical legal studies (i.e., legal indeterminacy- not every case has one correct outcome, most cases are decided by emphasizing one line of authority over another), and radical feminism (i.e., the relationship between power and the construction of social roles). Additionally, CRT draws from some European philosophers (e.g., Antonio Gramsci, Jacques Derrida), from the American radical tradition (e.g., Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King Jr.), and from the Black Power and Chicano movements of the sixties and seventies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT theorists ascribe the title of founding father to African American scholar Derrick Bell (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), but they also recognize the contributions of African American or Black scholars Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Williams; Asian scholars Neil Gotanda, Eric Yamamoto, and Mari Matsuda; Indigenous scholar Robert Williams; and Latinx scholars Richard Delgado, Kevin Johnson, Margaret Montoya, Juan Perea, and Francisco Valdes. As the field continues to grow, so does the list of prominent names. In education, scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings, William Tate, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara Yosso continue to explore different ways in which systemic



oppression affects students and teachers of color from Pre-Kindergarten to higher education settings.

### **CRT in Education**

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain why it is important to apply CRT in the education field, stating that “race continues to be significant in explaining inequity in the United States” (p. 51). When trying to explain the differences in school performance or experience, class and gender are not enough. Solórzano and Yosso (2001) paraphrase Mari Matsuda when they express that the goal of CRT in education is to work “toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating other forms of subordination such as gender, class, and sexual orientation” (p. 472).

For Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), CRT is based on three central propositions, (a) race continues to be a determinant factor of inequity in the U.S., (b) U.S. society is based on property rights, and (c) “the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity” (p. 48). Similarly, Solórzano (1998), and later Solórzano and Yosso (2001, 2002), propose five themes that encompass how CRT can be applied in education (e.g., basic perspective, research methods, and pedagogy). These five themes - (a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideologies, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary discipline- work to answer the questions of what CRT does, why it does it, and how it is done (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Solórzano and Yosso's (2001) analysis provides a cohesive framework for CRT in education that embeds Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) propositions into their thematic analysis of CRT (i.e., race continuing to be a significant factor determining inequity in the U.S. falls within the theme of race and racism being central in the study of equity in education). For this reason, I use Solórzano and Yosso's (2001) CRT central themes as they "challenge 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).

***The Centrality of Race and Racism, and their Intersectionality With Other Forms of Subordination***

As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain, "racism is ordinary, not aberrational" (p. 7). For most People of Color in the U.S., it is the way business is usually conducted by society. However, race and racism need to be seen at their intersection (Crenshaw, 1991) with other forms of subordination (e.g., gender, class).

In 2013, Crenshaw reiterated the importance of intersectionality across disciplines. One of these disciplines is special education. Although the field of special education recognizes the racialization of disability (Artiles, 2013; Connor, 2019; García & Ortiz, 2013; Hernández-Saca, Gutman Kahn, & Cannon, 2018), "scholars have been slow to frame this racialization as an intersectional project" (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 306). In Solórzano and Yosso's (2001) CRT analysis of education, racism is about the white educational institutions keeping power. As Darder (2011) explains, the Dominant culture

aims to control the structure of schooling so that children from this culture end up in roles of control in American society.

### ***The Challenge to Dominant Ideology***

The Dominant ideology in the United States positions whiteness as normative, and everyone else gets ranked according to the norm. This norm has the power to maintain a narrative where People of Color are muted or erased when they challenge the Dominant culture, authority, or power (Darder, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In education, CRT challenges the notions of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, gender blindness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity (Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso 2001). It posits that any suggestion of these previous claims is a camouflage for the self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in the United States (e.g., students who fail are not measuring up to *our* standards; there must be something wrong with *them*).

### ***The Commitment to Social Justice***

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain that CRT “not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better” (p. 3). Solórzano and Yosso describe CRT in education as the “curricular work that leads toward: (1) the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and (2) the empowerment of underrepresented minority groups” (p. 473). Ladson-Billings (1995) classifies CRT in education as an “important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (p. 9).

In special education, teachers are called to improve the educational achievement of students by focusing on their academic skills. For Students of Color, however, this goal cannot be achieved if teachers do not address inequity in the classroom and in the students' daily lives. Teachers must become advocates of their students and must demand action from other teachers and administrators in order to achieve meaningful changes in the education of Students of Color with disabilities.

### ***The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge***

An important aspect of CRT is the recognition of experiential knowledge of People of Color as valid (Pillow, 2003). Since the inception of CRT and through its expansion into education, experiential knowledge and storytelling have been recognized as strengths. Drawing from the explicit lived experiences of People of Color and utilizing methods that are culturally accepted in non-western societies - methods such as family histories, storytelling, biographies, scenarios, *testimonios*, narratives, and counter narratives (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso 2001)- CRT in education explores the racialized experiences of Students of Color.

### ***The Transdisciplinary Perspective***

CRT in education utilizes knowledge from different fields (e.g., ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, law) to understand racism, sexism, and classism in education within a historical and contemporary context (Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso 2001). Because the world we live in continually becomes more complex, we cannot rely on only one point of view to understand how it

operates (McGregor, 2004). In order to understand how the world operates, scholars are called to look past their own disciplines in order to understand the present world.

CRT does not advocate for the elimination of western ideologies or scholarship, but rather advocates for the recognition and use of alternate paradigms as valid means to approach a problem. The key components of the transdisciplinary perspective are collaboration, problem solving, engaging with the real world, and being open to all disciplines while maintaining a level of rigor and tolerance among disciplines (McGregor, 2004; Rendón, 2008). The purpose of CRT in education is to challenge traditional knowledge construction paradigms and the related discourse on race. CRT focuses on race and racism from the perspective and experiences of People of Color. More importantly, CRT provides a guide, through social justice, to transform the social conditions in which People of Color find themselves (Solórzano, 1998). CRT in education asks that researchers recognize other knowledges that can provide insight into enduring educational problems that evade explanations when western research methods are used to address them (e.g., achievement gap, drop-out rates, low achievement by minorities on standardized tests). These alternative methods grapple with the same issues from a different perspective, provide a different explanation for the root causes, and offer a range of solutions that explain the problem by shifting the focus of the problem from an individual perspective to a societal one. For example, instead of dropout rates, Ladson-Billings proposes the term “push-out”, instead of achievement gap she uses the term “education debt.” Instead of focusing on lack of achievement by minority students, scholars question who was the population used to norm such standardized tests).

CRT is not uniform or static. It has expanded to include several different branches. These branches emerge as a continuing effort to include the histories of other marginalized groups in the U.S. (Valdes, 1996). There are several branches of CRT (e.g., LatCrit, DisCrit, FemCrit, AsianCrit), and they all share some basic characteristics (e.g., the importance of transdisciplinary approaches, an emphasis on experiential knowledge, challenge to the Dominant ideology, centrality of race; Pillow, 2003). Originally, however, the dimensions of race-based power relations in CRT addressed only what is known as the *Black/White paradigm*, an approach that missed the experiences of Latinxs, Native Americans, Asians, and other Groups of Color. Today, CRT has expanded to include other critical theories. These theories shift the discourse of racism in the U.S. from a white/black binary to one that includes multiple faces, voices, and experiences. LatCrit is one of the branches that emerged from CRT looking to address the reality of Latinxs across the United States.

### **LatCrit**

As with CRT, LatCrit in education centers race, class, gender, and sexuality as ways of oppression manifesting in the educational experiences of People of Color in the U.S. (Huber, 2010). In addition, however, LatCrit offers important dimensions to the conversation on race. In the last 20 years, the United States has seen a demographic shift largely due to an increase in the Latinx population. According to Ennis et al. (2011) more than half the growth of the U.S. population from 2000 to 2010 was due to a growth of over 15 million people from Latinx origin (Ennis et al., 2011). In order to address this shift, it is important to address issues that are outside of *the Black/White paradigm*. To

accommodate this shift in population, and to address their different needs, LatCrit theorists include language, immigration, ethnicity, identity, culture, phenotype, and sexuality in their systemic analysis of structures dealing with inequity and discrimination in social and educational settings (Bernal, 2002). LatCrit also benefits from a rich tradition of Latin American history and literature, with authors and scholars constantly informing that tradition. This does not mean, however, that CRT and LatCrit are in opposition to each other. In fact, they work together well and should be seen as “close cousins” (Valdes, 1996, p. 26). In addition to the five central themes of CRT, LatCrit offers three additional possibilities for critical scholars to consider: (1) Pan-ethnicity and anti-subordination, (2) anti-essentialism, and (3) collaboration and coalition between traditionally subordinated communities (Bernal, 2002; Valdes, 1996).

### ***Pan-ethnicity and Anti-subordination***

The idea of pan-ethnicity stems from the similarities Latinxs share (e.g., language, music, history, culture), and how these similarities can generate an overall affinity group. The power lies in who defines the group. By self-identifying into this group, Latinxs find a sense of belonging and shared consciousness previously “granted” only by acting *normal*. Belonging to this group stems from “similar experiences and struggles with subordination rather than [relying] on traditional fault lines like race or ethnicity” (Valdes, 1996, p. 27). By using similarities shared across identities to self-identify as Latinx, Latinxs take back the power to name their condition, and thus distance themselves from the normative dichotomous relationship of dominant/subordinate that ranks *others* depending on their similarities to the norm.

### ***Anti-essentialism***

The second possibility of LatCrit is a “rejection of automatic or essentialist commonalities in the construction of coalitions... which can create a platform for the politics of difference and identification” (Valdes, 1996, p. 27). Rejecting the assumptions and replication of political essentialism opens up possibilities for diverse critical scholars to engage with each other by identifying the different, yet similar ways in which different People of Color experience oppression. Anti-essentialism is also important for CRT scholars (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). However, Valdes (1996) proposes its use to navigate geographical and cultural differences among Latinxs in order to embrace similarities and thus create an opening for the third possibility of collaboration and coalition.

### ***Collaboration and Coalition***

This third possibility is only feasible because of the anti-essentialist and anti-subordination work mentioned previously. Through this possibility, LatCrit scholars offer a way for scholars who identify with different traditionally subordinated communities to collaborate and coalesce to enhance legal and social conditions for Latinx and other subordinated communities (Valdes, 1996). “This final possibility is about the broader alteration of individual and group power relations legally and socially. It is the promise of empowerment for self/kin/community through coalitions stemming, again, from common yet diverse experiences with oppression and suffering” (p. 29). The collaboration among scholars of diverse communities creates a new space for theorizing how intersectionality



and the ways in which different forms of oppression interact and affect individuals and groups.

Embracing different ideas with the common goal of surviving, resisting, and eventually dismantling oppressive systems in society can only happen when participants understand themselves without looking at their differences to create an identity (Castro-Gomez, 2005). These three possibilities create an identity based on cultural similarities that do not compare each other to a standard. Ranking or comparing and positioning each other based on a standard return the conversation to a hegemonic way of knowing where a status quo is emulated.

### **Conducting Research under a CRT/LatCrit Framework**

Counterstories have been a central tenet of CRT from its beginning. Delgado (1989) describes counter-storytelling as helping the outgroup gain psychic self-preservation. By understanding the facts of history behind their oppression, “members of these outgroups gain healing” (p. 2438). As with CRT, LatCrit “invites understanding of ways students respond to injustices (e.g., being constructed as deficient, or being segregated and stigmatized) through fostering or attending to counter-narratives and explicitly reading these stories against the grain of master narratives” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 13).

Bernal (2012) explains that counterstories are more than just a method. They form part of raced epistemologies or well-developed systems of knowledge that challenge the Dominant Euro-American epistemology. LatCrit, specifically, recognizes Students of Color as holders and creators of knowledge. Although some have dismissed

counterstories as just stories (Farber & Sherry, 1997), Delgado (1989) argues that the Dominant culture also tells stories. These stories are part of the Dominant discourse or majoritarian narrative. To the Dominant culture, however, “these stories about merit, causation, blame, responsibility and social justice-do not seem to them like stories at all, but the truth” (Delgado, 1993, p. 666).

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) explain that a narrative that supports the majoritarian story utilizes presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings that people of the Dominant culture bring into discussions about race. A counternarrative or counterstory, by definition, “challenges the majoritarian story” (p. 475). Storytelling has a rich tradition in the African American community, Latinx community, and Indigenous community (Delgado 1989; Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Solórzano & Yosso 2001). As Solórzano and Yosso (2001) explain:

Counterstories serve at least four theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical functions: (1) they can build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (2) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (3) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (4) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (p. 475).

It is important to note this last function because it speaks to people working together for a better future for all. In this way, counternarratives fall under the third possibility expressed by LatCrit scholars around the collaboration for a more just society (Valdes, 1996). CRT and LatCrit acknowledge at least three types of counterstories: (a) biographical, (b) autobiographical, and (c) composite.

### ***Composite Counterstories***

Composite counterstories draw from multiple sources of data to recount the experiences of People of Color (Yosso, 2006): (1) data collected from the research process itself, (2) existing literature on the topic, (3) judicial data, and (4) the author's personal and professional experience (Solórzano & Yosso 2001; Yosso 2006). Afterward, the author creates composite characters who embody the themes evidenced in the research, and writes them into social, historical, and political situations, allowing the research findings to emerge through the dialogue, challenging the majoritarian story in a creative way (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1989; Delgado 1993; Yosso, 2006).

### ***Biographical and Autobiographical Narratives***

Biographical and autobiographical narratives come in a variety of presentations (e.g., *dichos*, *testimonios*, *consejos*, autobiographical stories, and pedagogies of the home; Bernal, 2002). Huber (2009) describes *testimonios* as counternarratives that emerged from human rights struggles in Latin America. They were used by non-Dominant groups to document their experiences and denounce oppression and injustice. Today, *testimonios* have moved beyond the field of Latin American studies into other fields, such as anthropology, sociology, and education. Although there is no formal definition of

*testimonio*, Huber uses a common understanding between her and the participants in her study to establish a working definition: *testimonio* is a “verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (p. 644).

Although positivist researchers question the authenticity of these narratives, the purpose of counterstories is not to decide whose version is true or untrue (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This dialectical thinking of either/or is based on the Eurocentric dialectical perspective of right and wrong, black or white, normal or abnormal (Bernal, 2002; Castro-Gómez, 2005). The use of counterstories as research methods allows for participants to tell their stories and work in collaboration with the researcher instead of being used as an example. It is a way to honor the lived experiences and knowledge of participants. By working together with participants, the researcher can understand the realities of participants within a larger context of systemic and structural inequities inside or outside the field of education.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I used *testimonio* to document the lived experiences of ULWD, and to understand the types of systemic barriers or supports they have faced in their educational experience. Centering the experiential knowledge of ULWD allows researchers to understand the participants’ experiences without essentializing the community. Additionally, using *testimonio* also supports the mission of changing the narrative that pervades this population in the current political and educational climate. These *testimonios* provide ULWD who participate in the creation of

the *testimonios*, and ULWD who later read them a space for self-preservation, and ask the readers to understand the world from a different point of view (Delgado, 1989).

### ***Testimonios, Ontologies, and LatCrit/CRT***

*Testimonio* is a type of counterstory where the participant narrates a specific event in their life where the participant experienced or witnessed an injustice. *Testimonios* align with my ontological stance because they (a) honor the whole humanity of participants and the co-construction of knowledge, (b) honor the experiential knowledge of the participant in the creation of a narrative, (c) aim to reach across ideological divides with the hope of working with those in power to find a solution that honors and respects the *testimonio* participants, and (d) are often constructed through a dialogical process where narrator and participant co-construct the *testimonio*.

The work required in the creation of *testimonios* aligns with LatCrit/CRT by denouncing racism, challenging the Dominant ideology, acknowledging personal experiences as knowledge, and emphasizing the commitment of those involved to social justice. Furthermore, *testimonios*, as other counterstories, ask the reader to suspend judgement until the story ends. This last point signals the importance of finding a way forward for equity and social justice with all parties involved. This is what Gloria Anzaldúa referred to when she alluded to groups of people finding a common solution instead of yelling at each other across the river (Anzaldúa, 1987).

### ***Critiques of Experiential Knowledge and Counterstories***

While western researchers question the authenticity of *testimonios* and other counterstories (Farber & Sherry, 1997; Stoll, 1999), the purpose of counterstories in

general, and of *testimonios* in particular, is not to decide whose version is true or untrue (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), but to honor the lived experiences of participants as they denounce injustice, provide members from the margins a way for self-preservation, and help the listener to overcome their own world view to understand the realities of those narrating the story (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Understanding the realities of the narrator is imperative to the field of education, where the voices of People of Color have been silenced in order to maintain the Dominant narrative of what is accepted and constituted as normalcy (Ladson-Billings 1998).

In the next section I explain *testimonios* in depth and discuss how I ensured the quality and trustworthiness of the project. First, I define *testimonio* and explain its different components. Then I reiterate its value within a LatCrit/CRT framework in education. Next, I explore the use of *testimonio* in educational settings and explain why it is an important addition to the field of special education. Additionally, I describe the influence of Chicana Feminist pedagogies, the importance of Cultural Intuition (Bernal, 2002), and the co-construction of knowledge with participants as an essential part of the *testimonio* process. I conclude by addressing the question of who can do *testimonios*, both as an invitation and as a warning for other researchers.

### ***Testimonio***

Before describing how *testimonios* will be used in this study, it is important to describe what a *testimonio* is. Although there is no one formal definition of *testimonio* (Huber, 2010), Beverley (1989) stated that any attempt to specify a generic definition “should be considered at best provisional, at worst repressive” (p. 15). Huber

(2009) describes *testimonios* as counterstories that emerged from human rights struggles in Latin America. Yúdice (1991) describes *testimonio* as a personal story which describes the experiences of the community the interlocutor belongs to.

The use of *testimonio* is a way to honor the lived experiences and knowledge of participants/narrators. *Testimonios* are acts of witnessing; they ask the reader to recognize the common human vulnerability the narrator and reader share in order to elicit meaningful actions and develop compassion and solidarity (Zembylas, 2013). Yet, *testimonios* ask the reader to understand the situation of the narrator while at the same time differentiating that the narrator and reader are not in the same situation. This differentiation needs to happen so that the readers do not assume they know what the reality of the narrator is, and so that the readers recognize systemic ways in which the narrator is oppressed while they are not (Zembylas, 2013). In this way, readers can look for alternate ways in which solutions can be reached in the work for equity and social justice with all parties involved (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lavín & Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2019; Valdes, 1996; Zembylas, 2013). *Testimonio* as research methodology establish a dialogic relationship between narrator and researcher, where the researcher can better understand the realities of participants, where researcher and participants can engage together in a different type of knowledge creation that exposes inequities or injustices within a larger context inside or outside the field of education (Freire, 2000).

### **CRT/LatCrit and *Testimonio***

Counterstories and *testimonio* have been a central tenet of CRT. Delgado (1989) describes counter-storytelling as helping the outgroup gain psychic self-preservation. By

understanding the facts of history behind their oppression, “members of these outgroups gain healing” (p. 2438). LatCrit, specifically, recognizes Students of Color as holders and creators of knowledge. Although it is not the first *testimonio*, I use *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian woman* (Burgos-Debray, 1984) as the starting point in this discussion due to its high visibility and the criticism it received.

From the beginning of her *testimonio*, Menchú expressed that this was not just her story, but the story of her people. Her story brought to light the horrors experienced by indigenous Maya in Guatemala. By combining her personal experiences with those of her relatives and community, Menchú’s *testimonio* invited the reader into her life, and denounced the oppression and violence carried out by government officials. Because Menchú’s *testimonio* (1984) centered the experiences of an indigenous woman and population as the source of knowledge, western scholars have raised questions about the validity of the claims, the objectivity of the narrator, and the veracity of each claim in the *testimonio* (Beverley, 2008). To dismiss *testimonio* on these grounds misses the point of a *testimonio*. It asks a *testimonio* “to be something it never aspired to be – to force it to conform to externally imposed and culturally b(i)ased assumptions about appropriate forms of representation” (Haig-Brown, p. 421). The purpose of *testimonios* is to communicate with urgency the narrator’s story about a problem of repression. As readers we are invited to understand the experiences of the narrator, not to judge their veracity, and to recognize the *testimonio* for its real value, the centering of marginal voices decrying injustice against those they represent (Beverley, 1989).

### ***Characteristics of Testimonio***



Today, *testimonio* has moved beyond the field of Latin American studies into other fields, such as anthropology, sociology, and education. Several scholars (Beverly, 2008; Huber, 2010; Yúdice, 1991) suggest similar characteristics within *testimonio*: (a) the narrator describes a personal experience that bears witness and communicates a problem of repression, poverty, othering, or survival with a sense of urgency (Yúdice, 1991); (b) the narrator does not speak for his or her community instead, the speaker “performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective” (p. 15); (c) *testimonios* challenge the assumption of what constitutes knowledge; and (d) *testimonios* invite the reader to empathize with the narrator (Brabeck, 2003), while demanding action (Beverly, 2008).

*Testimonios* are meant to name the oppression or violent actions of the Dominant/hegemonic powers, and to call out the marginalization of people due to racism, classism, xenophobia, or any other type of institutionalized marginalization. They are not, however, a representation of a group of people by an individual; nor should readers over-generalize individual characteristics of the narrator to his or her group. By doing so, we run the risk of stereotyping the community of the speaker and using a western understanding of culture to define a population. *Testimonios* “represent the voice of many whose lives have been affected by particular social events, such as totalitarian governments, war violence, displacement, or other types of broad social affronts on humanity” (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 528). Bernal and her colleagues (2012) describe this representation as getting to know the conditions of many by listening to the story of one.

In addition, *testimonios* challenge the hegemonic ways of conducting research (Burciaga, 2007). In their book *Telling to Live* (2001), The Latina Feminist Group used a collaborative process to create knowledge and theories based on their experiences. By emphasizing their experiences as central to the creation of knowledge and theories, the Latina Feminist Group used their *testimonios* as a way to give voice to that which has traditionally been silenced, guarded from sight “*sus papelitos guardados*” (p. 1).

Finally, as readers of *testimonios*, we are called to listen as if the narrator is specifically talking with us. *Testimonio* in Spanish means “to bear witness” or “to testify.” *Testimonios* demand our attention and a response. The response may be to act upon it, or not to act, however, we cannot ignore it: “What *testimonios* ask of its readers is in effect... solidarity—that is, the capacity to identify their own identities, expectations and values with those of another” (Beverley, 2008, p. 550). By paying close attention to *testimonios*, we learn through collective accounts how society, culture, and history shaped our understandings of reality (Bernal et al., 2012). *Testimonios* ask the reader to take a stance and decry the injustices described within. By asking the reader to suspend judgement, *testimonios* elicit the reader to understand their own humanity and condition in order to see the different ways in which the narrator and their communit(ies) are being oppressed, persecuted, or destroyed (Zembylas, 2013). In education, Students of Color continuously get relegated to the schools with poorest conditions (Fuller et al., 2019), least prepared teachers (Mangiante, 2011), and with more stringent disciplinary measures (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Additionally, Students of Color with disabilities endure these issues on top of working toward inclusion based on their different abilities (Artiles,

2013). Yet, there is little to no research on the intersection of disability and Latinx EBs (Lavín et al., 2019).

### ***Testimonio in Education***

In the last 20 years, there has been an explosion of the use of *testimonio* in academia (Bernal et al., 2012). The increase has occurred in the field of education, it focuses on the experiences of Chicana/Latina communities and students in the United States, and it is produced in its majority by Latina/Chicana scholars. The collaborative nature of *testimonio* aligns with the Chicana feminist tradition of “theorizing from the brown female body, breaking silences, and bearing witness to both injustice and social change” (p. 364).

Because of the work of the Latina Feminist Group and other prominent Chicana/Latina scholars such as Dolores Bernal, Lindsay Huber, and Rebeca Burciaga, the use of *testimonio* has spread across educational studies. An important addition that emerged from Chicana feminists engaging in *testimonio* is the use of Cultural Intuition as a tool to understand, analyze, and break down the stories of participants. Bernal (1998) described Cultural Intuition as extending beyond theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss’s theoretical sensitivity approach to data analysis referred to how the researcher used their professional experience, existing literature, analytical research process, and personal experience in order to give meaning to data. Cultural Intuition “extends one’s personal experience to include collective experience and community memory, and points to the importance of participants’ engaging in the analysis of data” (Bernal, 1998, p. 563). Cultural intuition centers alternate ways of

knowledge to explain events in the lives of People of Color placing culture, lived experience, and personal experience as equally important tools for the researcher to understand the narratives of their participants in a manner that goes beyond theoretical sensitivity.

### ***Narrative Co-construction of Meaning***

Borland (1991) wrote about the awareness the researcher must have to recognize the difference between original intentions of the narration or story, and the objective of the researcher when “making connections between the narrative and larger cultural formations” (p. 64). For the researcher, the stories become symbolic constructions representing the themes or ideas we are trying to identify. For the narrator, however, these are lived experiences within a larger context. Researchers must be careful not to misrepresent characters in these stories for the sake of research.

Borland (1991) suggests including the narrator of the story in the analysis of the text. As the transcriber, one must be careful not to bestow an understanding or social consciousness on the participants simply because their story and circumstance fit the mold. Instead, this understanding can be achieved through dialogue and discussion where both parties are willing to understand the other’s perspective.

### **Special Education**

The use of evidence-based practices in special education is mandated by law (ESSA, 2015). Yet, the focus on evidence-based practices obscures other issues that also need to be addressed in order for Students of Color to be successful, such as race and culture (Annamma et al., 2013). Some scholars believe that an intervention that works

can be effective even when cultural differences are not considered (Connor, 2019; Kim & Linan-Thompson, 2013; Klingner et al., 2014). This approach to education, however, does not address systemic barriers that Students of Color face in schools. When educators rely on academic outcomes or achievement measures, repeatedly placing the blame for failure on the students while exonerating the intervention, interventionists, and school when a student does not improve academically, and when they do not take into account issues of racism, cultural dissonance, or difference in languages, they fall into the fallacy of colorblindness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). With the population of the United States continually becoming more diverse (Ennis, 2011), the field of special education must consider alternate ways in which to explain the lack of perceived achievement by Students of Color with disability. Examining the systemic regulations and policies that regulate the education of Students of Color with disabilities, specifically ULWD, is an important and necessary step toward this reality.

A call for the use of *testimonio* as a research methodology in special education does not imply that other types of research are not important. It simply articulates the need in special education to look for answers to long enduring problems (e.g., poor academic achievement by minorities with disabilities) by asking different types of questions (e.g., are there any systemic obstacles that interfere with your education?) and using alternative research paradigms (e.g., CRT, LatCrit, feminists frameworks).

It is important that we recognize that different research methods are needed to answer different questions. Researchers in special education must not be afraid of asking these important questions for fear of disrupting the status quo where “alternative

perspectives are side-stepped, ignored altogether, or derided” (Connor, 2019, p. 11). In fact, disrupting the status quo and shifting the gaze from the lack of student achievement to the system where the student is not successful should be enough reason for this change. Educators need access to critical work within the field of special education. They should not have to look outside the field of special education for information on diverse learners, intersectionality, gatekeepers, or systemic issues in the field.

The question should drive the methods, not the other way around (Harry et al., 2005), and the questions should not be censored by the field, lest the field grow antiquated and irrelevant for lack of self-critique and actualization (Connor, 2019).

*Testimonio* is a way to do this work in special education. By analyzing and exposing systemic inequities, *testimonio* can provide different insights in order to understand the problems from a different point of view (Bernal, 2002; Huber, 2010; Pillow, 2003; Yosso, 2006).

### **Who Can do Work Through *Testimonios***

The use of *testimonio* is not limited to the research conducted by or with Chicanas/Latinas (Bernal et al., 2012). If the practice of *testimonio* is limited to Latinx/Chicanx researchers, we fall into the order or classification of people based on external characteristics arranged by difference; and the colonial or western order repeats itself. Instead, anyone interested in undertaking this type of research must be epistemologically aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of *testimonio* (Bernal et al., 2012): That the purpose of *testimonio* is being witness to or experiencing an injustice; that the term “injustice” is not used lightly (acts of extermination, racism, xenophobia,

and discrimination are included in this description); and that it demands action. In addition, those who choose this methodology must recognize the mind, body, and spirit as equal sources of knowledge. Yet, *testimonio* is not a way to get to know Students of Color, nor should it be used as an ice breaker at the beginning of the year. Researchers interested in *testimonio* must understand the rigorous methodological components of a *testimonio*. As well as the theoretical underpinnings of LatCrit and CRT that guide its development.

Although the word *testimonio* is Spanish, knowledge of the language is not a requisite for researchers to engage in this practice. Haig-Brown (2003) explained that in her case, while working with First Nations People in Canada, the process of *testimonio* was the best approach that would honor her participants and capture the richness of the participants' stories. In fact, the participant in Haig-Brown's project created her own written story as part of the research process because she felt the interview did not get at the important aspect of her experience. Other scholars in Canada, such as Dian Million (2009), developed their own theories that engaged the histories, the lived experiences, and the emotional knowledge of the participants and communities to inform their scholarly work. Soto, Cervantes-Soon, Villareal, and Campos (2009) expressed a similar idea when referring to those who are welcome in their Xicana Sacred Space.

Researchers interested in using *testimonio* need to take care of co-optation in two ways. If the researcher is working with People of Color, he or she needs to understand that the role of the researcher is to witness and share the participant's *testimonio*.

Although they are part of the research project, researchers in *testimonios* serve as an

amplifier to what is otherwise already a counterstory that needs to be heard by the Dominant culture. Finally, researchers should take care of which stories are expressed through *testimonios*. If researchers fail to use *testimonios* based on the epistemological root of LatCrit and CRT and honor the work previously done by scholars in this field, *testimonios* run the risk of being co-opted by the whitestream research agenda, and lose their ability to speak truth to power (Bernal, personal communication, August 18, 2019).

### **Study Design**

In this study, I used *testimonios* to examine the educational experiences of two ULWD and their family in order to understand the types of barriers these two students faced in K-12 educational settings, and the types of supports they have used to overcome these barriers along the way. In this chapter, I describe the criteria for selecting participants, the methods for data collection and data analysis, and how I ensured the findings were consistent with the participants' stories, the theoretical framework, and the methodology of the project. Additionally, I describe my positionality, how I proceeded with the data collection through *pláticas*, and the trustworthiness approach I took in order to ensure that I honored the lived experiences of the participants. I also address how data analysis changed due to the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders.

The reader will note that this section provides an overview of what the study entailed without describing the particulars of the study. The description of how the study proceeded is part of chapter four *platicando*. This separation was intentional. The separation provided a separation between the work done to build the study up and the requirements to ensure its quality from the study itself. *Platicando* provides rich



descriptions of the participants, the setting for the *pláticas*, and a reflection on how the pandemic affected the data analysis.

### **Participant Selection**

For this research project, I recruited two TPS Latinx immigrant college students and their family using purposive and snowball selection (Reybold et al., 2013). Although the sample size is small, *testimonio* lends itself to a small sample size (Alarcón et al., 2011; Cantú, N., 2012; Hoy, S. T., 2018; Mora-Lopez, M., 2016). Additionally, the purpose of *testimonios* is not about creating vast generalizable claims, but rather about honoring the voices and experiential knowledge of participants. In order to honor the time my participants give for the project, and make the interview and focus groups a more personable experience, I offered dinner before our interviews. This, however, turned into a reciprocal event, where the participants insisted on buying dinner during our second interview. I was able to buy dinner again for our third interview.

I recruited two twin brothers with TPS attending school in a Mid-Atlantic university (i.e., Rogelio and Alejandro) and their family (i.e., Sra. J their mother, Sr. C their father, and their two older siblings). These students were twins who self-identified as having a disability and disclosed having received academic support while in the K-12 setting due to having a learning disability. They are 24 years old, and are currently pursuing their undergraduate degree in education. Because of the specificity of characteristics of the population in the study, in order to ensure participant confidentiality, I cannot provide more specific information on the participants. The reasons for seeking students that fit this description were:

- (1) Although, in today's reality ULWD students are a vulnerable population, the TPS status of my participants provided them with a slightly more protection than other immigrant students who may not have the same status.
- (2) The term TPS has clearly defined guidelines and provide clear-cut population characteristics for the type of students I want to work with for the project.
- (3) As students with TPS struggle to stay in the country, I want to provide them with another forum in which to express their ideas and have their voices heard.
- (4) TPS students with disabilities attending college, who were successful ULWD in a K-12 academic setting, can speak to their experiences from K-12 as well as college, thus providing insight into different practices that worked for them, or did not, as well as identifying the types of barriers and supports they faced within the American education system.
- (5) When immigrants arrive in the United States and attend school, their status as immigrant is no longer used. The term that the U.S government uses to refer to them is not "immigrants" but rather "EBs" or "Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners" Their immigration experience is not addressed. The ULWD experience fills a void in the literature and provides a deeper understanding of a research topic that scholars across disciplines agree, needs to be researched more fully (APA, 2014; Domínguez, 2019; Francis et al. 2019).

### **Data Collection**

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, IRB was strictly followed. In addition, as "the project must respect and honour any restrictions placed by the informant" (Randall,

1985, p. 27), I ensured that the participants knew they could choose not to answer any questions, or opt out from participation at any given point. I conducted interviews and a focus group to gather data and work collaboratively with the participants to analyze the data. During the focus group, we analyzed the artifacts and narratives that emerged from the work with the participants. Through the interviews and focus group process, I examined the K-12 experiences of ULWD by exploring the following units of analysis:

- (a) navigation strategies in educational settings;
- (b) participant-identified systemic barriers identified in schools;
- (c) participant systems of support;
- (d) participants' backgrounds and experience during their time in school; and
- (e) family perception and history.

### ***Interviews***

I conducted three interviews with participants on their educational experiences. Fierros and Bernal (2016) suggest that instead of conducting an interview, researchers should engage in a *plática*. *Pláticas* originated in the 1970's as a way to conduct more culturally appropriate research with Latinx populations in the southwest. They are different from interviews because researcher and participant engage in a meaningful conversation as opposed to having the interview be just a primary data collection strategies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I followed the three phases of *pláticas* during the interviews: the *Entrada* (entrance), the *amistad* interview (friendly interview), and the *despedida* (goodbye). This type of process helped to build a relationship between myself

and participants, and reinforced the reciprocity of the relationship during the research process (Fierros & Bernal, 2016).

The first interview began with questions intended as an introduction where the participants and myself got to know each other better and built trust (*entrada*). For the *Amistad* Interview, as Randall (1985) explains, the questionnaire needs to be flexible so participants feel comfortable. The protocol included questions about family life, relationships, and experiences surrounding schooling at home and at school. For the second interview, I asked the participants to bring a meaningful memento (e.g., medal, diploma, picture) that would help them tell their stories about their time in high school. I focused on the aspects of going to school that were hard, were disliked or just best remembered by the students. Because time was running short and it was getting late during our second interview, we met for a third time to continue with questions that emerged from listening to the twins' *testimonio*.

I also interviewed the participants' family. This interview took place in the participants' home. This interview lasted for three hours without counting the time spent eating lunch. During this conversation the family and I discussed the experiences of the participants going to school in the U.S. and their time in special education. Although I used a protocol to guide the direction of our *plática*, for the most part I listened to the narrative from the twins' family members and let them tell me their story. I only intervened to redirect the conversation back to the educational experiences of the twins or their siblings. See Appendix B for the interview protocols.

### ***Focus Group***

For the focus group, I used the three components of *la plática*. The purpose of this session was to work with the participants to (a) analyze the data from the interviews previously coded into themes, (b) identify the type of barriers that emerged across interview data, and (c) identify structures of support participants benefited from during their educational experience. The session included both participants and together we analyzed the data. Each member received the themes and deidentified quotes or stories by theme. During the interviews Rogelio and Alejandro shared with me that they struggled with written text due to dyslexia. As a result, I audio recorded the segments we analyzed as well as typed them in a larger font for easier readability. By engaging in a *plática* with my participants, I worked hard to recognize and honor the knowledge we were building together from their everyday experiences (Fierros & Bernal, 2016).

### **Analysis**

After I interviewed the participants, and transcribed the recordings, and I developed initial codes using a critical race grounded theory approach (Malagón et al., 2009). In order to analyze the data from the interviews, first I engaged in line by line coding, (Charmaz, 2014). Then, I moved to focused coding (Charmaz, 2014) to create thematic examples. I used Nvivo software to manage the transcripts. This approach allowed me to analyze the data and begin to develop theories as the data collection unfolded, it also allowed me to use a LatCrit lens to understand the ways in which race, immigration status, gender, and class were woven into the thematic categories emerging from the interviews. I focused on the units of analysis mentioned earlier:

- (a) navigation strategies in educational settings;

- (b) participant identified systemic barriers identified in schools;
- (c) participant systems of support; and
- (d) participants' backgrounds and experience during their time in school.

Although I began the inquiry with these themes in mind, the nature of qualitative research in general, and of *testimonios* in particular, demanded that I be attentive to other topics and themes that may emerge from the participants' stories during the interviews.

Data analysis followed a three-phase process: Preliminary data analysis, collaborative data analysis, and final analysis (Huber, 2010). The first phase is preliminary took place after the interviews. I looked for emergent themes and narratives that represented them.

During the second phase, the collaborative analysis, the participants and I worked together and discussed the emergent themes and different narratives from the interviews. The participants and I reflected individually and as a group on how the emergent themes fit, the patterns that emerged, and what that meant for Latinx immigrant students with disabilities across educational settings. I also conducted member checks and ensured I was interpreting the participants' words accurately. Member checks are one of the ways in which researchers ensure the fidelity and trustworthiness of the research data. A member check entails going back to the participants and asking them if the initial interpretation of the data "rings true." (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 246)

The collaborative phase of the analysis is crucial to the dissertation, as *testimonio* is a research methodology that challenges modernist discourses of validity or replication (Bishop, 2005). It is during this phase that the participants and I co-constructed

knowledge from the participants' lived experiences. Because of the nature of *testimonios* and the LatCrit analytical approach I was using for the analysis, I needed to be aware of the tension between the creation of true participant *testimonios* and the LatCrit analytical framework I used. Although one of the central tenets of CRT/LatCrit is the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), it is also a theoretical framework with specific goals. This is why conducting the analysis with the participants was a crucial part of this study. As the researcher, my purpose was to amplify the participants' counternarratives, and not to make their experiences fit into what I think are stories of discrimination ableism, sexism, racism etc. (Borland 1991).

Finally, during the third phase of the analysis, I wrote about the findings from the two previous phases, described at length the focus group analysis session process, and the process I used to identify themes and the different sources of data. During this phase I used LatCrit as a theoretical framework to understand the ways in which race, immigration status, gender, and class are woven into the narratives from my participants. The purpose of blending *testimonios* and LatCrit is to make connections between the participant narratives that can provide answers to the questions of the study. As previously mentioned, in chapter four, *Platicando*, these procedures are described in depth.

### **Quality**

Creswell and Miller (2000) explained how different research paradigms have distinct ways to ensure the quality of their research projects based on two perspectives: the lens researchers use to validate their studies (i.e., researcher, participants, and external

reviewers), and their paradigm assumptions (i.e., post positivism, constructivist, or Critical). For scholars engaged in critical research, Creswell and Miller mention three main quality procedures: reflexivity (researcher), collaboration (participant), and peer debriefing (external reviewers). They also suggest that researchers can engage in additional forms of validity (e.g., member checks, thick descriptions) to strengthen the trustworthiness of their research.

It is important to note that the quality measures addressed in this section are key to the construction of the participants' *testimonios* as counternarratives. As a researcher, I needed to be transparent and establish meaningful relationships with participants. If I was not transparent with my participants, I could not expect my participants to be honest or transparent with me.

### **Authenticity**

As a special education teacher, I experienced numerous instances where Students of Color, specifically Latinx immigrants, were placed “at risk” for disabilities through the evaluation process for special education simply because of an educator’s perception of the students’ prior lived experiences. I bought into the narrative of *difference* and to this day feel shame for not understanding how my perception of Students of Color was clouded by the narrative of colorblindness and meritocracy that maintains the hegemonic status quo (Castro-Gómez, 2007). This shortsightedness as a teacher has pushed me to become a more critical researcher. Through this project, I was interested in listening to undocumented Latinx students with disabilities whose lived experiences can help identify the systemic barriers, gatekeepers, or support networks, that made their educational



journey more difficult, or better. My intention was to do anything in my power for their stories to reach a broader audience.

### ***Researcher Reflexivity***

The power imbalance between the participants and researcher needs to be addressed in order to have a true dialogic relationship (Freire, 2000). The purpose of this procedure is for researchers to self-disclose any biases, assumptions, and beliefs by reporting on the beliefs and values that shape the researcher's approach to research. As the researcher, understanding the ways in which my status, political views, nationality, etc., may affect my relationship with my participants, enabled me to better relate with my participants. During the process it was important to ask: What are the silences of my method? Who am I not including in my study and why? What are the assumptions I am trying to overcome? Usually, researchers provide their reflexive stance on the beginning of a project (Limes-Taylor Henderson & Esposito, 2017). I continuously asked myself these questions to ensure the power dynamics between the participants and myself are as equal as they can under this type of project (i.e., dissertation research where the researcher earns a degree once the project is completed). In addition to these questions, I worked hard to earn the trust of my participants during the project.

I worked on securing this trust during the *entrada* part of our interview. I was also transparent about the purpose of this study, the process we were following, and the role the participants and I were going to have during the project. I needed to be transparent and open with my participants in order to build a dialogic relationship with them.

### ***Positionality***

Positionality means understanding how the researcher is seen or understood by the participants in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Particular to this project, I was seen by my participants as a Latinx special education college student and instructor born in Mexico. Although there were similarities with my participants (e.g., Latinx, immigrant, educator), there were also differences (e.g., immigration status, disability) that I needed to understand in order to create trust with Rogelio and Alejandro. In the past, my biases interfered with my work as a teacher working for equitable access to education for all of my students. During this project I consistently reminded myself of my positionality as an outsider and remembered reasons for doing the work. I wrote memos and reflections to help me with this process. As a Latinx special educator the research methodology of *testimonio* resonates with the way I understand knowledge creation (Bernal, 2012; Pillow, 2003). I planned, however, to maintain rigor throughout the investigation by understanding my positionality, constantly revisiting how my positionality affects my relationship with my participants, and by being aware of incurring on biased interpretation of information (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

### ***Collaboration***

Collaboration means that participants are involved in the project in order to have their point of view built into the study. During the second interview and the focus group session I will include the participants in the construction of knowledge. Through collaboration, the participants and I took member checks a step further (Hatch, 2002). Instead of checking to see of my interpretation of the information I received from

participants was accurate, by collaborating with the participants, the participants were able to push back if the representation of their stories was not what they anticipated. “In this space of exchange between listener and *testimonialista*, we are able to open doors into another’s world, open hearts and minds and at times, become invited participants—we become *emparejados*—aligned, next to each other, in solidarity (Lenkersdorf, 2008)” (Bernal et al., 2012, p. 368).

An integral part of this study was the collaborative analysis that took place during the focus group session. During this session, the participants helped identify the themes that emerged from their own *testimonios*. It was extremely important that during this session I constantly reflected on how my positionality as the researcher might influence the analysis. Further, I was be aware of the constant pressure to align the study to positivistic standards of validity.

In addition, collaborating with my participants aligns with a CRT/ LatCrit framework and my ontological stance on the value of experiential knowledge and the co construction of knowledge. It also helped me to challenge my biases often by listening to my participants’ *testimonio* while we worked together.

### **Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefers are colleagues familiar with the research that can provide support, challenge the researcher assumptions, and push the project to the next methodological step (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As someone external to the study, the peer debriefer provided feedback over the time of the project, adding credibility to the study. After seeking clarification from my committee, I included a peer debriefer in this study,

however, because of the sensitive nature of the study, I ensured all the information was de-identified before sharing it with this person.

### **Member checks**

I conducted a member check with my participants after the interviews. Additionally, during the interview itself, whenever the participants shared a story or another piece of information that I did not understand, I followed up with a question in order to clarify the meaning the participant wanted to convey through that particular story (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, during the focus group the participants looked at the themes and the different excerpts from the interviews and had an opportunity to express whether I was able to capture their thoughts or if I needed to re-think about the way I understood certain events (Huber, 2013). In order to address concerns over my bias, I conducted member checks with participants before the focus group, and I debriefed with the participants after the focus group to ensure their voices and knowledge are respected and honored (Hatch, 2002).

### **Triangulation**

Although triangulation is a popular procedure for qualitative studies where the researcher gathers different types of data (e.g., interviews, observations, document analysis) in order to strengthen their findings, there are other procedures that are just as important (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The purpose of *testimonios* is to honor the lived experiences of the participant. Therefore if I tried to triangulate the information for the sake of validity, I may be losing its original intent. The collaboration with the participants ensures their stories are reflected in the study and readers can understand and empathize

with the participants' reality. In addition, as Solórzano & Bernal (2001) explained, under a LatCrit theoretical framework, *testimonio* “recognize[s] that experiential knowledge of Students of Color are legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (p. 314).

While I did not triangulate data specifically as described by Brantlinger and colleagues (2005), the data gathered from the interviews and focus groups needed to be understood in context. In order to make sense of the data, I analyzed the data within a theoretical framework (i.e., LatCrit) and use different policies surrounding the education of ULWD to corroborate how this information fits within a model that describes the schooling experience of ULWD.

### **Thick Descriptions**

Thick descriptions place a heavy emphasis on writing texts that use rich descriptions to highlight important events and are congruent with the analysis (Cho & Trent, 2006). Additionally, as a researcher using thick descriptions to enhance the quality of my study, I was not trying to draw conclusions that can be transferred to other contexts. Instead, I was concerned with the lived experiences of my participants, in order to center their experiences as valuable knowledge.

*Testimonios* focus on the lived experiences of an individual or of a group of people to decry acts of injustice (Beverley, 2008). As a researcher employing *testimonios*, the descriptions intended to reflect the voices of my participants in order to amplify their narratives without alteration. Table 2 presents how I used the previous measures to ensure the quality of the study.

**Table 2***Measures Undertaken to Ensure the Quality of the Dissertation*

Type of measure	By Whom	Implementation	Purpose/Result
Authenticity Reflexivity Positionality	Author	Author wrote memos, notes, and constantly reflected on how to engage the participants on their terms.	The relationship between the participants and the research was based on trust and mutual respect.
Collaboration	Author and Participants	Participants and Researcher worked together on the analysis of the data and developing the codebook for the study.	The data that emerged from the study was filtered through the participants point of view.
Peer Debriefing	Author and Peer Debriefers	The researcher consulted an outside peer familiar with the methodology to receive feedback and ensure the study was true to its description.	Study was able to capture the descriptions of Alejandro and Rogelio in depth by adding an interview with their family.
Member Checks	Author and Participants	After the analysis was completed the author presented the results to the participants to ensure that they reflected the participants' views and thoughts.	Rogelio and Alejandro were thankful for having someone listen to their story and validate their experience.
Thick Description	Author	The next chapter used thick description to familiarize the readers with the study.	The descriptions help the reader understand the lives of Rogelio and Alejandro.

The next chapter uses thick descriptions to narrate the research process.

*Platicando* is the gerund form of verb *platicar*. I use it to describe what the actual interview and analysis process entailed. These *pláticas* were intended as conversations: Conversations between me as the researcher and my participants, me and the data, and me and those reading this dissertation.

The reader will note a change in the tone of the dissertation. This shift is intentional. It represents the move from the preparation that took place beforehand to the actual start of research project. In the next section I describe the interviews and the participants based on my memos, notes, and observations. The interviews were conducted using *la plática* (Fierros & Bernal, 2016).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Platicando*

In this chapter I provide a description of what the *pláticas* with my participants looked like. I also describe the different analysis phases from the study. As I mentioned earlier, I interviewed two ULWD about their K-12 experiences. The participants in the study were Rogelio and Alejandro, twin brothers studying at a state university.

Qualitative work requires flexibility. Therefore, the purpose of this description is to provide readers a better feel for the interview and analysis process as well as for the relationship I built with the twins during the research process. Further, it describes the turning point of the dissertation from interviewing more participants or interviewing the twins' family to go deeper into their experiences.

From the first time I met Rogelio and Alejandro, to the last time we chatted during our focus group, the conversations during our time together became real *pláticas* within a few minutes; the interviews turned into in-depth conversations among friends where everyone shared their story. We started each interview in the same way, we decided on what to eat for dinner and shared a meal. The first time we had dinner I treated them to *tortas* and *tacos* from a local restaurant just off-campus. The week after that, they insisted on buying dinner. I tried to protest and explained that in research it is usually the participants who get free food, but they would have none of it, “tell them it’s



our culture” they said. Our third meal consisted of pizza (which they allowed me to pay for) delivered to our *plática* room. The *plática* room was my office. We sat around the table, closed the door, broke bread together, and talked for two-three hours per session.

During this unstructured time, we got to know each other on a different level. Out of the two twins, Rogelio was louder and more outgoing, while Alejandro was thoughtful and more reserved. Alejandro seemed content with providing input or clarification at different points in Rogelio’s narrative. He would add his comments to complement the story, to provide background information, or to simply take a jab at his brother as only siblings know how to do.

When talking, Rogelio’s hands would move all over, adding detail and flow to his narrative. They aided Rogelio in the retelling of the story. His descriptions were enhanced by the movement of his hands, and made his narrative more compelling. In contrast, Alejandro’s hands stayed on his lap while he offered his input to the collective narrative being created. Although Alejandro’s demeanor was always calmer than Rogelio’s, when they would engage in brotherly banter, Alejandro would also become more animated and inevitably his hands would join the conversation as counterparts to Rogelio’s own.

Due to Rogelio and Alejandro’s close relationship, I separated them at different times during the interviews in order to get their individual responses and points of view. During the first interview, I interviewed Rogelio first, while Alejandro waited in an outside area doing his schoolwork. I then interviewed Alejandro and it was Rogelio’s turn to sit outside. For the second interview, I asked them to bring a memento that reminded

them of their K-12 educational experience. Because each of them brought a different artifact, I decided to interview them together. During the third interview, I asked some questions to both while sitting together, and then separated them again in order to get individual responses to other questions. This was important because I wanted to provide both brothers an opportunity to share their narrative with me. Because of their personalities, I wanted to avoid one brother speaking for both, especially when talking about their individual school experiences.

Their responses to the interview questions reflected my earlier observations on the twins' demeanor. Because of the time Rogelio and Alejandro spent thinking before responding, it was clear that both thought about their answers and told me their story honestly. Yet, while Rogelio often used comedy to make his *testimonio* lighter, Alejandro's seriousness during his *testimonio* added an emotional component that reminded me about my own high school memories and feelings.

These interviews had me intrigued, and while I wanted to learn more about Rogelio and Alejandro, I also needed to interview other participants to continue with the study. Initially, I wanted to understand the experiences of at least five ULWD, but because of twins' *testimonio*, I also wanted to explore their experiences at a deeper level. At this point in the research process I had a choice. I could continue searching for student participants and listen to their *testimonio*, or I could go deeper into the twins' story and interview their family members. After weighing the alternatives, and having conversations with my committee and peer debriefer, I decided to pursue the second option and interview Rogelio's and Alejandro's immediate family. By interviewing the

twins' family, I could gather background information that complemented Rogelio and Alejandro's narrative. My intention was to understand more about the twins upbringing and the reasons their parents had for leaving their home country and moving to the U.S.

After amending the IRB to include family members, I asked Rogelio and Alejandro for permission interview their parents. When they agreed and provided me with their mother's phone number, I scheduled a time when I could have *plática* with both parents about their children's educational experience. I tried to ask them out for dinner, or to pay for take-out, but again, just like their children, they refused my offer. Instead, they invited me for Sunday lunch at their home, after which we could talk.

Once I realized they were not going to budge on my invitation to take them out for a meal, I agreed to go for lunch. At least we reached a compromise, and I was allowed to bring a side dish to share, and at the twin's request I also brought *pan dulce* for dessert. I decided to bring a dish that was close to my heart and prepared my grandma's *frijoles Cubanos*. My grandma shared her recipe with me before she died and I cook them for big family meals such as Thanksgiving or Christmas.

When I arrived at Rogelio and Alejandro's home, Rogelio greeted me at the door and brought me into the kitchen where all the men of the house were congregating. They were all cooking and tasting the food being prepared. I was introduced to two older brothers, their father, Sr. C, and an uncle who was also having lunch with us.

It was clear the kitchen was the heart of this home: Coffee machine working, something delicious cooking on the stove, and everyone having a conversation while preparing *la comida*. After Rogelio and Alejandro's mother, Sra. J came down from her

room and ensured I was being taken care of, Sr. C, Sra. J, their uncle, and I sat down for lunch. Rogelio, Alejandro and their older brothers also shared the meal, but they came and went. They were busy taking care of other things (e.g., doing homework, studying, surfing the web). The ‘something delicious’ on the stove was *flan* and after a delicious meal, and two (or three) pieces of flan, we began our *plática*. The uncle excused himself after finishing his dessert and only the parents and I stayed at the table. We talked over coffee, more dessert, and fruit. The whole *plática* at the twins’ house was in Spanish. It could have been any *sobremesa* (after meal discussion) at my house or any of my friends’ houses growing up.

At times, the twins or one of the older brothers would join us individually, sit, eat, and join in the conversation. Instead of stopping the twins’ older siblings from participating in fear of their comments derailing the conversation, I welcomed these incursions by the brothers and the twins. First of all, because I was in their home, and as such, the rules of who was allowed to participate (or not) were dictated by the hosts, but also, because their experiences added context to Rogelio’s and Alejandro’s *testimonio*. I arrived at one thirty in the afternoon, and finally left a little before six in the evening. We had talked for over three hours. It felt like a Sunday at home, and I could not have asked for a better atmosphere for a *plática*. Sr. C and Sra. J held high expectations for all their children regarding education, and were proud to share with me of all of what their children had achieved.

## **Analysis**

In this section, I describe the analysis process. The analysis consisted on three phases. First, I describe how I identified the initial themes to create the reflection document during the first analysis phase. Then, I relate how the twins and I proceeded during the online collaborative analysis phase. Next, I explain how I used the a critical grounded method approach (Malagón et al. 2009) to conduct the third phase of analysis. Finally, I relate how social distancing added some complications to the *plática* with Rogelio and Alejandro during the collaborative analysis phase, and what contingencies I utilized to address these complications.

### **Initial Analysis**

After I transcribed the interviews with Rogelio, Alejandro, and their immediate family, I began to analyze the data using a critical grounded method approach (Malagón et al. 2009; Huber, 2013) in order to identify initial themes that emerged from the interviews. I conducted the initial coding using (Charmaz, 2014) and moved to thematic coding in order to create a reflection piece to be analyzed by Rogelio, Alejandro and myself during the collaborative phase. The reflection piece was conformed from segments of all the interviews. I focused on the units of analysis mentioned earlier:

- (a) participant-identified systemic barriers identified in schools;
- (b) participant systems of support;
- (c) navigation strategies in educational settings; and
- (d) participants' backgrounds and experience during their time in school.

Although I began the inquiry with these themes in mind, the nature of qualitative

research in general (and of *testimonios* in particular), demanded that I be attentive to other topics and themes that may emerge from the participants' stories during the interviews (e.g., the importance of education within their family, discrimination for being Latinx). When it was time to conduct the focus group with Rogelio and Alejandro, the "stay at home" order due to COVID-19 came into effect in my state. In order to continue with the study, we engaged in the next phase of the analysis online.

### **Online Collaborative Analysis**

This phase consisted of two three-hour collaborative online sessions with the Alejandro and Rogelio. During the first session, I introduced the participants to the dissertation research questions and provided them a brief overview of CRT and LatCrit. I explained how LatCrit and CRT are theoretical frameworks that fit with my ontology and epistemology, and asked them to keep in mind the frameworks when analyzing the data for information on supports, barriers, and counterstories to the dominant narrative. For the analysis, it was important for the participants to fully understand the purpose of the study and what the lens I used to analyze the emerging data. We also reviewed the concept of the Dominant narrative seen as normal, while everything else is seen as less or deficient. Although I had introduced the concept of *testimonio* and counternarrative and Dominant narrative at the beginning of the study, I created a short presentation in which I reintroduced the concepts. (Appendix C)

As the purpose of *testimonios* is for the narrator to tell their story, it was important that both Rogelio and Alejandro participated in the analysis of the data. To prepare for the first online session, I used the themes that emerged from the preliminary data analysis

to create our reflection document. The purpose of this document was to serve as a receptacle of our opinions and identify further themes related to the research questions. Previously, during our interviews, the twins shared they had a reading disability. Due to their difficulty reading, limitations of working online, and other distractions, I wanted to provide accommodations for the twins to access the reflection document. In order to address their needs, prior to our first online session, I used voice recordings and embedded them in each slide of the presentation to explain the purpose of the dissertation, the importance of our collaboration during the analysis, and the reintroduction of *testimonio* and counterstories. In addition, I recorded the segments that we were going to use in the reflection. Then, I uploaded the presentation, the reflection, and the recordings to a confidential cloud-based service provided by my university. Finally, I shared the access link to these documents with Rogelio and Alejandro.

### ***First Online Session***

When we met for our first session, the *entrada* was hard to recreate. Both, Alejandro and Rogelio were seated in different areas of their house and other family members were constantly coming in and out of these areas. This first session consisted of the introduction of the research questions and a discussion about the different segments used in the reflection. I quickly realized that having the segments recorded did not help the engagement of the twins and opted for reading the segments out loud to them while they followed along in their own computers. I wrote down their comments next to the reflection document on the online platform we used and worked with the twins to

understand the different segments of their *testimonio*. The session ended when Alejandro stood up to drop his girlfriend off at work, leaving no time for a proper *salida*.

### ***Second Online Session***

Reflecting on the lack of *familiaridad* (i.e., intimacy) in our first session, I made some intentional changes to the structure of the second session. First, I planned for Rogelio and Alejandro to sit in the same room and ask their family members for some privacy. However, it was apparent the twins thought about this issue as well because when we began the second session they were in the same room and had closed the door. Next, I asked one of them to mute his computer microphone. Each of them still had their laptop and headphones, but only one microphone was active. This was done in order for conversation to feel less restricted. By only having one microphone active, both brothers could answer at the same time, disagree, or have a conversation without one mic shutting off because another participant was talking. Then, using the sticky notes application in my computer, I created a virtual bulletin board where we could create themes and categories that emerged from our discussion and where we could code the different segments of the reflection.

Finally, I opened the reflection document, placed it next to the virtual bulletin board, and shared my screen with Rogelio and Alejandro (Figure 2).





**Figure 2**

*Screen Shot of the Interactive Bulletin Board for the Collective Analysis*

Initially, I was the only one reading the different segments out loud. After the first few segments, however, the twins volunteered to read some of the segments as well. Having the participants read the segments, increased their engagement and allowed the process to go faster and more smoothly as I did not have to pause the note taking to continue reading. These changes to the environment (e.g., having the twins in the same room with the door closed), the technology involved (e.g., using only one microphone, creating the virtual bulletin board), and the structure of our conversation (e.g., having a virtual space to classify ideas as a collective) increased everyone's engagement and helped with the success of the session. Additionally, I planned for extended time for the *entrada* and *salida* in order to honor the time we spent together working in the project.

During the collaborative sessions, Alejandro, Rogelio, and I coded the different segments in the reflection piece into themes (e.g., school life, feelings, social life, racism). After we coded all the segments into themes, I listened and recorded which segments they considered a barrier and which segments they considered a support and why. This collaborative aspect of the analysis is an integral component to *testimonios* (Bernal, 1998) and it also served as a member check (Burciaga, 2007), ensuring both Alejandro and Rogelio agreed with the interpretation of the data. In this manner we created a codebook and used it to code the remaining segments of the transcripts.

### **Final Data Analysis**

During the third phase of the analysis, using the codebook created with Rogelio and Alejandro, I coded the remaining segments of the transcripts. I followed a critical race grounded methodology (Malagón et al., 2009) for the analysis. This methodology required that I was intentional about (a) the selection of participants would help fulfill the goal of the study, (b) the participants being engaged in the data analysis, and (c) developing a conditional matrix.

In order to answer the research questions, and based on my cultural intuition (Bernal, 1998), I intentionally selected the participants and later altered the number of participants in the study to get richer descriptions through their *testimonio*. I developed a matrix to understand the ways in which the different themes interacted with each other using a LatCrit lens (Appendix D). The matrix revealed the ways in which the same themes identified by the twins as barriers, were also identified as supports at different times.

Using a critical grounded theory approach allowed me to analyze the data and begin to develop theories during the process. It also allowed me to use a LatCrit lens to understand the ways in which race/ethnicity, immigration status, and disability are woven into the thematic categories emerging from the interviews.

For any Spanish text, I used the backtranslation method described by Francis et al. (in press). This process included an outside interpreter translating into Spanish my English version of *testimonio* sections in Spanish. If a discrepancy affected the meaning of the *testimonio*, the interpreter and I met to discuss a better translation that stayed true to the meaning of the *testimonio*.

### **Social Distancing**

Due to the social distancing restrictions imposed as a result of the spread of COVID-19, after I conducted all the participant interviews, the second phase of the analysis took place online through a virtual classroom. Fortunately, my university provided students and faculty with their “own” secure and private virtual space for online instruction. Although the online platform provided us with the tools necessary to conduct the analysis, I believe it initially affected the tone of the interview.

Conducting the interview online provided me and the twins unprecedented freedom in choosing a location to hold the meeting (e.g., living room, bedroom, terrace), opened up scheduling possibilities (i.e., there is no travel time to and from the meeting), and gave us enormous flexibility to select how we would attend (e.g., phone, laptop, video call). However, even though the online space provided us with more flexibility to conduct interviews, in my opinion, important aspects needed for a *testimonio* got lost in

the exchange. Specifically, some of the confidential conversations were cut short (e.g., how Alejandro felt when he was berated for someone else's mistake at the grocery store where he worked), and the participants were not as comfortable talking about their family life (e.g., the expectations both parents had about their children's education. During the stay at home order, Rogelio and Alejandro were sheltering at home with their family. Because they live with their parents, two older brothers, and currently their uncle, all family members are at home at the same time and there is not enough space to have a private conversation without family members overhearing it. Based on our previous conversations and the reactions the twins had to my questions during this session, I believe Rogelio and Alejandro's answers were more guarded or cut short because of this loss of confidential space.

*Testimonios* require participants and researchers to be present and involved during the conversation throughout the *plática*; yet, due to the virtual platform, it was hard to be present and hold each other's attention in the same way a face to face interview does. During the first online session, distractions in the environment (e.g., dog, family members, uncomfortable seating, other engagements) and technological issues (e.g., spotty Internet, poor sound) interfered with the attention and distracted everyone involved in the interview at one point or another.

It is in this manner that I sat with my two participants across the internet to discuss different aspects of their *testimonio* and reflect together on the support and barriers they faced in school due to their status, disability, and ethnicity. Initially, I planned on having one collaborative session. However, due to the newness of the

environment and other time constraints, we met a second time online to continue with the analysis. During our second session, I asked Rogelio and Alejandro what they thought about holding our meeting online. Their answers echoed the feelings I expressed earlier about being more comfortable while at the same time losing the personal touch and the confidentiality.

We don't get that closeness, we are laying down, its more comfortable. When we were meeting, we had to sit down. Fortunate enough to have technology. The [personal] connection is lost, [it is] hard keeping people engaged, with everything we need but we can get distracted.

Additionally, through the previous *testimonio* interviews, I tried to use *La Plática* (Fierros & Bernal, 2016) as the method to conduct the interviews. In all previous interviews, I had time to establish a relationship with the participants by having conversations outside of the scope of the interview (e.g., *entrada*). Furthermore, when ending the interview, we took time with the ritualistic extended goodbyes as well (e.g., *salida*). Because of the newness of the online interview structure, I struggled to maintain the same level of comfort with the twins I previously had during our face to face meetings.

In the following chapters, I answer the research questions with the help of Rogelio, Alejandro, and their family's *testimonios*. I present the findings in two chapters (i.e., one chapter for each research question). In Chapter Five, I present the identified barriers and supports that impacted Alejandro and Rogelio's educational experience as ULWD. In Chapter Six I address how the intersectionality of disability, immigration

status, and race/ethnicity impacted Rogelio and Alejandro. Finally, in Chapter Seven, I connect the findings to existing literature, identify and address some of the limitations of this project, and propose future work that can be done to counter the Dominant narrative in order to provide better supports to ULWD and other Students of Color in K-12 educational settings.

## CHAPTER FIVE

When conducting the group analysis with Rogelio and Alejandro, we collectively identified barriers and supports that transcended their K-12 experience. As the analysis continued, those themes identified as an impact on the twins' K-12 experience did not completely fit into a barrier category or a support category. As we continued with the analysis, the identified themes were consistently both: a barrier and a support. For example, at times Alejandro and Rogelio identified staff as a support, and in other instances they identified staff as a barrier. In the first section I present the barriers and supports that transcended the K-12 setting (Figure 3). The second section describes those themes that were dually identified as a support and a barrier during the collective analysis.

Through the analysis of the *testimonio* by Alejandro, Rogelio, and their family, the twins' and I identified several themes that were critical to the twins' narrative. Family support, immigration status, and cultural misunderstanding traversed their daily lives and influenced their K-12 experience, their family, and their social lives. Figure 3 demonstrates how these themes were considered supports or barriers by the twins. Next, I describe the K-12-specific themes in order to understand the complications of being a ULWD within the K-12 educational system.

After creating a conditional matrix, the codes collectively identified from the *testimonio* transcripts revealed three large themes: (1) school system, (2) school staff, and (3) special education. The *testimonio* by the twins and their family described examples of barriers and supports throughout each of these themes. In order to understand how the twins described the same theme as a barrier and support, I present the findings in two columns: on the left side I describe the barriers and on the right, the supports identified in each theme. I begin from the general to the specific first with the school system, moving to school staff and ending with special education. Figure 4 depicts how the Dominant narrative influenced whether a theme was identified as a barrier or a support. Finally, in the last section of the chapter, by analyzing the barriers and supports identified through the twins' *testimonio*, a new narrative emerged. Figure 5 reiterates how the supports were identified through a different narrative that countered the influence of the Dominant narrative.

The reader will note that I arranged the text in non-traditional and perhaps unexpected ways. This arrangement is by design, following on the work of Davies (2000), who suggests that disrupting static knowledge requires the disruption of static notions of how text is presented. Based on Fals-Borda's (2002) *Historia Doble de la Costa*, I present Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio* in *doble canal*, contrasting the barriers and the supports throughout the text. This presentation of the text allows the reader to read each section independently or compare the it in each column while progressing through the reading.



## Everyday Life Testimonio

### Immigration status

Alejandro and Rogelio's *testimonio* described their early experience of coming to the U.S., their transition to an unknown country, and their attempt of assimilation into a different way of life. Throughout their *testimonio*, the twins identified some aspects of life in the U.S that were not under their control and interfered with their lives. During the collective analysis phase, Alejandro and Rogelio identified their immigration status and cultural misunderstandings from staff and others as barriers.

From the first interview, the twins identified their immigration status as a barrier. As mentioned previously, TPS does not provide a path to citizenship, and allows holders to remain in the U.S as long as they are not convicted of a crime. Even though TPS holders pay taxes and contribute to Social Security and Medicare, TPS status does provide a path to residency. In fact, TPS

### Family Support

Rogelio and Alejandro relied heavily on their family for support. From the time they were little, the twins mentioned how important it was to have their grandmother come visit and take care of them for months at a time. They described her as a loving, caring, and, doting grandmother who would go out of the way to keep them connected to their home country through the food and the language.

My grandma used to spoil us.

Luckily she was able to get a visa so she could stay here for a few months and that became like her date during the summer or winter to come and babysit us. That was the only connection back to the homeland. She always used to bring coconut milk, candy, pastries, cheeses, all in her *maleta*. She would, like, give us a shirt and we'd ask "what are we doing with this shirt?" "unwrap it" she would

recipients live in uncertainty of not knowing when their status may be revoked. The twins expressed the fear of knowing that any mistake could get them sent packing to El Salvador. For the twins, however, these barriers were not evident until middle school and high school. Alejandro relates the first time he actually understood how his having TPS affected his life.

We have a Social Security card, we pay taxes, but we don't know if we're going to be here. You know, regardless of what happens, our Social Security is ours and we hope we can collect it and at the same time, say that we get deported right now. Our TPS [becomes] invalid and we have till this year... so we'll see, I guess hopefully we can get the money. we don't know.

Sr. C and Sra. J also felt the pressure of having TPS. They related that they are always afraid of something happening and their family getting separated. In fact, even though they know other TPS holders who have left the U.S

say and then it would have like cheese and all these other things. Before the 3 oz liquid rule in the airport, she would bring *agua de coco* in shampoo bottles. - Rogelio

Having the twins' grandmother visit for long periods of time also helped both parents with their parenting responsibilities, job schedules, and socializing. Alejandro and Rogelio's mother expressed how much her mom loved her grandkids "porque [para] mi mamá la prioridad son sus nietos (*because for my mom, her priority are her grandchildren*).” She took care of the children at home and the family relied on her as a caregiver while she was in the U.S. As Sra. J remembers, when her mother was in town, she was in charge of picking the children up from school, arranging playdates and even inquiring as to who could take care of kids when she went back to El Salvador.

Mi mamá venía en las vacaciones a estar con ellos en el verano gracias a Dios no tuvimos que dejarlo en manos extrañas, ...se encargaba... ella hacía las

and come back, they are not willing to take that chance for fear of being separated. Sr. C explained that he was afraid of getting stopped by immigration on the way back. Additionally, Sr. C and Sra. J felt frustrated that even though they follow the law, and have not been in trouble with the law, they still live in fear of being sent back.

Al regresar, si a uno de ahí de la aduana se le ocurre ponerle cualquier traba, arruina a mi familia porque cualquiera de nosotros que vaya y hay un problema se hace un caos en mi familia. Esa es la palabra, frustración, porque nos sentimos frustrados que sabiendo que ya tenemos 20 años de estar en el país que trabajamos duro, que somos honestos que los muchachos se han enfocado no hay ningún problema con la ley.  
-Sr. C

*(Upon returning, if a customs officer thinks about making trouble, [the officer] ruins my family. That is the word, frustration, because we feel frustrated knowing that we've been in the U.S for over 20 years, that we work hard, that*

relaciones sociales ahí en la escuela donde los iba a recoger ella “mira, conozco una señora que se puede encargar de recoger a los niños después de la escuela cuando ustedes estén trabajando”

*(Thank God my mom came to be with them during the summer and we did not have to leave them with strangers... she would take care... she would make social relationships at school where she picked up the kids “look I know a woman who can pick the kids up from school while you are still working”).*

Alejandro and Rogelio understood how hard their parents worked. They knew that both mom and dad had sacrificed their previous life to come to the U.S. in search for a better future for their children. Although both parents had a university degree, from El Salvador they worked in the construction, cleaning, and restaurant industries in order to generate enough income to sustain a family of six.

Having the retrospect of seeing how hard our parents, what they did, what they sacrificed, how much of their body they wore out just so that we can have a proper

*we are honest that our muchachos have been focused and there has been not trouble with the law).*

Rogelio and Alejandro understood they came from a different country but did not realize the importance of their status. Alejandro explained that he first understood there were big differences when he asked his mom if he could go on a study abroad program.

Yeah, like they were offering like a field trip where you can go out and go explore Spain, Germany, all that. It's like a fun experience and all that. The teacher was telling me about it and at first I was petrified I didn't want to leave the United States not because of it's unavailable but because, but then I mentioned to my mom "hey I have this trip where you can go and be a tourist around these European nations, countries. You can go to like these museums, it's so interesting..."

The first thing she did was ask me "how much does it cost?" and I'm like "I don't know but if I know

future, be happy be successful and not have to do this immigrant jobs that they had to do. -Alejandro

Both parents reiterated this feeling during our interview Sr. C explains "teníamos una carga bien fuerte encima que era trabajar, trabajar, trabajar para sacar adelante a los muchachos (*we had a very heavy load on our shoulders that was to work, work, work in order for our muchachos to be successful*)."

For Sr. C and Sra. J their first mission in life had been to provide opportunities for the success of their children. Both parents worked around each other's work schedule so an adult was always present before the *muchachos* (as they affectionately referred to their children) left for school and when they got back as well.

Entonces nos dedicábamos, jugamos siempre con los schedules de trabajo o Sr. C entraba temprano según el trabajo que él tuviera y yo me buscaba uno que yo pude entrar más tarde para que Sr. C estuviera ahí cuándo llegarán a la casa cuando estaban pequeños.

I'll tell you" and also "you're not going." Straight up she said "I don't think you could go" she said "you're not going" and then she said, she just put it like "we have to renew your passport" I didn't know that we had to call the Embassy and ask for permission so we can leave. I did not know all of that until later when I asked just wondering how I wasn't able to leave for that trip and they're like no. Even back then it was a lot less hostile against immigration status compared to now.

Additionally, Rogelio described his mom being extra concerned whenever the twins left on field trips or overnight camp. He remembers how Sra. J reacted when the twins were invited to wrestling camp in high school. The twins even mentioned that at the time they believe Sra. J was overreacting. I was just a field trip after all.

*(Then we would dedicate, play with our work schedules either Sr. C went in early depending on his job at the time, and I would look for [a job] where I could go in later so that Sr. C would be there when they got home when they were young).*

This also meant that Sr. C and Sra. J had to make professional sacrifices. Sacrifices they were aware of, but still hard choices. Instead of pursuing a job in their field, they opted for a job that would allow them to spend time with their family instead. They focused on the wellbeing of their *muchachos* by ensuring their immediate needs were met instead of working to validate their own studies from El Salvador. By providing for their children, they could forge a future for them and the *muchachos* from the start. Sra. J describes this as:

O nos enfocamos en sacar a los muchachos delante y dedicarles tiempo a ellos o nos enfocamos en prepararnos nosotros para un futuro mejor para nosotros, pero íbamos a descuidar la atención hacia ellos entonces... no, podemos estar dando duro ahorita, pero siempre estamos vamos a dar

When we went to this wrestling camp over in UVA, [mom] decided to pack our passports just in case. “just in case, here is your passport and your visa.” We had our legal documents and we were coming to the realization: We’re driving there I think, I don’t think we’re going to use a plane, why is she packing all these things? and then realizing that all these guys they just packed clothes while here I am, with my legal documents cell phone and extra cash. My mom gave us like \$50 each just in case if anything happened, “if we got stopped [have money] to do something with it, [if] we got arrested or anything, if you get deported.” That’s what my mom said.

The twins’ life during middle school and high school went on as if everyone had the same opportunities until as Rogelio and Alejandro describe, it was time to reach “typical milestones from child to adult. Although TPS came with

al mismo objeto y el mismo objetivo y siempre han sido los muchachos.

*(We either focused on helping our muchachos succeed and dedicate our time to them or in preparing ourselves for a better future for us, but we would not pay close attention to them so... no, we can work hard now, and we always have come to the same thing and the same objective and it has always been the muchachos).*

Even though Sra. J worked long hours during the day and often at night as well, she made sure her boys were always cared for. She would prepare meals for her *muchachos* while the rest of the household slept and have it ready for them when she had to go to work.

In addition to the support from their parents and grandmother, when they first arrived in the country without understanding the language or the expectations, Rogelio and Alejandro relied on each other to get through the difficult transition to a different environment. Alejandro and Rogelio explained that they were scared of their new surroundings and did not understand their new roles or new expectations.

some benefits, like applying for a driver's license, they explained that during this process, or during the process of applying to college, is when one realizes how different life is depending on your immigration status. Rogelio explained the feeling of uncertainty that came with applying for a driver's permit or applying to college.

But getting a permit, or applying for colleges... it turns out that when you're undocumented then they [the processes] are frozen in time. That's where we were, we were like [Rogelio hesitates] stuck... because we could have applied to for our license or permit but then we realized how would College work out because colleges don't know everything about TPS?

Sra. J worried constantly about the wellbeing of her *muchachos*. She lived in fear for her children. She worried they would be discriminated against for their different status, she even made a point of asking them not to mention their

I remember going to kindergarten, me and Rogelio were in the same class and that was good because we supported each other. We understood how this country was foreign to us, so we were together, and as twins we had a bad [reputation] to always be together in such a way that we don't interact with anybody else, just each other... We had our own language our own non-verbal communication so we were always talking to each other.

As Alejandro related this, Rogelio's head was nodding up and down. It was clear they both understood the importance of having one another during their transition to a different country, with a different language and different rules. A country where they would face barriers imposed on them just for being foreigners. A country where they would be discriminated against them for having an accent or not fully adopting the local cultural norms or customs.

status for fear of any one of them getting bullied by their own classmates or peers.

Sí, yo siempre miedo. Más que todo por ellos porque yo sabía que sí mencionaban eso en la escuela los mismos compañeros los podían estar haciendo bullying entonces en esta casa le decíamos que no mencionaran que eran TPS

*(Yes, always for me, fear. Especially for them because I knew if they mentioned it [TPS] at school their own classmates would be bullying them. Therefore, in this household we would tell them not to mention that they had TPS).*

Rogelio and Alejandro explained that they now realize the fear Sra. J felt all the time when they left the house or how different they were from their peers when packing for a wrestling meet. In addition to traveling restrictions, they also mentioned the cost of having TPS and how that played out with their peers. From the time they were 16, Alejandro and Rogelio had to work to pay for their TPS renewal. This meant that during their last three years of high school they worked enough to pay the TPS fees and fingerprinting fees every 18 months.



[Mom] knows how quickly things get escalated and how eventually a family can be separated just for like a traffic stop you have so little stuff like that until you actually realize that “oh that’s the reason why”...we thought it was normal until we started talking to [our peers] like we had to make excuses to our native-born friends “hey are you going to this trip?” and [we would say] “we have to work man” it was true because we worked like dogs back then. But we made all the excuses in order to avoid our whole citizenship situation because for so many people, it is easy. Did you ask for parent permission? Done. That’s it. But for us we have two more questions like can we afford it? Because once we started working any expense especially our renewal of a Visa every 18 months we have to renew that, but it was just another expense that not everyone pays at all. It was

\$800 or 900 dollars plus \$500 for fingerprints. -Rogelio

Rogelio and Alejandro also related how even though they were expected to make their beds, brush their teeth, and do their own laundry, unlike other families, Sra. J would “hound” them for completely different reasons. For Sra. J, it was a given that her children would make their beds or wash their clothes. Sra. J wanted her kids to save money and never get in trouble. Alejandro and Rogelio now understand their mother and realize that their status and their ethnicity played a big role in their lives growing up.

“Make sure you have enough money, make sure you have enough money. Make sure you do that. Make sure you stay safe. Make sure you don’t break the laws. Make sure that you...” It scares me, but now I understand the fear she felt all these years. I don’t know how she keeps saying because I’m having trouble maintaining. Knowing what I know now this is scary, scary

place right now, and what if I'm just pulled over, and they may not like any immigrants they could just simply ignore all paperwork simply because you're not white.  
-Alejandro

Although their immigrant status did affect Rogelio and Alejandro's school experience, it transcended into their family and social lives. Their parents, Sr. C and Sra. J, constantly worried about the safety of their children and lived in fear of their family being separated for any minor offense. In addition to their status being a barrier that translated outside of their school experience, Rogelio and Alejandro also identified cultural misunderstandings as a barrier. Sometimes these misunderstandings did not happen out of malice, but in the end they hindered the twins' experiences and contributed to other difficulties in their lives.

### **Cultural Misunderstandings**

The twins understood that their mother worked hard in order to provide for their family. They also saw how anxious she was to comply with school

requirements such as IEP meetings. She would take off work and rush to the school, listen to the teachers and rush back to work. Seen from a deficit perspective, this would be a textbook example of an unengaged parent that is only going through the motions. Rogelio described her mom attending meetings as “my mom would come in [wearing] her scrubs, or Target outfit, whatever job she would be doing, sit down and listen and they would tell her everything should be okay, and sign and then leave as quickly as possible.” However, Alejandro explained, their parents worked hard hours to ensure their children were taken care of, Sr. C and Sra. J were relying on the school to educate their children.

As their time in school continued, Rogelio and Alejandro were often in their IEP meetings as translators for their mom. Alejandro explained that even though he was in the meeting, Sra. J often only got the gist of the conversation due to the teacher’s lack of Spanish. The school staff assumed the twins spoke Spanish well and thought they could avoid a translator. For Alejandro, this was jarring. How could these adults ask a

child to translate, do a good job of it and speak up if he could not do it? Culturally, the expectation for Rogelio and Alejandro was that when an adult asks you to do something, you do it. Culturally, however, adults understand the limitations of children, such as Alejandro and Rogelio, and do not ask them to undertake tasks that are beyond their abilities. This way adults foster independence and instill a sense of security. By asking the twins to translate in these meetings the staff accomplished the opposite.

We were interpreters of our mother coming to the IEP meetings In middle school oh, our Spanish is crap. We know it, we tried our hardest but my mom only got the gist what we were saying “estamos haciendo bueno, tenemos aplicar más (*we are doing good, we need to work harder*).” [Our] vocabulary has expanded, but in middle school it took us a lot to say, like a 20 minute explanation [from the teacher] mine was like 5 minutes because I could not explain

[things]...and how are you expecting a child to say [these things]... they put this expectation on us and I had to fulfill that expectation like any other child. I couldn't say "I can't do this, somebody come talk to my mom." How does that even sound like to you? How do you say "talk to my mom?" You know I'm her child so they assumed oh you speak Spanish so you can communicate perfectly with your mom there's still communicational barriers that one has.

Additionally, Rogelio and Alejandro were taught by their parents to be respectful of their teachers at home and as such would behave in classroom. In their minds disrespecting a teacher was not an option, so they did not get why it was such a compliment when the teachers said they were well behaved children. But the meetings were overwhelming and their input was only asked to fulfill a requirement.

Through the IEP meetings I was just a translator for my mom and

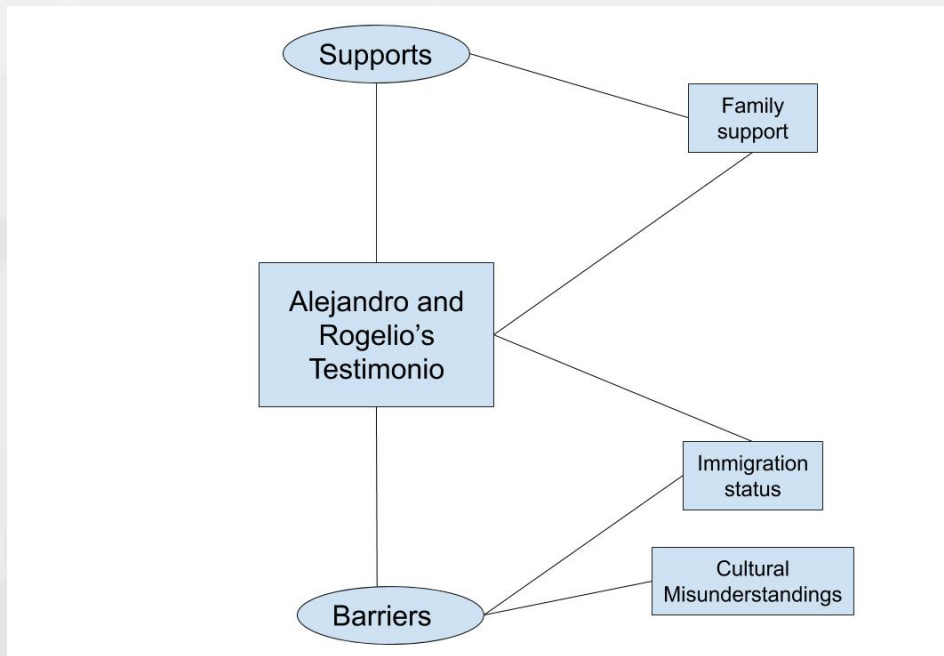
it was like more of a pep talk. “Oh he is such a pleasure to have in class...” because my parents told me be respectful but why wouldn’t I be respectful to a teacher, if I was mad I was mad. all right? but I did not take it out on other people so they were oh he’s such a pleasure, he’s getting it, he’s understanding this, and would say, what are your goals? I’m like pass the grade? I know I’m struggling I don’t know what to pick from the million things I struggle with. -Alejandro

Finally, the parents saw school as a place that could be trusted completely. They mentioned that they just assumed teachers did right by the students. The orientation meeting for special education was a blur and they felt overwhelmed so they hoped the twins would be taken care of. Looking back, they understand how that was a mistake and they should have asked more questions to better understand their kids’ situation, their rights, and their options.

Pero el gran problema que tenemos es que asumimos que todo está correcto Y eso es un error porque eso es por falta de información, porque las cosas no son claras, o el sistema hace que en una sola sentada le den toda la información y no queda claro ¿cierto? Porque eso lo hicieron con nosotros -Sr. C

*(But the great problem that we have is that we assumed everything was correct. And that is a mistake because that is due to a lack of information, because things are not clear, or the system makes it so that in just one seating one is given all the information and it is not all clear, right? And that is what they did with us).*





**Figure 3**

*Supports and Barriers Impacting Rogelio and Alejandro's Everyday Life*

*Note.* This figure represents how family support, immigration status, and cultural misunderstandings influenced Rogelio and Alejandro's life inside and outside of school.

## *Testimonio* from School

### School System

The Twin's *testimonio* describes instances in which the policies of the school system interfered with daily tasks the twins and the other children needed do while in school. In some instances, communication with school was very difficult. Sra. J relates how when they moved to another school she did not feel welcome or comfortable bringing up any issues. She mentioned they made her feel like a burden when she asked for an interpreter. Due to her work hours, Sra. J had limited time to go into school and talk with the teachers. By not having an interpreter available, the school unintentionally prolonged her time away from her job. Sra. J elaborated explaining this also happened during scheduled meetings where teachers knew Sra. J struggled with English.

Pero ya no me acercaba tanto como cuando iba [a la otra escuela] que me sentía con facilidad de traducción Aquí no, aquí tenía, yo que pedir que por favor me ayudará traducirme y sí

The *testimonio* by the twins and their family members describe the school system as being helpful for some vital aspects of their lives. For Sra. J and Sr. C, the schools were at times very supportive. The first school the *muchachos* attended, welcomed the Latinx community and its staff was approachable. Sra. J and Sr. C were very active in that school. They not only attended to the English language classes, but also attended different meetings geared toward improving the school services.

The school system also offered several programs for students from lower socio economic backgrounds. These programs sometimes offered day care for school-aged students during the summer, technology assistance to students who had not computers, or other support programs.

Sra. J remembers the first school the *muchachos* went to with a smile on her face.

venia alguien del condado para ayudarme, pero no estaba tan accesible como allá. Llegaba uno e inmediatamente ya había a alguien porque aquí las zonas es mas de americanos y de otras culturas que hablan en inglés...Mi inglés ya estaba mejorando un poquito porque ya hablaba más inglés, ... pero no me sentía con aquella confianza de llegar hoy voy a encontrar, me sentía cohibida... Yo siempre tenía que estar pidiendo que tradujera y esperar que llegara...

*(But I did not approach [the school] as often, as when I went to the other school where I felt it was easy to translate. Not here, here I had to ask please help me translate and yes, somebody from the county would come to help, but it was not as accessible. Compared to just arriving and having someone there because of the area. Here it's more of Americans and other cultures who speak English... my English was improving a bit...but I did not feel confident on just going to school, I felt intimidated...I always had to ask for someone to translate and wait until they got there).*

Although their school system had a program for college preparation aimed

Entonces cómo lo repito gracias a Dios, qué la escuela acogía muy bien a la comunidad latina Incluso el principal hizo un programa para los padres de ESL. También íbamos a clases de inglés en la noche una vez por semana... había bastante acceso para ir a la escuela hablar con ellos por cualquier problema.

*(Then as I mentioned earlier, thank God the school welcomed the Latinx community. The Principal actually started a program for ESL parents. so we also went to English classes at night once a week...the school was very accessible, you could go talk to them about any problem).*

Y otra cosa que ayudó, que creo yo, que [los *muchachos*] siempre estuvieron en clases de verano y en la otra en las vacaciones, no Porque tanto lo necesitaban sino que porque nosotros los metíamos ahí porque era una manera de que los muchachos estuvieron [cuidados] o sea no pagamos babysitter, o pagábamos menos, y mi suegra los iba a traer y estaban aprendiendo en la escuela, y era un soporte. -Sr. C.

to get students ready for college. For Alejandro and Rogelio, the program did just the opposite. It took time away from their studies. It targeted students based on their socioeconomic status, which by itself is not a problem, but coupled with low expectations from the counselors involved and the lack of preparation for helping ULWD apply to college made the program hard to like. Rogelio and Alejandro's older brothers also commented on the program with similar experiences. They were disillusioned by the lack of preparation of the staff to deal with the issues students like them faced every day. Counselors were not familiar with TPS, did not know of any resources to help students with TPS, or showed no interest in helping out.

I remember we were in this program I think it was called [name] they go to minority kids and those who had free lunch so they viewed those type of kids they said "you know, college is one part of your school age career, this program will show you all about college." They usually went for minority kids

*(And another thing I believed helped is that the muchachos were always in the summer classes and other school care during other vacations. Not because they needed it, but because we put them in as a way for the muchachos to be taken care of without paying for a babysitter, or paying less, and my mother-in-law would take them, and they were learning in school, and it was a support.)*

El programa de la escuela en esos meses que llegamos y se realizó una cambiaron las computadoras, y nos dieron una computadora no solo a nosotros con el programa educacional que todo para las familias hispanas tuvieran mas acceso para que los niño tuvieran un soporte y estudiaran en la casa. -Sr. C

*(The program the school had in those months we got here. They changed computers and they gave us a computer. Not only us but all Hispanic families so that their children would have more access and a support to study at home).*

Other programs were of immense help. Sr. C still remembers the first time his children went to summer-care provided by the school district. He was happy they were learning English in a safe environment while he worked.

because immigrant parents they won't know [about college] especially for Spanish students. They won't know the school system here. -Alejandro

In this program it shows "this is how you do a school tour, ask this question. This how you apply, this is how you make a resume," and they gave us tours, we went to [school], actually, and like they are "hey we're going to help you, show you" I was "this is great." But a lot of the counselors were "oh, I see what you're doing. I see what is your plan?" Well, I don't know since I'm going to pay for college all by myself, "I guess community college," and they'd be like "okay that is a good choice"... and counselors they kind of left us alone. -Rogelio

Another barrier the twins identified in the school system was the rigidity of the assessment procedures. In high school, end of year assessments really interfered with the twins'

Additionally, each student was provided with a computer through a program by the school system and both parents thought this was very helpful. Especially once the *muchachos* began moving to higher grades. Sra. J remembers their first school fondly for all the help they provided Latinx families in the area and the way in which the school welcomed immigrants. Both Sr. C and Sra. J expressed their gratitude for the first school their children attended. They felt everyone in the school took care of them. Sra. J thought the culture was welcoming and that encouraged parents to participate more.

Both parents also believed that the ESL classes for their children helped tremendously. They believe that the ESL classes helped children learn English quickly. Additionally, the *muchachos* stayed in the same grade they had finished in El Salvador, and Sr. C and Sra. J also believed this helped their kids. During the collective analysis, Rogelio and Alejandro agreed with this their parent's decision. They identified staying one more year in kindergarten as a support because they needed to learn the

education. One end of year assessment in particular (geometry) created an immense amount of anxiety and provoked the twins into exhibiting negative behaviors. Alejandro and Rogelio began questioning the purpose of education and whether they were actually learning anything by taking the same assessment numerous times.

The twins did not understand how they were allowed to demonstrate their understanding of a topic in different ways during the school year only to fail at the end of the course because they were not able to pass a standardized test. Rogelio and Alejandro referred to this test as a specific barrier in their high school experience. They wished they could have demonstrated mastery of the subject in a different way.

You're just a number, you're just the end product of a standardized test determining whether the school is successful and not on being a person. Failing a geometry test for nine, 11 times... that really, am I even educating? because there is so much pressure

language without worrying too much about the academic skills.

Sra. J related the story of their eldest son telling them one day at the beginning of the school year, "mamá, no se que están diciendo solo hacen bip, bip, bip, bip, (*mom, I don't know what they're saying they just go beep, beep, beep, beep*)" but by the end of the year he was not saying that any more. Furthermore, the *muchachos* were signed up for health care thought the school system shortly after they arrived to the country. This was essential to the family's well-being and both Sr. C and Sra. J remember it as a lifesaver.

Mejor dicho se quedaron en el año en que vinieron que estaba en El Salvador, un pequeño atraso. Y a todos los metieron a ESL. Eso fue una ventaja que los gemelos fueron a K el mayor a 2do y el siguiente a 1. y a esl sus clases de English as a second language.

-Sr. C

*(Actually they stayed in the grade level they came from in El Salvador, a short delay. And they all went into ESL. That was an advantage, the twins went into K, the oldest into 2nd and the next*

on one test and having a disability did not help. -Alejandro

I took the geometry test so many times, you're going into that room, knowing that I'm about to fail and they are not. Being like "I'm a junior I'm not even taking geometry no more and I still have to take this test" that was sucky. -Alejandro

Again, just like my brother, I needed to take the geometry test several times. So you see, you're up to a year everybody talking about oh I just finished with [test A] and I'm done with [test B] and here you are, a senior, trying to make sure that you [pass geometry] every time you gain a point or two, but you're still away from [passing] it. -Rogelio

One thing that I hated about school it's always standardized because there are so many ways to show results there are plenty of other ways you know teachers do

*one into first grade and they all went to their ESL classes).*

Un día nos aparece una señora en la casa diciéndonos que venía de la escuela para ofrecernos un seguro médico para los niños. Entonces la pasamos adelante y entonces la señora, pero yo no sé para mí todo venía del cielo siempre cada vez que encontraba algo todo venía del cielo. -Sra. J

*(One day this lady showed up at our house telling us she came from the school to offer us health insurance for the kids. So we let her in. I don't know, for me all these things came down from heaven).*

Pero ese grupo de personas, aparte de que habían varios [que incluían] en el grupo a la comunidad hispana le servían mucho la en la en la escuela. Qué era lo que nosotros conocimos de entrada. Sra. J

*(But that group of people, on top of being several, they included in their group the Hispanic community, and they served the school a lot. Which is who we met with initially).*

In the end, Sra. J and Sr. C saw the culture of the first school their

take into consideration during their lesson however that doesn't mean anything to the state or federal, so what's the point of you know doing that fun project when all leads to the standardized test?

-Rogelio

The twins identified school programs and policies that lost track of how to help students learn and did not consider the needs of students, the twins identified these procedures as barriers.

I had no teacher saying hey what do you want to do. I, honestly, I had to discover what I really wanted to do by myself with no counselors. I don't even, I don't think I knew any of the counselors in middle school or high school, which was unfortunate. [They] didn't know how to help out non-citizens.-

Alejandro

children attended as a great support. It encouraged parents to participate and created a community between parents and staff members. In this way, the school system provided numerous supports for the twins and other ULWD.



## School Staff

A key component of schools is the staff. The twins and their family identified several staff members who made their experience in the public schools harder.

Sometimes the people in charge would be Latinx and yet prove to be barriers for the twins and their family. For these people, the task of gatekeeping who got access provided them with a sense of superiority to their peers. As previously mentioned, by ranking or comparing and positioning each other based on a standard, these staff members emulated the colonial structures of power where a status quo is emulated in order to gain prominence. By engaging in these practices people like the school secretary at the elementary school or the middle school counselor placed barriers in the educational pathway of the twins and their family members.

Sinceramente la primera vez que sentí eso fue con la secretaria de la elementary cuando cambiaron de secretaria. Era una peruana esa señora nos quería ver por el piso porque ella se sentía muy

Staff was a major theme in the twins and the family's *testimonio* as well. They mentioned inspiring teachers, administrators, and other as staff members as well.

Sra. J referred to staff members she met over 15 years ago by name because of how helpful they were. The people she talked about welcomed her, accepted her, and helped her family out when they needed it the most.

Y habían personas ahí que inmediatamente yo llegué con los *muchachos*, nos tendieron la mano. Estaba la señora Cornejo, la señora peruana que era la traductora. En la escuela siempre hay gente que ayuda a traducir.

*(And there were people there that gave us a hand immediately when I arrived with the muchachos Mrs. K, the Peruvian lady that was the school's interpreter. There was always people helping to translate in school.)*

Mi prima me acompañó para para irnos a inscribir, pero nos encontramos con la sorpresa, que sí, inmediatamente apareció

americana Entonces cuando yo quería hablar ahí. [Ella sentía] como que su nivel de educación era mas alto que el mío y me quería hacer sentir “Que yo soy más que tú.” -Sra. J

*(Honestly the first time I felt that [discrimination] was with the secretary at the elementary school when they switched. She was Peruvian and that lady wanted to see me on the ground [struggling] because she felt very American. So when I wanted to go and talk there, she felt her education level was higher than mine and she wanted to make me feel “I am better than you.”)*

Como ejemplo, es mas sistémico que es un profesor, por ejemplo había una profesora, ella era hispana era mi eighth grade counselor, y cuando me fui a high school me puso -aunque no me preguntó- me puso en unas clases de niños y estudiantes como mi [yo] otros hispanos y negros. Una clase chiquita de como siete, ocho niños al lado de la escuela, verdad al lado de la escuela. Y me acuerdo que pregunté por qué, y

alguien que habla español que ya con la señora cornejo y la enfermera que era hispana, empezamos a llenar los documentos.

*(My cousin came with me to enroll the kids, but we were surprised that immediately someone appeared who spoke Spanish Mrs. K and the Hispanic nurse so we began filling out the documents.)*

Mr. S era un americano, pero muy abierto con la comunidad latina esas personas que quieren ayudar a la comunidad y formaba muchos programas adentro de la escuela.

*(Mr. S was an American, but very open to the Latinx community. Those people wanted to help the community and formed many programs inside the school).*

The twins also remembered teachers that had a positive impact on their lives. In some instances, Rogelio and Alejandro explained that their teachers and coaches went the extra mile to help them, providing them and other struggling students with extra tutoring, creating opportunities for them to volunteer for other teachers or simply providing a safe space for them to eat

me dice “eso era para los niños que se metieron en peleas.” Yo me saque, le pregunté a mi counselor de high school porque me pusieron eso, me dijo “tu counselor de middle school te puso en eso ella [lo] recomendó”...era una hispana que hizo eso pero, es la ignorancia y también el sistema. -Hermano R

*(As an example, it is more systemic. I had a teacher, she was Hispanic, my eighth grade counselor and when I went to high school she placed me -without asking me- she put me in a class of kids and students like me other Hispanic and Black kids. A small class of seven or eight beside the school. Really next to the school. And I remember asking why, and they tell me “this is for kids who got into fights.” I took myself out, I asked my high school counselor why did they place me there, he said “your middle school counselor placed you here, she recommended it” ...it was a Hispanic lady who did this, but it was the ignorance and also the*

lunch and do their work. The teachers they identified were not just their special education teachers. The list of influential teachers included one Spanish teacher, one geometry teacher, special educators, and the wrestling coach.

Throughout their *testimonio* while acknowledging they were not saints, Rogelio and Alejandro did mention several times that they worked hard at school and usually got good grades. One area they struggled in was geometry. The twins remembered one teacher who went out of his way to ensure they understood the subject.

Mr. B., I truly appreciate how he took time “since I know you’re not getting that, I will stay after school and I will provide you with stuff, I will make sure you get this” he was in middle school. He was by himself without any team teachers and he had several kids from our class that had IEPs, and he couldn’t slow down and break it step-by-step. He couldn’t do this. He needed to find the balance cause the kids weren’t getting it. And he found out he could do this

system.)

In their *testimonio* Alejandro and Rogelio did mention instances of discrimination by teachers, as well as teachers having low expectations of them, or teachers as who simply did not care nor tried to understand their individual situation. In some instances, teachers made racist comments and made them feel unwelcome, while in other instances they held Alejandro and Rogelio to very low standards and assumed they were lazy students who did not care about school. One of the areas they struggled the most was geometry. Both Rogelio and Alejandro remember poor geometry teachers. According to Rogelio, one of these teachers could not even do the math correctly, and refused to help him with the material

I had a really bad teacher because every single time she went on the board that students had to correct her for every single problem, and it would have been okay if she was [wrong] like okay or twice but it was every single problem. A student would say “hey actually

after school. He could help us in this way. -Rogelio

Mr. B was seen as a helpful teacher that actually cared for the success of his students. Both Rogelio and Alejandro recognized when a teacher was passionate about their subject. To them, Mr. B. worked hard to ensure the students knew the material and went beyond what was required of him. Additionally, other teachers mentioned by name were all described as caring and helpful.

I had several, I was very fortunate, teachers that were passionate, that had the passion for teaching. My teacher assistant in elementary Miss J. She was amazing. She cared for us. I think she was also a reading and language teacher so she helped with my phonics. She also had a lot of games, she treated us like she really wanted to make inclusion for us. -Rogelio

Our math teacher. She’s the one that actually made me want to do

it's this" and she would say "oh okay"... how are you going to be teaching a subject that you don't look like you're passionate about?... you're not that helpful because I've asked for a lot of help and I was struggling and I asked "I'm sorry I'm not getting it I need help" and she couldn't help me and... I was way behind in geometry and in hindsight I couldn't catch up.

For Alejandro his geometry teacher served as an example of how not to be a teacher. Alejandro was very clear on how he felt about this teacher.

My geometry teacher. I don't remember her name because I tried to move on. I appreciate her because she taught me one of the most valuable lessons: I did not want to be her, I do not want to teach like her, I did not want to put any student through that. I remember she found me bothersome and a burden.

math, I couldn't understand math at all without her. -Alejandro

I had a very great mentor /coach and he told me "hey my wife is a teacher at the school and she is looking for a teacher assistant and she was wondering if you wanted to do it" and I'm like "yeah sure I don't know what I'm going to do but that's pretty cool yeah" [he said] "instead of doing a study hall or something you can just go up with her and help her out."

-Rogelio

For the most part, the twins felt supported by their teachers. In fact, this is the section in which Rogelio and Alejandro found most of their support during their time in school; teachers and teacher assistants that cared about their education.

Rogelio mentioned teacher assistants as key in helping him through difficult classes, while Alejandro expressed how his Spanish teacher made him feel at home in her classroom. He felt so welcome that during high school

Rogelio and Alejandro did not even attempt to remember the name of these teachers. Rogelio and Alejandro either forgot or chose not to remember.

Alejandro and Rogelio identified school staff as barriers depending on how these teachers made them feel. There were several instances in which teachers made them feel that they did not belong or where teachers showed no interest in the twins' lives. Their counselor did not approve of the twins taking a course in Spanish for fluent speakers.

We decided to take Spanish for fluent speakers and improve our own skills. Our case manager was like "oh, okay," still a little surprised why don't you try something else? But I feel like I should improve on my Spanish and it's for fluent speakers so I'm sure I'm going to learn something.

Additionally, during Alejandro's senior year, a teacher made him attend school to take a final exam even though the teacher had agreed that those who passed the class did not have to take the final. Alejandro explained that this

he began eating lunch in the Spanish teacher's classroom. Alejandro also mentioned he was not the only one there.

In elementary school, they also found support from one of their special education teachers. She was constantly in the resource room where Alejandro and Rogelio could go if they needed a break. Although they mentioned it was hard to remember her name, they did remember that she was always available in case they needed a space to do their work quietly or take a break.

I remember TA's mostly. When I was completely lost and was like "I have no idea what was going on" I could not even look up or ask questions because I didn't even know that I did not understand. Just having that friendly smile coming to me and saying "how are you? good? are you understanding? and then would say "hey I just letting you know here are your notes. I think you're having trouble." you know? I didn't even know I needed fill-out notes. She didn't make an observation but she just did that for

teacher thought he was helping to build students' character, but in reality he was not aware that Alejandro was working over 30 hours a week and had to call to get off work to show up for a final that never happened.

I said "I'm tired, I'm sorry" and he's like "whatever you're really disappointing me" and I thought "well I passed the class" and there was an exception for seniors and if you passed the class you didn't have to take the final. However, he made us specifically show up for the final and I needed to call off work and I needed to arrange a ride. I need to do all that and I got there and he made sure that I came in. I came in and he was barely even there. [He asked] "why are you still here?" and I said "you told us to come for a final" and he said "oh there is no final, why are you here?" ... He made me come for the final even though I had to get out of work and he thought he was helping me build character or something.

me, she did not ask me, she already had it in her mind.

-Rogelio

First of all my handwriting is shit, still to today but knowing that she saw that, and she still planned ahead, and very respectfully said "hey I've noticed you having trouble with handwriting and whenever I ask you to read some notes for your basic skills class you were having some trouble so we're having some fill-in in notes" and just offered me the option and being nice and that was amazing.

-Alejandro

In elementary they both talked about having a room available for them when they needed to calm down and get their emotions in check. They also mentioned the teacher that was there to listen to them sort out those emotions.

This teacher, she was co-teaching with the classroom [teacher].

Alejandro new her more actually because he got introduced to her first and ... I know she was in

Alejandro and Rogelio's *testimonio* also described some teachers as not aware of how to help immigrant students past high school. These staff members and teachers, received the fact that Rogelio and Alejandro applied to a community college after high school with surprise. Alejandro or Rogelio described several of the teachers as not thinking much of them, or as thinking that community college was an acceptable next step for the twins because it was where the twins belonged as opposed to a four-year college or university. They did not hear about going to a four-year institution by their counselors or advisors. They also did not hear of how they, as UWLD, could apply or receive support to attend college.

Rogelio and Alejandro also experienced discrimination by teachers. In one instance that Rogelio relates, the teacher actually asked him where he was from and why was he disrespectful to the U.S. flag. Rogelio was immediately considered an outsider, regardless of how Rogelio thought about himself.

different rooms. She was co-teaching, making sure her caseload was being good and see how they were doing class, but at the same time that room was always available to us. If you wanted to do work and it was noisy, we could go to that room and she would be there and she would make sure that we were doing the work and doing it right. Also, like, since we were little kids and we had behavior [issues] or emotions we had that place to come down cool down and talk about it.-Rogelio

The twins also explained that during middle school they were not interested in learning. They did, however, respond to some of the teachers. Specifically, Rogelio responded well to one of his case managers who would call his mom when he was not following expectations. As Rogelio talked about this teacher, he could not help but smile at the memory. He felt he was not the easiest student to deal with during middle school "I bet some teachers wished I was sick many days back in middle school."



And he said “hmpf that’s incredible, that’s so disrespectful, if I was in your country I would stand up for the Pledge of Allegiance.” ... if I was in your country? I’m already seen as an outsider... I didn’t know enough of my status then, but now I know that from the get-go I’m seen as an outsider and disrespect me and my country it was something.

The twins also commented that during high school a teacher from a different class made them feel unwelcome, even when they were simply following directions from their teacher when asking for an extra desk from this teacher.

### **Special Education**

Alejandro and Rogelio’s *testimonio* evoked different feelings when talking about special education compared to when they talked about teachers or the school in general. The

I remember she was the only one who could discipline me because she knew what to do. She just moved her finger “come here, come here”, take me to the main office, and I would have to call my mom.

During high school, Rogelio and Alejandro specifically remembered their Spanish for fluent speakers teacher. They felt she understood them. Alejandro and Rogelio enjoyed having her as a teacher. When they started to remember some of the banter that would happen in her class, they started laughing out loud.

We started talking to the teacher she was like this crazy Argentinian. Fire. -Alejandro

When the topic turned to special education, the twins identified supports—specifically during elementary school. Rogelio and Alejandro identified ways in which being part of the special education

twins felt that because of their disability, they were discriminated against and segregated during their time in school, especially in high school. During the last years of high school, Alejandro and Rogelio felt that the services provided by special education did not provide enough of a benefit against the challenges he faced for being part of the program. There were three areas of the special education program in which the twins and their family identified barriers: The IEP meetings, the accommodations provided, and the segregation/isolation they felt because of the special education services.

One of the most significant barriers had to do with the IEP meetings in particular. Although earlier in this chapter I mentioned language as an issue, the lack of appropriate interpreters for the meetings interfered with not only the twins' education, but with Sra. J's understanding of their disability, the procedures, and the twins' rights. Sra. J mentioned she was scared to fight back for her kids because she did not want her fight to impact the education of Alejandro and Rogelio as retaliation. Further, having a student translate to their

program provided supports for them during school. In several instances, Rogelio, Alejandro, and their parents' *testimonio* identified the services they received as being helpful. The twins, Sra. J and Sr. C agreed that during elementary school and early middle school, the services provided to them by special education teachers were needed. They also identified the type of instruction what helped them overcome their dyslexia and which accommodations were helpful in their academic careers.

Los gemelos entraron aparte de ... la ESL entraron a *speech therapy*, porque... mi esposa trajo toda la documentación que teníamos del El Salvador y aquí los volvieron a meter a ese programa. Sr. C

*(The twins entered, besides ESL, to speech therapy, because... my wife brought all the paperwork we had from El Salvador and here they put them back into that program).*

Al principio sí muy contentos porque lo necesitaban, y la verdad es que la terapia del lenguaje era muy importante y las evaluaciones eran buenos

parent what is being said in a meeting puts a lot of pressure on the student. As Alejandro noted earlier in the chapter,

They put this expectation on us, and I had to fulfill that expectation like any other child. I couldn't say "I can't do this, somebody come talk to my mom." How does that even sound like?

Los últimos años ya no había intérpretes porque yo ya había mejorado un poquito [mi inglés] y me preguntaban si yo quería que si necesitaba y yo les decía que sí, que sí, pero no venía [nadie].

-Sra. J

*(During the last few years there were no interpreters because my English had improved a bit and they asked me if I wanted [one] and I would say yes but none would come.)*

Also, like the whole IEP meeting they had like five or six faculty members, the student, and the parent. My mom didn't understand a lick of English so it was an issue. She got the general

resultados, los profesores y las terapeutas decían. -Sra. J

*(In the beginning, yes very happy because they needed it, and the truth is that speech therapy was very important and the evaluations showed good results, the teachers and therapists said).*

And we were also programmed in as ELL. So we were enrolling in ELL. And they were [both] helping us a lot. -Alejandro

Elementary was definitely more carefree ... they would say this is going to help me and it did.

-Rogelio

Rogelio and Alejandro received specialized reading instruction throughout their time in school. From the beginning of school, both, Alejandro and Rogelio identified the time spent on reading instruction outside the general education classroom as a time that was helpful to them. They remember that during these periods of time they actually learned the skills needed to go back into the classroom and do the work. Through their *testimonio*, the twins reiterated that

gist of it, but she didn't understand completely so like so we were trying to explain it but we are kids ourselves... we are there talking about [test] scores or what are my goals. I want to try to translate to my mom but that's the best we could but still my mom would just look okay, yeah, yeah. She would just always agree and she didn't even know that she could disagree and she's like I think they're doing fine there.  
-Alejandro

Yo no luchaba con el sistema porque era un sistema con el que había que luchar. Yo no quería que mi hijo esté ahí y después me le fueran a poner malas notas o decir "bueno la mamá rechazó el servicio." -Sra. J

*(I did not fight against the system because it was a system that you had to fight against. I did not want that my child being there would receive reports or say "well, the mother rejected the services.")*

the help they received learning how to read was key to them succeeding in high school.

Yes, I remember in elementary school back in [place] we did have [services] back in the trailer when we got taken out and got like the phonics awareness and we got individual reading. -Rogelio

It was like building blocks and we were reading the passage and I'm getting it, and I got it, and they would say "you're doing good" and you see it was a room of four to six kids in it and I enjoyed it and it did help me a lot.

-Alejandro

In middle school I was mostly in the very building blocks reading class they were building up my phonics, my awareness of words that was the only time it was really teaching, it was helping with the situation. -Rogelio

Another special education-related barrier that Alejandro and Rogelio identified in their *testimonio* was the disability itself. During their interviews both brothers explained that having dyslexia made learning difficult, or as Alejandro mentioned “reading is a bitch.” Because of the disability, Alejandro and Rogelio often felt left behind.

As they progressed through school, they understood the different ways in which having dyslexia impacted their education. Even with read-aloud accommodations for his tests, for Alejandro, having a disability meant taking longer to complete every assignment and re-reading passages, or finding technology to read passages to him. Rogelio stressed the fact that reading is still a problem today. In addition to their reading disability constantly interfering with their education, Alejandro observed that the lack of transition planning for post-secondary education hindered them as well. As Rogelio and Alejandro stated, because they were ULWD, the counselors mostly left them alone and did

During a very emotional part of his *testimonio*, Alejandro explained that before he took a test in a separate setting, he always received poor grades. He remembered how the first time he was pulled out and received extended time he got an ‘A’ in his test. Alejandro described the anxiety of seeing his peers finish before him, knowing he was not understanding the material, and that in order to finish he would have to make up the answers. He explained that having a separate setting in the beginning was very helpful. It helped him gain confidence and bring up his grades. Additionally, as Rogelio explained, they received fill-in notes for their classes. With these accommodations Rogelio and Alejandro were able to pay better attention to the lesson, which in turn helped them understand the material and score higher in future assessments. Further, during fourth and fifth grade, the twins remember having the option of leaving the classroom if they felt they needed time to get their emotions in check.

So when you have an IEP especially one that requires you that creates test anxiety, you

not provide any support or preparation for life after graduation.

Everything was moving fast speed and I just couldn't understand. You know, my English wasn't perfect back then. I mean I could comprehend a lot but it wasn't perfect it wasn't fluency. So from there I went to middle school, ...[where] I already knew I was behind like so if I know that I feel stupid and I don't like these standardized tests why should I even try? -Rogelio

Yeah, so I think that was diagnosed. I definitely had dyslexia I am facing the fact of the hardship today. I have big time dyslexia. I think they also said I had a minor learning disability, but I'm pretty sure my dyslexia out beats it all. So I have to face that, so yeah. -Rogelio

In middle school I felt very, very depressed all the way up to high school because I did not realize how bad my reading and phonics

should leave the classroom to take the test. Less people and all of them take as much time as you if not longer. That built a lot of confidence so I'm not by myself and that helped a lot. -Alejandro

I remember the anxiety. everybody during tests, every single person was finishing and I'm like oh God I can't be the last person I can't be the last person so I didn't know what it said I could start circling. And then they said "hey, hey you can go outside and take your time." I do remember in 4th or 5th grade I left the classroom and I passed the test I used to never pass test I used to get C's or D's but I actually got an A because I took my time you know I know the information. -Alejandro

There was a special room. Basically, when we ever had to do a test, it was like in fourth grade and fifth grade, the class was local so it was close. It was just another

and my language comprehension was until I was in the very self-contained reading. -Alejandro

Especially with my disability. Reading is a bitch. I have to work around the natural order “you have to read these 20 chapters.” Twenty chapters is a lifetime for me. It is a long process, even one chapter can take me a whole night.

From there I went to high school you know still being part of the special ed, making me do goals. I remember when they had the meeting when they said what do you want to do after high school? I didn't really have a career path set, I knew Ok, I guess I'll go to college I don't want to go to the military or look for a job so I said “I'll go to community college” because at that time like my oldest brother just graduated high school so there is that path to go to because growing up nobody was spewing college to me.

classroom with bean bags. It had chairs [that we]re separated, they have dividers, and we just, it was like basically a room that we could hang out... I can just have time for myself relax get my emotions back in check and I can hang out with a teacher that does not annoy me all the time. I could stay there and do all my work. - Rogelio

I had a lot of aid. Since writing and reading wasn't my strongest suit, they gave me like fill-in notes which were helpful and they really help me and I don't have to do much actual writing I can just listen to what the teacher is saying. Alejandro

And I already had the notes printed and typed for me in that helped so much because all right cause I am trying to read and write and I have terrible penmanship and I'm trying to read what's on the board and I'm messing up I'm scratching up and

The accommodations Alejandro and Rogelio had in place during their time in school were identified as barriers during high school. Both Rogelio and Alejandro saw the accommodation as a barrier when they felt they no longer needed the accommodation.

They knew that they had outgrown some of their accommodations. By the time the twins were in high school having separate setting became more of a problem than an advantage. Instead of alleviating the test anxiety, it increased the anxiety of missing out on class lectures. Additionally, during the IEP meetings in high school the twins felt the IEP team would not listen to them about which accommodations worked for them, and stopped providing an accommodation that the twins found helpful. In their *testimonio*, Rogelio explained that one day the teachers stopped providing him with fill-in notes, even though they never mentioned this to him.

For me, I was like in the hands of the teacher that “we think you’ll really benefit from it” and I didn’t

messing up so they provided that.

-Rogelio

When Alejandro and Rogelio talked about these accommodations they were both aware of the work it took teachers to implement them. They also recognized how the accommodations helped them be successful in school.



understand my needs fully so I said I do like... for a long time I've said I really enjoy going out of class but or like getting the notes read because they help me concentrate and then out of nowhere they stopped making notes for me and then they said "oh you don't have that anymore." Well I guess I don't, but I have that in my IEP and they're like "no, no, no, that was last year." I don't remember changing that, "oh it changed, it changed." I was like "okay" and I went with the flow, I didn't know and then I especially remember this- I don't want this anymore [separate setting]. "Okay, you don't want this, we hear you but it's going to help you, are you sure? Let's put a pin on it, we'll keep it." I felt confident in junior and senior year. I finished early. I was, like, I was beating a lot of kids [finishing earlier], so I finally could deal with it by myself. "Okay, okay, I know you don't want to leave the classroom, but

just keep it.” I could do it so simple now [taking tests], I didn’t need it, but they kept it.

It even became apparent to Sra. J that her *muchachos* felt unhappy with special education. She explained that she felt bad about the whole situation. She did not like her children having a label of learning disability. It appeared, she said, as if they wanted to keep them there even when it was no longer needed. For her, the worst part was that the twins were not able to pursue any extra-curricular activities due to the special education service delivery model in their high school. Even though Alejandro wanted to try music out, his schedule never allowed for it because of special education and this, “[*l]e rompía el alma*” (broke [her] soul).

La parte que no nos gustó al final, fue que los gemelos ya no sentían que necesitaban la terapia la educación especial pero por alguna razón la escuela siempre los quería tener ahí. -Sra. J

*(The part we did not like at the end was that the twins felt they*

*did not need special education anymore but for some reason the school always wanted to keep them there.)*

En mi caso, Yo me sentía mal porque a mí no me gusta que mis hijos se sintieran mal de estar en un lugar donde no querían estar y cuando yo iba y les preguntaba cuándo iba por ejemplo las reuniones una vez al año una vez nada más. -Sra. J

*(In my case, I felt bad because I did not like that mi kids felt bad for being in a place where they did not want to be and I asked about it, for example when I went to the yearly meetings only.)*

Eso es otra cosa, Alejandro siempre quiso estar en clases de música y nunca pudieron porque siempre las clases de educación especial eran al mismo tiempo.

-Sra. J

*(That's another thing, Alejandro always wanted to be in music class and was never able to because special education was at the same time).*

Another aspect of special education that the twins identified as a barrier was the isolation or segregation

they felt for having a disability. Rogelio and Alejandro mentioned that they did not notice it much during elementary, but as they moved into middle school and high school it became more apparent.

Rogelio decided to not dwell too much on this, he already had a plan for his future and just wanted to finish high school. For Alejandro, however, this isolation took a heavier toll on his high school experience. He began feeling anxious of spending too much time taking tests. He knew he could not finish the tests as fast as other peers, but being outside of the classroom affected him more. It affected his grades, and it affected his emotional state. Yet, Rogelio and Alejandro considered themselves lucky compared of one of their friends with had cerebral palsy. As Alejandro related the story of walking him to his classroom the day his wheelchair broke “He’s in the back of the school,” completely ignored. Alejandro felt he had it better because he was not as excluded as his friend.

I did not realize how I was getting isolated. middle school I feel completely isolated. High school I

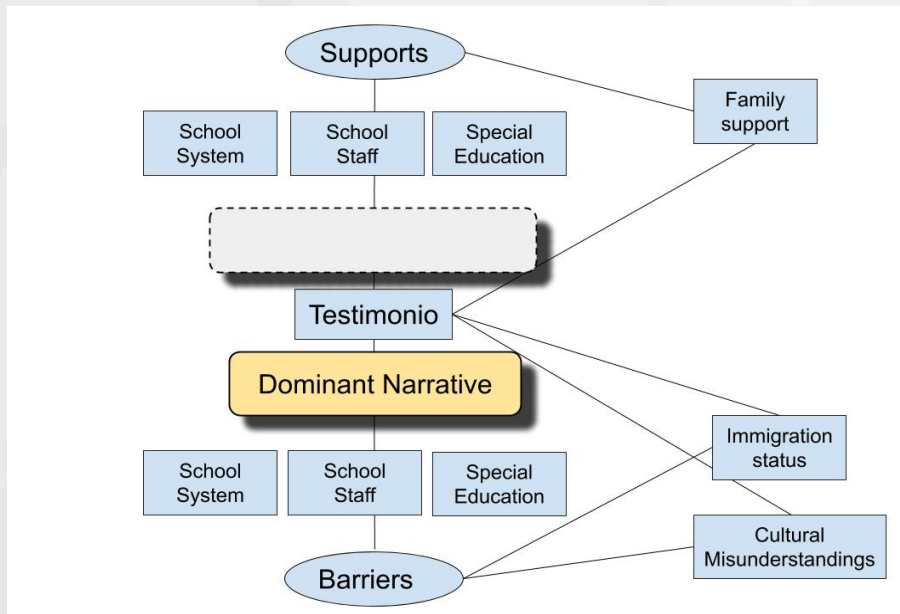
stopped caring I just wanted to get onto the next chapter in my life.

And then you realize every single class, like, you don't realize how long it take and how much you struggle until you come back in the classroom that you were in, that you were taking off for one simple quiz or exam, they are already moving on, and oh crap, what are we doing, oh I got to catch up I got to catch up and get quick anxiety and I hope I get this I hope I get this and then you realize that for every single class. you may get the concept but tests, everything reverts back to dyslexia reading. Reading the test always having the one simple way of proving the material through the test and thy are written or read And I'm like, crap, and they read the questions but you need to double read it you need to triple read it I need to read the problem 7, 10 times until I finally understood it and that was for every single class and you realize

I'm not normal, so. -Alejandro

In high school our friend had cerebral palsy and when his wheelchair broke down it just hit me how he is not acknowledged they're in the back of the school, because of my disability, me being part of it none of us excluded as him but always have to be taking that for the classroom even though I did not need that accommodation anymore.

-Alejandro



**Figure 4**

*Impact of the Dominant Narrative in the Twins' Testimonio*

*Note.* This figure explains how the three main themes were identified as barriers and supports at the same time. When the Dominant narrative when the twins perceived the Dominant narrative, the themes were identified as a barrier.

**Identifying the narrative(s) in school**

**Dominant Narrative**

The Dominant narrative surfaced consistently during the *testimonio* of Rogelio and Alejandro. It surfaced when describing barriers, or perceptions by

**Narrative of Acceptance**

Through Alejandro and Rogelio's *testimonio*, some instances appeared to counter the effect of the Dominant narrative. These excerpts

peers, teachers, other staff, and police officers. Additionally, Alejandro and Rogelio's brothers also mentioned how it affected their lives. Alejandro explained that he felt students were being influenced by the political climate the media. He related a small confrontation with a classmate who was not friendly to foreigners

People got mad when we spoke Spanish like that was a reason why that class [Spanish for fluent speakers] felt so homey. At home we speak Spanish so we just spoke Spanish. We were talking in the hallway and this guy said "dude speak English" and we're like "dude I can speak what I want" he's like "no you're in America, speak American." Not the brightest guy, American isn't a language, but bless his heart for pride or whatever you call it.

The Dominant narrative permeated Rogelio and Alejandro's school culture. It normalized antagonizing people who did not look, speak, or act white. Alejandro did not

stood out as examples of a different type of narrative. This narrative permeated the events where Rogelio and Alejandro identified having the most help, or the best time during their K-12 experience. For purposes of this research I call this narrative a narrative of acceptance.

Although similar concepts have been explained before (e.g., funds of knowledge, asset-based pedagogy, culturally relevant/sustaining pedagogies), this narrative of acceptance is an example of people accepting others as whole, complex, human beings.

Throughout the *testimonio* of Rogelio and Alejandro, each time they identified supports, these were framed within the narrative of acceptance. Examples of this narrative in the *testimonio* include the time when Alejandro realized he wanted to be a teacher because of how his own teachers made him feel.

Seeing all the teachers that were there to help me really instilled [in me], I want to be able to do that, to help, at least to help them understand that it's okay to be you it's okay to have a struggle.



identify this incident as racist. He dismissed it as ignorance instead of identifying it as discrimination or racism.

Both Rogelio and Alejandro remember feeling offended when their high school held culture night during their winter social. Culture night lasted 30 minutes.

When we were in high school we had culture day and we had it during the winter social and I remember freshman year it was a time where we had a chance to show our culture. We had Koreans in K-pop, Latinos doing salsa... They were practicing all week and I remember being there and we all sat there in the auditorium and you know nobody really cared. It was like a short little segment... that was like 7 or 9 cultures in 30 minutes. A dance or something and they would go. There was an impressive numbness to the winter social. 30 minutes, That's how much the white culture will tolerate other cultures.

For Rogelio this narrative was first evident when he mentioned his wrestling coach and wrestling community. It was the first time he found a sense of belonging and it became a place where he wanted to be.

But that doesn't mean that you don't that you're able to just get lost in the system. You find a way to be something and find yourself so you can be happy and, you know, during a high school like finding a source of community, with wrestling. We were always there all the time. We were trying to volunteer and help because we really liked the coach, we liked the environment.

Academically, this narrative of acceptance emerged for both Rogelio and Alejandro when they talked about their Spanish for fluent speakers' class. The twins explained that they felt pride for being Latinx, and even though their language skills were not on par with that of their classmates, they always felt welcome by their teacher and peers. In fact, Alejandro found a place where he

Alejandro felt that being labeled as a ULWD was difficult to bear. The labels of undocumented immigrant, having a disability, and being Latinx were all negative and did not focus on his strengths or on his person. This scrutiny influenced the decision of the twins to not disclose their disability once they got to college.

When you put these labels on me it's when I stop looking like a person, I'm already stigmatized with the label of being a succeeding immigrant but once you put my status in it "oh, it's a TPS recipient going to college oh wow, that's even better..." All these labels only attribute to what I cannot do. What the rest of the people can do. I guess I can do whatever [anyone] else can do, but it's a different process how I go on achieving it.

The twins' eldest brother explained that he was never afraid of being discriminated against because he was not born here so he knew what that meant. "Yo nunca tuve ningún miedo de

felt safe within that classroom. He would eat lunch there because the teacher understood him.

I just really enjoyed that class maybe... you know maybe the teacher was a lot, maybe that we were not even hiding the fact that we weren't fully assimilated because we don't have citizenship. At the same time we are like kinda outsider but at the same time they welcomed us... [the class atmosphere] it was a lot more... [pause] homey.

We are all Spanish people we played jokes we played games we used to joke a lot. People would eat their lunch there. I always ate, I started skipping lunch and just always hang down there because she [the teacher] ate her lunch there. She just always "how's your day going? "are you working? yeah? you're working? okay well." I don't do what with positive reinforcement, so she got me, she

discriminación ni todo eso, como no nació aquí ya sabía lo que es discriminación” (*I was never afraid of being discriminated, since I was not born here I already knew what discrimination is*).

Finally, Rogelio and Alejandro’s other brother understood that the problem was systemic. Through his experiences and time in school he identified the Dominant narrative, but dismissed the aggression because it was not innate -but learned from a system, from the media, or from other family members.

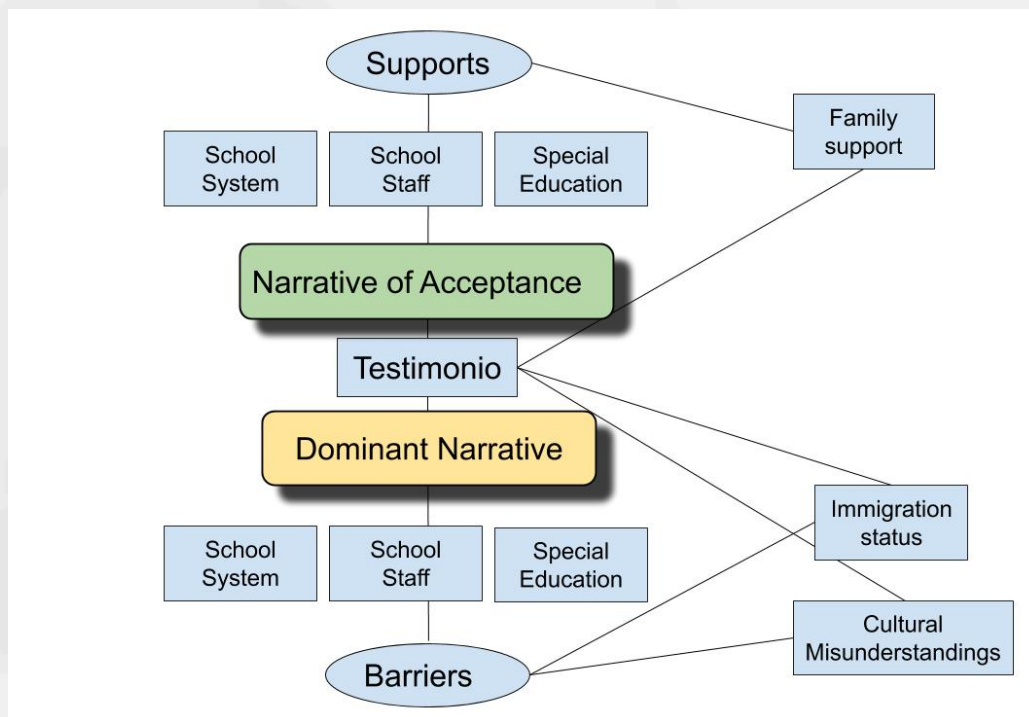
Yeah, I mean, every time you would try to explain your own culture, they would laugh. “It’s not the students’ fault”...Ok, you can’t really blame the students for that, because it’s what they get from their parents, it’s what they get from the media. For example this girl told me “you’re Mexican so you are a raper, right?”...los counselors que teníamos ahí eran gringos y no sabían cómo...reaccionar a esas cosas ellos no pueden ver en los ojos de inmigrantes. Hermano R

didn’t say “oh I’m so proud of you,” you know? she just knew it’s what you’re supposed to do.

The school personnel who saw Alejandro, Rogelio, and their family through a narrative of acceptance lens enabled Rogelio and Alejandro to be successful in school. In conjunction with the family support that they continue to have to this day, the narrative of acceptance opened up possibilities for the twins in middle school and high school and enabled them to pursue a college education.

*the counselors we had there were gringos and did not know how to...react to these things, they could not see with the eyes of immigrants.*

Following a critical race grounded methodology, I constructed the model in *Figure 5* after creating a conditional matrix (see Appendix D). This model explains how the barriers and supports in Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio* depended on whether the Dominant narrative influenced the perception of school personnel, or if the school personnel saw the twins and their family through the lens of narrative of acceptance. As this model helps identify the barriers and supports the twins experienced during their K-12 educational experience, the next chapter deals with the ways in which the effects of intersectionality affected their educational experience.



**Figure 5**

*Impact of the Narrative of Acceptance In the Twins' Testimonio*

*Note.* The narrative of acceptance influenced the supports identified by Rogelio and Alejandro. Because of this narrative, the twins felt welcome in school and found support from different teachers and staff.

## CHAPTER SIX

The Dominant narrative affected the lives of Rogelio and Alejandro throughout their K-12 educational experience. It affected the way in which teachers, staff, and students understood or addressed the twins. In order to answer the second research question of how do the counternarratives of ULWD describe the effects of the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, disability, and immigration status on their K-12 educational experiences , first, it is necessary to recognize how the Dominant narrative continues to permeate the work of teachers and other education professionals constantly.

The Dominant narrative affected the way in which people in school understood immigration, specific to the twins' *testimonio*, how they understood TPS. The Dominant narrative about TPS recipients constantly impacted the twins' lives. It did not only affect their time in school, but it also filtered unto every other aspect of their daily interactions. It was not, however evident to those who interacted with them. It was just in the background.

Through the *testimonio* of Rogelio and Alejandro, first I expose how disability becomes another part of the twins' life and how they decided to hide it because they were afraid of having too many stereotypes to constantly address. During their time in middle school and high school, Rogelio and Alejandro considered the label of having a disability to be visible and therefore it interfered with how teachers and counselors perceived them.

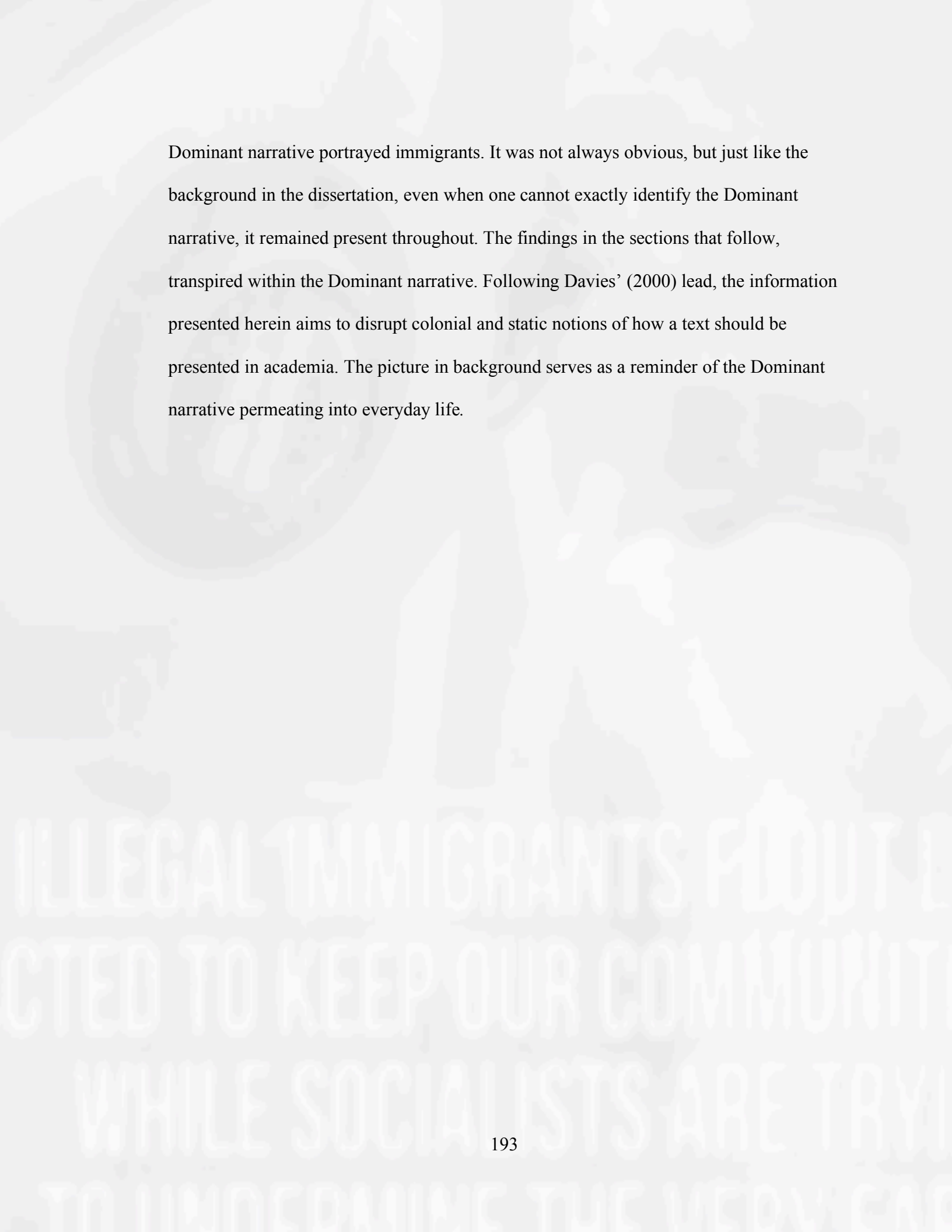
Then, I explain how the twins' ethnicity brought up their disability and their immigration status to the forefront after people had judged them because the way they looked.

Finally, I address how the narrative of acceptance mentioned in the previous chapter allowed for Rogelio and Alejandro to find a sense of belonging in high school as well as a sense of purpose. This narrative of acceptance created an opportunity for the twins to find a safe space in school. Within the confines of that safe space, Rogelio and Alejandro could just be themselves without worrying about being judged. They were welcomed for who they were and accepted without expecting anything in return. It was a space where the Dominant narrative did not have a hold on them.

### **Dominant Narrative and Intersectionality**

The picture in the dissertation background, and displayed in Figure 6, is part of the advertising for the political campaign of someone running for office this November (Facebook, 2020). The message utilizes the Dominant narrative to instill fear in the inhabitants of that particular county by portraying UIs as criminals who violate the law and undermine American society. Conversely, Alejandro, Rogelio, and their family have been in the U.S. for over 20 years working hard, furthering their education, paying taxes and social security, fully aware their status can change from one day to the next. None the less, the Dominant narrative uses fear to influence people into thinking that immigrants are dangerous.

For Rogelio and Alejandro, this reality is out of their control and yet, it influenced their day to day decisions. Their immigration status permeated everything in their lives. Rogelio and Alejandro faced barriers throughout their school experiences due to how



Dominant narrative portrayed immigrants. It was not always obvious, but just like the background in the dissertation, even when one cannot exactly identify the Dominant narrative, it remained present throughout. The findings in the sections that follow, transpired within the Dominant narrative. Following Davies' (2000) lead, the information presented herein aims to disrupt colonial and static notions of how a text should be presented in academia. The picture in background serves as a reminder of the Dominant narrative permeating into everyday life.





**Figure 6**

*The Dominant Narrative Influences Political Discourse*

### **Immigration Status**

For Rogelio and Alejandro, the Dominant narrative about immigration permeated everything in their lives. It was always in the back of their mind. Their immigration status and how the Dominant narrative influenced the representation of UIs in the country impacted the twins' daily activities, interfered with their social lives, and constantly hindered their relationships.

Like with my girlfriend, I couldn't sleep, I had trouble, cause I'm thinking "I feel like I was going to marry that girl" which I I'm very happy [about], but that's a shit creek to go through because people are going to assume "oh I'm only getting papers" and I don't want that, but that's just is going to go down. I don't want this to be a green card marriage. I just wanted to show her this is my world because she's born here, she's white. So this whole thing I'm showing her every time when we go out people look at us weird. And some people are not so kind to my predicament. -Alejandro

Our parents always told us just be polite don't make any sudden movements put your head down don't reach for anything [say] yes sir! Do as you're told. Don't make things worse because they always tell you 'you have TPS" you have to be careful. It is true because we have no rights. Because if [they] wanted to get us caught, what are we going to do? We're not going to fight cops. They have all the guns and power and they can ask for backup. What can we do? -Rogelio

For the twins, their immigration status was not always visible in school, however it was the background throughout all of their experiences growing up. The way the Dominant narrative perceives immigrants as rapists, dirty, or poor, became the backdrop to their story. Aware of how the Dominant narrative uses stereotypes to discredit immigrants, the twins continued with their daily activities. They still deal with this Dominant narrative as it emerges in their daily activities today. They know government officials don't always approve of immigrants with TPS. As mentioned

earlier, when asked about how the government officials perceive immigrants, this is what Alejandro shared.

A lot of [the president and] his companions say, “Let’s get the illegal immigrants. Let’s keep the jobs in America. They’re using our resources our social security our Healthcare. They’re using this,” while our whole family works, strived, pushed every single day so we can have our life, our simple life, we don’t take from anybody. We pay our taxes we do everything that is required.

In some cases, these stereotypes influenced their personal relationships as well. For Rogelio, it was an experience with his ex-girlfriend (a second-generation Salvadoran) that exemplified how the Dominant narrative saw them as UI’s and how anyone can adopt this narrative.

I had an ex-girlfriend and she is from El Salvador and when we started dating the mom straight-up came and told her “make sure that he’s not getting papers from you.”

She sat me down one day and said “hey I know you love me baby and I love you but what’s your intentions?” and in my head I hadn’t even thought about that. I was just lying there with a person I really liked. She’s my girlfriend. I wasn’t seeing that far but at the beginning of the relationship literally our first month that was the first bomb that dropped on me. “Hey! Are you trying to get with me just for papers?” And that like shook my world because it was the last thing in my mind.

This aspect of the Dominant narrative is difficult to explain. People of Color often fall into the fallacy that adopting the ideas from Dominant narrative will help them get ahead in the world. As explained in chapters two and three, the Dominant narrative wants those who are not part of the status quo to compare themselves to what the Dominant narrative considers the norm. By doing so, People of Color help continue the ranking system, where white people are at the top, other 'races' in the middle, and in the bottom they placed Black people. By creating this ranking system, the status quo that keeps a Dominant group on top is also maintained by those groups fighting for acceptance trying to reach the top.

Alejandro and Rogelio recognized that their immigration status was not in the forefront of their mind during elementary and middle school, they also explained that their status became evident to them during high school. Their situation was different than their peers, and they had additional obstacles when trying to complete certain activities like getting a driver's license. Once they went into high school and realized how life outside of school worked, their status as ULWD became ever-present. Even though the twins consider the U.S to be their home, they are still considered outsiders and they recognize how their life in the U.S. can be threatened by their status and their looks.

Mostly my time in high school and [later] because when I was a little kid, [I would say] I'm from El Salvador [they would go] how was it? I don't know. But referring to now having TPS it's a constant back of the mind, panic attack where like, that [TPS] is not permanent and I could be sent back there to what I consider a foreign country, not my country. I consider [the U.S.] home. So just like, that

added stress of life: you got to do your homework, you got to do this, you would have work, you want to live your life here. However, it may just be a false life, an elusive dream and you will wake up and you will be shipped up to your ‘home’ country. -Rogelio

Until I started realizing later in high school or early high school I don’t have the same advantages of my friends I don’t have they don’t have to worry about getting targeted by cops they don’t have to worry about my parents being hurt other job. -Alejandro

Both, Rogelio and Alejandro thought about their status constantly. They quickly realized that having TPS influenced many of the decisions they made regarding their education, their daily lives, and their plans for the future. TPS holders are granted in-state tuition, but they do not qualify for financial aid. While compared to other ULWD in-state tuition can be seen as an advantage, their status can change from one day to the other and college tuition is still expensive. “Say that we get deported right now. Our TPS is invalid and we have to this year [January 2021], so we’ll see...”

Additionally, for the twins, the fear of living with TPS translated into their daily life, and continues to do so today. They worried about whether or not the current administration will take away their status and what that would mean for them as people who have lived in the U.S. their whole life. Rogelio and Alejandro have lived in the U.S.

since they were four years old. Their childhood memories are here, and they know that if their status gets revoked they will be depicted as a criminals by the Dominant narrative.

Later in life, I realize how my status really affects me. I mean. I could be doing so well in school and right now. I'm in the dean's list, and I'm able to get all these grants and scholarships for my academic success, but at the same time, this is all temporary because the current administration took away TPS. It's kind of surreal knowing that growing up here and more and more assimilated and to think of going back to El Salvador [where] I'll be a tourist. Immigrant in my home country. I don't know what it is. I know I will get jacked because they'll think I'm a rich American, but knowing that I'll be never a true American because of my status. -Alejandro

I only have temporary paperwork to be here for a length of time. It is really detrimental just knowing that all my childhood is going to be taken away and it's going to be gone because of my status. But if you are a natural citizen you'll never have to deal with it, you'll never know. This is my issue ... at one point you're here living your life and not worrying about anything and then the next minute you're being told you got to get out. You can stay and be illegal and wait until we you get caught, and you will get treated as a criminal. -Rogelio

As with her children, Sra. J worried constantly about her *muchachos'* education. She understood that the law granted them access to a public K-12 education, but that

anything beyond that would be hard. Because Sra. J and Sr. C had college degrees, the expectation in their household was that their children would attend college as well. Yet, paying for college was another matter. Each child has had to finance their own way through school. All of the *muchachos* work on and off during the year to pay for their tuition.

Para mí cuando los niños estaban en la escuela era bien preocupante porque sabía que iba a llegar el momento que estos niños tenían que ir a college, y con TPS. Entonces yo ya sabía con lo que nos íbamos a encontrar. Mientras estuvieron de la elementary a la high school no había problema porque la educación la tenían que tener con TPS o sin TPS sin nada, porque la ley es así donde no tenga documentos pueden estar en la [escuela]. Pero yo desde siempre desde que los niños estaban en la escuela había la preocupación de que había graduarse pero se iban a encontrar con la Barrera de no encontrar ayuda para para seguir en College.

*(For me when the kids were in school [K-12] it was very worrying because I knew that the moment would come when our kids would have to go to college, and with TPS. So I already knew that we were going to find. While they were in elementary through high school there was no problem because they had to have an education with TPS, without TPS, or with nothing else, because the law is like that where even without documents one can go [to school]. But from the beginning, from the time the kids were in school we worried about them graduating, but more that they would face the barrier of not finding any help to go unto college.)*

Sra. J demonstrated to be interested in the education of her children. She was aware of the law, and encouraged her children to save enough money for school. Sr. C explained proudly that he would provide a place for his children to live and food for them to eat, as long as they were in school or working to finish their college education. They

both wonder what will happen now that their status is being questioned by the current administration. TPS is set to expire in January 2021 and the uncertainty adds to the family's stress about the future.

Even though having TPS was not always evident, as their *testimonio* relates, the way in which the Dominant narrative influenced the perception of TPS holders affected Rogelio and Alejandro's daily encounters with other people. In school, however, Rogelio and Alejandro described their disability as the most visible trait, and because of its visibility, it generated a different type of barrier for the twins. The way the twins faced these barriers influenced future decisions about school.

### **Disability**

Rogelio and Alejandro were candid about their disability during their *testimonio*. Both mentioned that having dyslexia was a constant obstacle they had to tackle in order to succeed in school. It was an immediate need that required the twins to work harder than their peers in order to get the grades expected from them at home.

For example, growing up in the school system I didn't have to worry about my status at all. It was hidden. It was a hidden identity that I didn't know I had until I had to integrate to the real world compared to my disability [where] all my struggles were in school. -Rogelio

In addition to having a reading disability, Alejandro struggled with the feelings the disability caused. Alejandro felt isolated and segregated because of his



disability. Instead of facing test anxiety, he started developing anxiety about being pulled out of class. He dreaded coming back into his classroom and not knowing what was happening. It has hard to get pulled out for tests. As mentioned before, during middle school having a separate setting for assessments was crucial for the twins' success, but as they moved on to higher grades it became a problem.

Alejandro explained that for some reason the teachers would not trust him to return to his class when he finished his assignments. He saw other students leave the room and go back to their classroom, but he had to stay until the period was over.

Alejandro never understood the reason behind this. But it made him want to stay in the classroom and not leave to take any more tests. In addition, his disability made the challenge of catching up with the rest of the class more difficult.

And then you realize every single class... you don't realize how long it takes and how much you struggle until you come back into the classroom that you were in, that you were taking off for one simple quiz or exam, they are already moving on, and oh crap! What are we doing? Oh I got to catch up. I got to catch up, and get quick anxiety. I hope I get this, I hope I get this, and then you realize that for every single class you may get the concept but in the tests everything reverts back to Dyslexia [to] reading. Reading the test. Always having the one simple way of proving [mastery of] the material through the test and they are written and read. And I'm, like, crap and they read the questions but you need to double read it. You need to triple read it. I need to read the problem seven, 10 times until I finally understand it and that was for every single class ... it [being pulled out]

did help me a lot, but it also make me feel like an idiot. I can't do this, I can't do this.

As Rogelio and Alejandro got closer to graduating from high school, they understood more about their disability. They began to learn how to work around their difficulty in reading. Because of the way their last IEP meetings went high school, Rogelio and Alejandro made the conscious choice of not self-disclosing their disability to receive accommodations in college. They believed that self-disclosing their disability would backfire and they would have another label to address. One that is not visible, and they can avoid, if they do not mention it.

And you add the label of disability and then I'm not only an immigrant but I also have a disability, and I don't want to have another label. [Just] because you see just an immigrant that should be doing what he's doing, but in the back of my mind I still have a disability. -Alejandro

The twins knew their disability affected their education. They were aware that it required an extra effort just to keep their grades up. They had to develop strategies to keep up with the work. Yet it took longer to complete their assignments. Their teachers are not always as understanding about the twins' disability. Rogelio describes the writing process as being a painful experience. He sometimes wondered if the teachers assume his writing is poor due to him being Latinx or if they understand that it is part of his disability.

Reading is a bitch, writing isn't fun, we know we can't write to save our lives, we have to be edited ... our teachers say hey "we love your idea but, just so you know, your writing, you really have to revise it" and we're like "we've been revising it" and I still get that constantly. Like I revised [it] and this is the best of my ability as of right now I'm trying to read to myself I'm reading in my own voice and obviously the mistakes will be there grammatically.

Additionally, by their senior year, both Rogelio and Alejandro had decided the advantages of receiving special education supports did not outweigh the obstacles presented by these services. Even Sra. J. knew it. She felt bad because the situation was not benefiting her children. She was only able to observe. Alejandro and Rogelio were now over 18 years old so she no longer needed to attend the annual IEP meetings. Because of her job schedule she saw this as an advantage, since she did not have to take any more time off to attend the meetings. But she understood that the twins were unhappy. She knew they wanted out. She just did not have enough knowledge of the system help her children out.

Yo me sentía frustrada porque ya no los quería ver a ellos, a ellos los hacían ver como niños especiales. Entonces ya ellos ya no querían estar clasificados en ese grupo.

*(I felt frustrated because I did not want to see them as, they made them seem as special kids. So then they did not want to be identified in that group anymore.)*

Alejandro and Rogelio referred to having a disability as a label, as a barrier, and as an identity in high school. Due to their accommodations and the service delivery they

described, it was evident to their classmates and teachers that they received special education. The apparent visibility of this label only served to increase the twins' feelings of not belonging and Alejandro's feelings of isolation. While the disability label became evident to the twins' classmates when Rogelio and Alejandro were pulled out for services, their ethnicity or their non-whiteness marked them as different from the moment they stepped into the school building.

### **Race/Ethnicity**

Throughout Alejandro and Rogelio's *testimonio*, the issue of race/ethnicity came up several times. The twins addressed it as something they live with constantly and they expressed how in high school they were immediately othered by white people they encountered. Rogelio and Alejandro had been looking for a place to belong. They considered the U.S. their home. They knew that their culture comes from El Salvador, and yet, they still identified with American culture. They asked for acceptance in their *testimonio*. They just wanted to be. In the end, Alejandro and Rogelio were just asking for a chance to be accepted for who they are, for their whole personhood and humanity. They were trying to find a way to fit in without compromising their identity. Hiding their disability and immigration status is tiring. They just wanted to belong.

I open this section with Alejandro's *testimonio*. As he talked, he did not break down, nor did his voice falter. He was completely aware of how the system works, how he is an outsider. As he narrated a story about his time working at a supermarket, he recalled getting berated and yelled at by a customer for someone else's mistake. He was a teenager; he could not defend himself. Fortunately, his boss intervened on his behalf. But

the episode left him shaken. Alejandro had done nothing but follow instructions and a customer had insulted him beyond anything he thought necessary. Because of his even-tempered narrative, Alejandro's description struck even harder. He was not trying to exaggerate matters. His words were enough. And although he just wanted to belong, he knew he will always be *other*. Not Salvadoran enough to go back to his home country, not white enough to find acceptance in the U.S.

Even though my home country I'm really proud of, I can't consider it my culture because this is my culture. However, I grew up in an environment with strong influence and I'm not one of here, I'm one of them I'm not considered us I'm them. So I am them and when I go there [El Salvador] they will treat me as "okay, you are not, you don't have food, come here I'll feed you, I'll give you water, I'll give you clothes." The charity of giving to others, that is a different structure because everybody there are struggling people. Only very few are able to succeed. Everybody here is "no, what's mine its mine" and people offer to give to others and I like that charity in the form of treating a human being like a human being not like a number, not like a minority, and I like a group not stigmatizing "you're them, not us."

When we worked at [Supermarket] and it was high school. And it was Thanksgiving and this woman messed up on her order and I'm looking for her order, and I'm looking, and I'm looking, and I can't find it. And I'm saying "ma'am I can't find it what's the order number" and she said "oh my goodness can you speak English? I said *this!*" Then my manager came and they took me out

of the situation because she kept hounding me “you guys are stupid! Why don’t you go back to your own country! You are ruining this area! Speak English or get out!” I got it, I was annoyed and very, very angry. But I never shared that with any of my friends because they wouldn’t get it, wouldn’t understand. So I kept it to myself.

We are not trying to be seen as other, we are who we are. You guys are pushing us away and trying to represent why we are differently because we don’t look like you, we don’t have to fully assimilate, we can live together, we don’t have to speak American [uses air quotes] to be American.

Alejandro’s *testimonio* asked for belonging, while at the same time, it described the different ways in which he has been considered *other*. Rogelio’s *testimonio* related a different experience that also described the reality of People of Color in the U.S. Often, People of Color are ignored while their white peers are addressed. In this case, Rogelio had spent a weekend caring for a young adult with disabilities. He personally felt as if he had bonded with this young adult. Yet, when he wheeled out his charge out to the family’s car, Rogelio was completely ignored by the young adult’s father.

Rogelio remembers this incident with passion. As he told this story, in complete contrast with Alejandro’s style, he used his hands to communicate and raised his voice as he related the story. However, the message was the same. Rogelio felt utterly disrespected. He did not feel he was accepted. The patient’s father talked to the white nurses who had delivered medication to his son, but he never uttered a word of thanks, or even of recognition, toward Rogelio.

Only because you have a child with a disability does not give you a big heart. Only because you deal with [your child's] struggles you don't, it doesn't, regardless of what the world thinks of them, it doesn't give you a big heart. I remember taking care of a sweet, sweet guy. He had seizures, he was still able to communicate, he was in the Spectrum, and he was just the most loving, lovely, kind soul that you will ever meet. He had great manners. He said please and thank you, and we bonded very well. When it was time for me to bring the child back to his parents, dad plainly ignoring me, he looked at my skin. Regardless of my status, you know I'm not white. It was so weird. My first reaction was I was pissed. One, I was going to talk to you, and second, I was like baffled knowing that this guy, he already couldn't acknowledge me as a human being, but yet I just took care of his kid for a whole weekend and you [he] can't accept the fact that I'm human.

I am here regardless of what you think of my skin color because, I don't know, some people think [it wasn't] racism "oh no he was just, didn't see you" but I have your kid, so first of all, he's [the child] in a wheelchair it's not like he is moving by himself. But he was talking the whole time to the nurses who were white and he didn't acknowledge me, and once I handed him off, he did not look at me at all, didn't look in my direction he [is] still plain ignoring me! Knowing that yes, I am brown. There's this racial stigma and if you clearly look it, you are targeted "that's not American." I don't even have to mention my status. If they see me. Brown. I am already assumed as a foreigner.

Because Rogelio and Alejandro want to work in the disability field when they graduate from college, this narrative continued to bother Rogelio. He wanted to believe that dealing with one type of difference makes one more susceptible to other types of differences. But as I explained earlier in this chapter, for the Dominant narrative, having a disability is not the same as being a Person of Color. For those influenced by the Dominant narrative, being a Person of Color is in itself being different, complicating matters even more for a Person of Color who happens to have a disability.

The twins realized that their ethnicity, immigration status, and disability compounded the barriers they faced in school and their personal lives. These different identities or labels affected what they wore, who they talked to, and how they studied. In the next section, I bring these three aspects together through the *testimonio* of Rogelio and Alejandro. Similar to Alejandro, Rogelio simply asked to be treated with the dignity a human being deserves. Yet again, just like Alejandro, he recognized that because of the color of his skin, and where he comes from, it is a hard task for many people in the U.S. to see him as an equal.

### **Dealing With The Labels**

ULWD face daily discrimination for different reasons every day. Rogelio and Alejandro understood that their labels compounded the way in which they were perceived as different. From the beginning of this process, both Rogelio and Alejandro mentioned treating individuals with compassion, and respecting others' humanity as part of their



daily lives. Even some of the narratives from their *testimonio* showed how they did not react in anger toward people who insulted them or made racist comments toward them: “first of all, props for having American pride, I guess.” They also understood that in high school their way is not how people treat each other. By the time they were seniors, Alejandro and Rogelio just wanted to put their head down, do their work, and graduate. When they graduated high school, in order to be successful, they tried to hide part of themselves. Because of the labels placed on them by the Dominant narrative, being a Latinx immigrant with no legal status, and having a disability, they knew that in order to succeed they had to work harder than many just to get the same amount of work done, just to get the same amount of recognition.

You know, we’ll never bring our IEP to college. Hey we are [going] to go without any accommodations regardless of struggle. You know? You learn. With struggle comes some type of lesson so we still have a disability and it still impact us every day.

The twins do not like the idea of being portrayed as an “ideal immigrant.” They know that because of the barriers they face, and the fact that they both made it through high school, there is undue pressure on them to keep performing at a certain level in order to meet the expectations set by society in order to be accepted.

They said “I need you to apply to the accelerated Master’s and now I found out what schools will look at, that there is no purpose for it. Why are they like this? All the teachers, even the counselors the few times I went, “so are you going to

get your accelerated Master's?" and then I was like, "oh I guess," "oh it will really look good in your resume, it would really look good in the college application it will really look good" and I was like "I guess." Now I am stressing myself, "I got to do this!" but I don't know, I'm working close to 32 if not 40 hours a week and this is the time when Rogelio and I are working we are working at [Supermarket]...so like I'm stressing myself, killing myself to do that [meet expectations] and then I find out it's pointless. how come nobody told me this? [We are] portrayed to the image of a succeeding immigrant. Enough to say we go above and beyond, especially for Spanish immigrants "oh he's going to college so he's being well educated, that is the type of immigrant we want in this nation."

I'm barely passing through it, I'm struggling. I have the same challenges as anybody else, just a little bit different because I will have to pay for my college. [So] I have to be financially responsible, make sure I have to save up. Just living life, but my disability puts different burdens upon me that most people will not be aware of.

But the in the background, status wise, I'm not sure this is permanent. I'm living up to the standard that I want to accomplish to myself, however their standard, [because the status] I have may not be permanent.

During our *pláticas*, I shared with Rogelio and Alejandro that my mom was born in Cuba and that in fact, most of my mother's side of the family was Cuban. They asked me why I did not tell people I was Cuban, and I explained that I was born and raised in

Mexico, and although I loved my Cuban heritage, it was too complicated to explain to people in the U.S. how I was Mexican-Cuban-American. So I simply left it at being born in Mexico. Both Rogelio and Alejandro understood this, my explanation of why I chose only my Mexican background to describe myself resonated with them. It was what they did about their disability. It was an additional label they stopped disclosing after high school. It complicated matters and made their peers and teachers see them in a different way. They also had similar experience when talking about El Salvador. As Alejandro explained “even though my home country, I’m really proud of, I can’t consider it my culture because this [American culture] is my culture.” For them being from El Salvador was a sign of pride, but it also left them between worlds. Although they know they would not be considered Salvadoran if they went back, they embraced it as their identity because it was easier to explain, and something to hold on to.

Neither Rogelio nor Alejandro liked having labels. For them, these labels only focused on what they could not do and limited their world. By focusing on labels, they explained, people stop looking at others as humans. The twins’ lives became a merit system in which certain labels increased their status among their peers, while others decreased it.

I try not to put attention to them [labels] due to you put these labels on me it's when I stop looking as a person. I'm already stigmatized with the label of being a succeeding immigrant but once you put my status in it “oh it’s a TPS recipient going to college, oh wow, that’s even better.”

When you look at my disability you're like "okay you have a disability" and you still have to do the same amount of work, you have to still do that. All these labels only attribute to what I cannot do. What the rest of the people can do, I guess I can do whatever else can do, but it's a different process how I go on achieving it.

Neither Rogelio or Alejandro expressed they enjoyed their time in high school. During their time there, both experienced discrimination by peers, teachers, and other staff members. This discrimination was compounded because it came as a result of three different identities. Rogelio and Alejandro grew tired of the school routine and looked forward to the day they could leave.

The labels the twins had to live with during their time in school were defined by the school culture, which in turn was influenced by the Dominant narrative. It got to the point that they decided they would rather go to college without accommodations than to deal with an additional label while in school. In the twins' case, they were already "*dos goles abajo* (two goals down)" as their mom would tell say. Sra. J told all of her *muchachos* several times that they needed to be aware about how the odds were stacked against them. "*Ustedes son Latinos, y son hombres* (you are Latinos, and you are men)." The twins and their family understood the effect of having to address more than one label constantly. They were tired of it, and they tried to hide their labels.

They also knew, however, that some teachers did not operate in this manner. Even with the Dominant narrative influencing the way in which the twins interacted at school, during the last phase of the analysis, instances in which both twins felt welcomed

and accepted emerged from Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio*. These instances were created by teachers who saw their students as humans first, concentrating on their strengths, and addressing their' needs. The teachers did not focus on highlighting the differences of their students. Instead, they created spaces where labels were unimportant, spaces where the twins felt safe to be themselves.



**Figure 7**

*The Narrative of Acceptance Provides Safe Spaces for the Twins*

*Note:* The Narrative of acceptance created a space where the Twins were shielded from the Dominant narrative. In these spaces, the twins felt they belonged and realized what they wanted to do once they graduated high school.

## **Belonging in High School**

Both Rogelio and Alejandro understood the importance of belonging in high school. Although they both disliked their time there, they did remember certain spaces, teachers, and classes which they felt influenced them positively. Rogelio found his place in the wrestling team. His coach opened doors for him academically and personally. The coach was the first one to lead Rogelio toward his decision to become an educator when he asked him if he would like to become a Teachers' Assistant for his wife (who was also a teacher in the school). I had asked Alejandro and Rogelio to bring a memento that helped them describe their time in high school. Rogelio chose his wrestling plaque. He talked about it with pride, not because he was a wrestling champion, but because he was proud of being part of that group in high school. Wrestling became an outlet for the twins, but for Rogelio it also became a home. It was a place where he wanted to be, and he would volunteer his time to help out because he was accepted.

Our beloved coach, who really liked us a lot. [this plaque] It's supposed to represent our effort and achievement as being a wrestler. We were horrible we were never state champs it says my overall record was 10-11 so I lost so more than I won. But regardless of the lack of good we were... that was the first sense of having a home thing, you know, a culture inside the school, because ... we didn't hang out with the Spanish people and we can hang out particular crowd that we would see in a daily basis in classes. We immigrated to the band people/the IEP population or but it [wrestling] was a place we found our home.

Like for most immigrant families, in high school once you're able to work, and luckily we were TPS we were able to work I couldn't finish my senior year as a wrestler so my coach gave me an offer the saying hey on your days off because he knew I was working a lot to bring income to our household they let me be a coach. So in I my senior year I was able to come in there and Coach the JV team and be there helping them out getting disciplined and getting ready for Varsity but yeah it a big part from high school that influenced me.

For Rogelio, wrestling became a haven, but it was not the only place where the twins felt they belonged. Alejandro and Rogelio found a home in the Spanish for fluent speakers class. For them, specifically for Alejandro, the Spanish classroom became a place where he did not have to hide who he was. He did not have to fight all of his labels. His teacher welcomed him there and provided him with what he needed: acceptance.

We were culture shocked because these are the actual ELL students, that's their favorite class because now they can actually do Spanish and it comes so natural to them but at the same time they're here trying to speak English and we were surprised at how Gringo we were. At first they thought we were Spanish [from Spain] because of how we spoke Spanish. They didn't even realize that we had a lisp, they thought we were really [from Spain] didn't know we're from Salvador. At the same time, we got to know new people and getting Spanish pride from being able to speak with them and hang out with them.

...She [Our teacher] would call you out, She would say you're ugly. Your mama so ugly she made you ugly. She would drag you...she would. But she did it out of love... we didn't feel in a traditional class... it wasn't a like any other classroom...it was a lot more... [pause] homey.

The white background throughout different sections within the dissertation represents the space where Alejandro and Rogelio felt safe from the Dominant narrative. It was a place where their labels were not important. Their whole person was accepted, and there was no judgement about any of their visible or invisible traits. In the Spanish class specifically, Rogelio and Alejandro felt at home.

The twins were surprised by how easily they were accepted by their peers and their teacher even if they did not speak Spanish as well as the other students. In this room something else happened, as they revealed in their *testimonio*, the twins developed a deeper sense of pride for being Latinx. Rogelio explained that the discrimination and lack of acceptance outside the Spanish classroom “maybe subconsciously drove me to succeed and be it [successful immigrant], prove that I’m worthy of something.”

Outside these spaces of belonging, their immigration status, disability, and ethnicity had a negative effect on Alejandro and Rogelio. The Dominant narrative influenced staff and peers into devaluing the twins’ language, ignoring them because of their disability, and discriminating against them because of where they were from. The Dominant narrative made them feel isolated from their peers, looking for a place to belong. Those teachers who enacted a narrative of acceptance



changed the way Alejandro and Rogelio saw school. By creating spaces where the twins felt welcomed, these staff members helped Rogelio and Alejandro develop a deeper sense of self, a sense of belonging, and instilled in them a purpose of creating that same atmosphere for others in the future.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

In this final chapter, after briefly restating the research questions and the methodology used; I present a summary of my findings, connections between the findings and current literature, provide a recommendation for educators, and address future directions for this work. Further, I connect the dissertation findings back to my epistemology and ontology, and I present Alejandro and Rogelio's vision for the future. Finally, I end with a challenge; a small call to action for teachers who are committed to eliminate the systemic barriers ULWD and other Students of Color face in schools every day.

The research questions guiding this dissertation were: (1) how do collective narratives by ULWD inform a model for understanding the types of systemic, cultural, or environmental barriers and support systems that ULWD experience in educational settings and (2) how do counternarratives of ULWD describe the effects of the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, disability, and immigration status on their educational experience K-12? In order to answer these questions, I collected the *testimonios* from two ULWD, their parents, and their siblings willing to share their K-12 educational experiences

Traditionally, *testimonio* is a type of counternarrative that conveys the experiences of people who experienced some sort of injustice or persecution in Latin

American countries. Recently, however, it has been used to center the experiences of Latinx in the United States (Burciaga, 1997). *Testimonios* honor the whole humanity of participants and the co-construction of knowledge, honor the experiential knowledge of the participant in the creation of a narrative, and aim to reach across ideological divides with the hope of working with those in power to find a solution that honors and respects the *testimonio* participants (Beverley, 1989). It is important to remember that *testimonio* is not a way to empathize with those in the margins if one is not marginalized. It is a tool to understand the reality of these who have been oppressed in order to find a way forward that addresses the inequities between oppressed and oppressor (Anzaldúa, 1987; Valdes, 1996; Zembylas, 2013).

For this dissertation I focused on the *testimonio* of two ULWD, Rogelio and Alejandro, their parents, Sra. J and Sr. C, and their two older brothers. By engaging Rogelio and Alejandro as co-creators, I was able to establish a relationship with them based on trust and dig deep into their K-12 experiences. As a result of this relationship, I was granted access to their family in order to have a *plática* with them as well. This *plática* allowed me to understand Alejandro and Rogelio's background and see the reality of how their immigration status affected them beyond their time at school. Because of that *plática*, I was also able to connect with Rogelio and Alejandro on a deeper level. I was no longer just some researcher they had met at school. I was now a guest in their home, and as such, our relationship grew stronger.

After Rogelio, Alejandro, and I analyzed the data collectively, identifying central themes from their *testimonio* and deciding whether these themes could be construed as a

barrier or as a support, I went back to the data to identify patterns that could help answering the research questions. Following the Critical Race Grounded Theory approach by Malagón et al. (2009), I created a several iterations of a conditional matrix. Through this matrix I was able to uncover the findings previously addressed in chapters five and six. I provide a summary of these findings next.

### **Answering the Research Questions**

#### **How do collective narratives by ULWD inform a model for understanding the types of systemic, cultural, or environmental barriers and support systems that ULWD experience in educational settings?**

In their *testimonio*, Alejandro and Rogelio identified three main themes that impacted their education and their daily life: (1) immigration status, (2) cultural misunderstandings as barriers, and (3) family support as a support. They also identified three themes as barriers and supports during their time in school: (1) the school system, (2) school personnel, and (3) their special education services.

The first three themes were part of the twins' everyday life. From the moment they arrived to the U.S., Sra. J and Sr. C focused on providing every educational opportunity they could afford to their *muchachos*. This often led to working two or three jobs at the time and leaving the children with neighbors or their grandmother when she was visiting.

The twins' immigration status interfered with their daily lives but it was not apparent until they entered high school. However, even today their status is in peril. TPS has been extended to January 2021, but it is unclear what will happen after that (USCIS,

n.d.). In addition to their immigration status, the twins also identified cultural misunderstandings as a barrier. For them, not being able to share their culture or their food with their peers for fear of being judged became tedious and often made establishing relationships harder. It was also apparent that the Dominant narrative influenced their immigration status and cultural misunderstandings into being considered barriers.

As a Latinx male who worked in special education for almost a decade, I understood how Alejandro and Rogelio identified themes as the school barriers. It was, however, more difficult to understand how they identified them as support. It was especially difficult when the twins identified the same special education accommodation (e.g., separate setting for assessments) as a support in some instances, and as a barrier in other instances.

I created a conditional matrix that helped provide meaning to the collective analysis. For the twins, the supports and the barriers depended on how they were perceived by those around them. When they were seen through Dominant narrative lens as less than their peers, as deficient in some way, they identified a barrier. Conversely, when they felt accepted for who they were and held to high standards, they identified a support. These thematic barriers and supports led to identifying how the influence of the Dominant narrative impacted the twins' educational experience. The barriers were always under the influence of the Dominant narrative. The supports, however, had a different influence. In this dissertation I call it narrative of acceptance.

As explained throughout chapter two, the Dominant narrative promotes the superiority of one group over the others. It creates a dualistic approach to life where if

something is not within the norm it is seen as deficient or abnormal. Through this narrative of acceptance, Rogelio and Alejandro identified their supports because they were accepted for who they were, in their complex personhood (Gordon, 2008). In these instances, the twins found the tools to be successful in high school.

**How does the *testimonio* of ULWD describe the effects of the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, disability, and immigration status on their K-12 educational experiences?**

As with the previous question, the Dominant narrative played an integral part of the analysis for this question. For the twins, the Dominant narrative was evident every day in school. Teachers discriminated against them and saw them as less because of their status and their disability. Peers often berated Alejandro and Rogelio for speaking Spanish in the hallway, made comments referring to MS-13, or being “rapers” because they were Latinx. Because of the Dominant narrative, Rogelio and Alejandro learned to hide any label that impacted their daily life. During high school, the twins’ immigration status was not visible, and even though it was constantly in the back of their mind, they would not reveal they had TPS to anyone. Even when they graduated high school, the increased discrimination they felt due to their status, disability, and ethnicity prompted the twins not to disclose their disability to university services. They decided that they would rather work harder than have to explain more labels, or try to fit into different boxes because of how they were labeled. Being half Cuban-half Mexican, I understood trying to fit into boxes, being labeled, and being seen only as that label. During our *pláticas*, I shared my background with Rogelio and Alejandro. I understood trying to

keep an identity private. I shared with them about being Mexican and Cuban and what that looked like for me in the U.S. today. This is part of my reflection on being labeled and hiding my identity to better fit in.

My mom and her side of the family is Cuban. This makes me half Cuban. But I was born in Mexico. I am both. And I am proud of both. But it has been so hard to shine a positive light into being Mexican, that I don't even want to start talking about my Cuban background.

I know how hard it is to deny who you are in order to fit into a box. I left Mexico partly because I was not happy to fit into the boxes prescribed for me there. I was tired. I looked toward the U.S. as a place where you can be anyone you want to. I believed in the American Dream. I already spoke English so I thought I was halfway there. Boy, was I wrong. Here I had to fight against the stereotype of being Latinx or Mexican. No way I was going to explain I was Cuban as well and deal with more stereotyping. Funny enough, even though I do not advertise my Cuban side, the dish I am most proud of cooking is *Frijoles Cubanos*.

As the Dominant narrative impacted the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, disability, and immigration status for Rogelio and Alejandro, there was another finding that emerged from the analysis. Those teachers who engaged in a narrative of acceptance created a safe space for Alejandro and Rogelio. In this space the twins finally found a place in high school. Specifically, Rogelio and Alejandro's Spanish teacher created a safe place for them. As the twins mentioned, her classroom was a "homey" place where they

felt welcomed even though they felt they were different from the rest of the students in the class.

The supports Alejandro and Rogelio received through the narrative of acceptance and within these safe spaces, encouraged them to do the same for others. Having these spaces and these supports helped them decide what they wanted to do when they graduated high school. They went from not knowing what they would do after high school to creating a career path with the end goal of becoming teachers.

### **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, I connect the finding from Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio* to existing research and extend the literature on ULWD. I also provide ways in which educators can continue to support ULWD in schools. First, I reiterate specific findings related to the instruction of students with disabilities; I address the common themes identified in Chapter Two, and how they were addressed throughout Alejandro, Rogelio and their family's *testimonio*. Then, I explain why the narrative of acceptance can be a step in the right direction. Finally, I revisit the different ways in which the Dominant narrative was identified by Alejandro and Rogelio in their *testimonio* while connecting it to existing literature.

### **Direct Instruction**

Direct Instruction is an explicit instructional approach based on scripted lessons. It separates major skills into smaller sub skills. By separating the skills in smaller pieces, it provides the students with ample opportunities to practice the sequence of steps needed to achieve mastery and moving to the next skill (Viel-Ruma et al., 2010). Rogelio and



Alejandro mentioned that when they received small group phonics instruction, they finally understood what they needed to do in order to read. It was during small-group specialized instruction in reading and in math that they learned the concepts needed to make it through school. Conversely, the twins agreed that they were not taught writing in the same way. They wished that they would have received writing instruction in a smaller group.

### **ELL and Disability**

Rogelio and Alejandro received ESL services during their first years of elementary school. Once they entered fourth grade, however, they were exited from ESL and identified as having a disability. Leaving a program before entering another one is not uncommon practice (Hoover et al., 2018). In fact, it is often the process by which EBs are identified as having a disability (DCL, 2016). Instead of trying to identify whether a student has a disability when they first enter school, administrators wait to discard the possibility that language is the only barrier interfering with the students' education. By law, when EBs are identified as having a disability, their IEP needs to address how their language learning will be addressed through the IEP (DCL, 2015, Hoover et al., 2018; Lavín et al., 2020).

After our last *plática*, Alejandro shared with me their IEP from 4<sup>th</sup> grade, the first year they were identified as having a disability. Even though 4<sup>th</sup> grade was the last year the twins were considered EBs, their IEP did not include any mention of their EB status. School teachers left blank how they would help address the language goals for the student (Figure 8). Rogelio shared that he still felt his English was not great and he felt that he

was always behind because of this, “You know, my English wasn’t perfect back then. I mean I could comprehend a lot but it wasn’t perfect it wasn’t fluency.” Intersectionality makes things harder for ULWD. Yet, the school failed to see how his English language skills in conjunction with his disability, impacted his education.

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP)  
FACTORS FOR IEP TEAM CONSIDERATION

Student Name: Alejandro [REDACTED] DOB: [REDACTED] Number: [REDACTED]

Complete items 5-8, as appropriate to the student's needs. If blank, the items were not applicable to the student.

1. In the case of a student whose behavior impedes his or her learning or that of others, consider, when appropriate, strategies, including positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports to address that behavior.

2. In the case of a student with limited English proficiency, consider the language needs of the child as such needs relate to the child's IEP.

**THIS QUESTION NEEDED TO BE ADDRESSED BY IEP TEAM**

7. In the case of a student who is blind or has a visual impairment, provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP team determines, after an evaluation of the student's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the student's future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the student; and

8. In the case of a student who is deaf or hard of hearing, consider the student's language and communication needs, opportunities for direct communications with peers and professional personnel in the student's language and communication mode, academic level, and full range of needs, including opportunities for direct instruction in the student's language and communication mode.

**Figure 8**

*Alejandro's IEP.*

*Note.* The question about EB was left blank when the IEP members created Alejandro’s plan. By law, IEP team members must address this question of the student receives ESL services.

### **Racialization of Disabilities**

The duality of the themes identified by Rogelio and Alejandro in their *testimonio* reiterates the point Artiles (2013) makes about racialization of disability. It is not that accommodations are ineffective for ULWD and other Students of Color. It is that because of the Dominant narrative, when white students need special education, they are seen as an exception to the norm, they are expected to outgrow their disability and exit the special education program. With ULWD, however, educators often see them as fitting into a disability category from the beginning and do not expect them to exit. Educators even stop looking for signs of improvement that may signal a ULWD's exit from the special education program (Artiles, 2013). For Rogelio and Alejandro, when the accommodations are used in compliance with the Dominant narrative, they became educational barriers. As one of their teachers mentioned during an IEP meeting "Oh, you will need it [accommodation], you'll see."

### **Fear of Authorities and Deportation**

As the twins grew older, and progressed through middle and high school, they realized how different their lives were from their U.S.-born peers. The narrative of Sra. J handing Rogelio and Alejandro their passports and extra money in case something went wrong during the twins wrestling camp, shows the state of anxiety in which Sra. J lived. Sr. C. also mentioned being scared of trying to visit El Salvador for fear of being sent home and the twins expressed concerns about being pulled over and being powerless if an officer chose to disregard their TPS and decided to begin deportation proceedings. Alvarado (2004) mentioned that for parents of ULWD the barriers from being

undocumented, overshadowed the barriers they faced because of their child's disability. Similarly, Rogelio and Alejandro expressed that their immigration status influenced their lives inside and outside of school, while their disability only affected them within a K-12 setting.

### **Deficit Perspective**

The twins' *testimonio* also identified how the deficit perspective influenced the way educators grouped students and saw them as less than their peers. One example of this perspective in special education is the description of Kim and Linan-Thompson (2013) about EBs with disabilities: "Many ELLs have low self-efficacy and a passive attitude despite their potential" (p. 233). This view essentializes EBs and blames them for not succeeding, instead of focusing on systemic reasons that affect the EBs' achievement. Responsibility for poor educational outcomes, for lack of full participation and involvement, and even for weakening the school and the community is often placed squarely on the students (their parents, their cultures, and their advocates). The educational outcomes of the school are viewed as the product of choices students and/or their families make, not on systemic inequities that favor one racial/ethnic group over another.

When "culture" (e.g., race, ethnicity, language, music, food) is seen as other or exotic, it loses its real value as legitimate (Smith, 2012). The Dominant narrative automatically dismisses it to the margins as peculiar, quaint, or strange (Artiles, 2013). It turns whole ways of knowing, traditions, and cultures into a 30-minute showcase. As the Dominant narrative repeats its message of superiority over other cultures and ethnic

groups, it gets a hold of second generation immigrants who did not have the opportunity of experiencing a society where people who look like them are successful. Alejandro refers to this when he talks about not knowing the beauty of his culture as his parents do.

I still refer myself as Salvadoran because I am, but I don't do much of the culture. I know how to cook the food I know how to speak, barely, the language I guess but just I don't know the full history, I don't know that dances, I don't know what my parents know of it the beauty of it.

Again, Alejandro's *testimonio* echoes findings in existing literature. In her book, *Subtracting Schooling*, Angela Valenzuela (1999) explained that first generation Mexican immigrants understood that in their country of origin there were successful people who looked like them and this knowledge gave them purpose and drive, unlike second generation Mexican Americans who had no positive role models that looked like them.

Unlike Mexican American youth, immigrants have had the experience of knowing high status professionals (e.g., doctors, lawyers, and engineers) who are Mexican. Thus [their] *national* identity contributes to the self-fulfilling expectations evident in both positive school orientations and high academic performance (p.14).

### ***Myth of Parents not Engaged***

Sra. J and Sr. C were extremely proud of all of their *muchachos*. When they first arrived to the U.S. and they felt welcomed in their children's school, they attended committee meetings and participated in other school functions trying to put forth their

best effort. Additionally, Sra. J and Sr. C were well informed of their *muchachos'* right to a public education K-12. Achola and Greene (2016) found exhaustive evidence to debunk the myth of Latinx parents not being engaged. What Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio* also shows, is that there are barriers that interfere with ULWD parent participation. Sra. J had to work constantly and could not afford to go to school and attend meetings she barely understood. She went anyway. She sat through the meeting, and made a concerted effort to show her children that he cared. It may be that the school did not see this effort, but for Sra. J, however, the important thing was to show her children that she cared about them, not show the school she cared about her children.

### ***Discrimination and Language Barrier***

One of the first things Sra. J mentioned about the second elementary school her children attended was that she did not feel welcome and that there was a language barrier between the staff and her. "Pero no me sentía con aquella confianza de llegar hoy voy a encontrar, me sentía cohibida.... Yo siempre tenía que estar pidiendo que tradujera y esperar que llegara" (*But I did not feel confident on just going to school, I felt intimidated...I always had to ask for someone to translate and wait until they got there*).

Sra. J's narrative echoes the findings from Alvarado (2004) and Francis et al. (2018) on how Latinx parents are discriminated against because of their lack of English, and how in turn this exacerbates the lack of communication between school and home.

### **Dominant Narrative**

The findings from Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio* are supported by previous research on how the Dominant narrative is pervasive in our society and as result,

pervasive in our education system as well (Ladson-Billings, 2017; Moll et al., 1992). In the schools, the Dominant narrative continues to influence school staff into believing that ULWD cannot learn, their families are unsupportive, and that they are genetically inferior to mainstream American students (Dolmage, 2011; Dunn, 1988).

This Dominant narrative is so pervasive that it can be adopted by People of Color without noticing it, perpetuating a colonial ranking system in which the closer a minority behaves as to the Dominant group, the higher their standing in the ranking becomes (Castro-Gomez, 2007; Mignolo, 2012).

During my first years as a special education teacher, I was influenced by the Dominant narrative. I shared this story with Rogelio and Alejandro during our *pláticas* as well. I wanted them to understand the driving force behind this study. I now share a written version of my own *testimonio*. It is important to understand how easy one can become a gatekeeper in school and the importance of identifying the influence of the Dominant narrative in order to counter it with a narrative of acceptance in schools.

When I was a special education teacher, I got used to a certain type of students (Brown and Black) coming to me for special education services. I did not seek them out, nor did I label them as having a disability. Where I lived, Students of Color were “achieving” at lower rates than white students. I often saw inequalities in the way students were identified for special education services, but I always blamed it on biased assessments and did not give any more thought to the matter.

One day, two new students came to my school, Ali (pseudonym) went to first grade and Samara (also a pseudonym) went to fourth grade. They both were Students of Color. Without knowing anything about them, I expected them to become part of my caseload in the following weeks (whenever their IEPs showed up at our school). I did not know anything about either student. I only saw the color of their skin.

By the end of their first week both students were excelling in their class. Ali was reading at a second-grade level. His teacher who was Black, recognized his strengths immediately and recommended him for the “nurturing” reading group led by the Gifted specialist. Samara was in the fourth-grade class where I co-taught in one of the math classes. After a few days I realized she was on top of the class, and the mistake I had made when I assumed she would end up in my resource room. Afterward, regardless of how much I tried to tell my co-teacher that this girl was brilliant in math she would always end up in my small group for instruction.

I went over my co-teacher’s head, and talked to the Gifted specialist about the student. The student was placed in the higher math group in a matter of days. I wanted to be mad at my co-teacher but I had also made the same mistake. I let my own bias dictate where I thought these kids should be in school. I saw the color of their skin and assumed they would be low achievers. I was ashamed of myself. To this day I still carry that shame with me. It reminds me of how easy it is to be



influenced by the Dominant narrative and become a gatekeeper. It reminds me that I don't want to do that ever again.

The Dominant narrative that influenced my actions then, continues to affect ULWD and other Students of Color inside and outside of school today. As I explained in Chapter Six, politicians running for office are employing the Dominant narrative as a scare tactic to influence public into voting for them. As seen in Chapter Two, the Dominant narrative garners strength and validity through constant repetition regardless of the truth (Castro-Gómez, 2007, Chavez, 2013). Educators must be able to recognize the Dominant narrative in their daily lives and counter it.

### **Narrative of Acceptance**

During the third phase of the analysis, I identified a counter stance to the Dominant narrative that I called narrative of acceptance. I base the name of Bennett's (1998) definition of acknowledging and respecting difference as a necessary human condition without value judgement. As Anzaldúa (1987) mentioned in her book, adopting a critical counter stance is not sustainable and it is not a lifestyle. Rogelio and Alejandro found a place where they felt safe in high school, not because of their teacher's critical stance, but because of their acceptance. George Noblit (1994), and later Angela Valenzuela (1999) posit something similar when they talk about ethics of care, and how students need their teachers to genuinely care for their education. In the field of religion Eck (2007) refers to acceptance as pluralism, where the challenge is not to erase

differences, but to “to discover ways of living, connecting, relating, arguing, and disagreeing in a society of differences” (p. 745).

To the Dominant narrative, a narrative of acceptance could appear to be a counter-stance. A narrative of acceptance, however, is a path away from the confrontation with the Dominant narrative and its dualistic way of knowing of right/wrong, normal/abnormal, abled/disabled. The narrative of acceptance moves away from this stance/counter-stance location to create an alternate way of moving forward. Therein lies its importance. Grounded on a critical perspective, and identifying racist systems of oppression, this narrative of acceptance can be a way to move forward (and away) from the yelling match across the river.

When I began this dissertation, I expected to identify Rogelio and Alejandro’s *testimonio* as counternarratives to the Dominant narrative. I believed that their narratives would demonstrate how to adopt a counter-stance to the status quo and provide examples of how to achieve these counter-stances. What emerged from the twins’ *testimonio* was more than that. In their *testimonio*, Alejandro and Rogelio identified ways in which they had moved past the counter-stance to the Dominant narrative. Through the collective analysis and the use of the critical grounded methodology (Malagón et al. 2009), I identified that by adopting a narrative of acceptance, one can move past the counter-stance and onto a different future.

Chapters Five and Six provided an outline on how this narrative of acceptance can be taught passed on to teachers. Unlike Rogelio and Alejandro’s teachers who did not adopt a critical stance, I believe the first step is to introduce a critical perspective to

identify the ways in which the Dominant narrative perpetuate systemic racism and inequities in order to maintain the status quo. Then, teachers must identify ways in which they can change the dominant narrative into a narrative of acceptance. The next step is to encourage teachers to provide spaces where students feel welcomed and shielded from the Dominant narrative. Finally, educators should focus on encouraging students to find ways to continue the work when they graduate high school.

### **Recommendations for Educators**

As a special education teacher, I often heard administrators and district officials ramble about diversity, equity, and achievement. However, very few of these conversations addressed racism as systemic and entrenched in the school system. The following recommendations begin by addressing the Dominant narrative. In order to move the work forward, educators must recognize this narrative in their lives, identify ways in which they have been complicit, and more importantly, identify how to change the narrative for their students.

#### **Adopt a Critical Perspective to Identify the Dominant narrative**

Based on *testimonio*, other types of counternarratives, and using Fals-Bordas's (2002) *Historia doble de la costa* as an example, educators can guide their peers through an exercise to identify the Dominant narrative. Because *testimonio* and other counternarratives recognize systemic barriers and understand the reality of those oppressed or in the margins, these counternarratives provide insight into the way ULWD and other Students of Color perceive school settings as unfriendly or racist without pointing fingers at individual teachers, but encouraging teachers into action. It is crucial

that the process is grounded in a critical stance from the beginning so the process is not co-opted, or watered down by the Dominant narrative in an effort to maintain the status quo. If not, instead of *testimonios* highlighting systemic injustice and as a call to action, they can be seen as reasons to feel sorry for students, or ice breakers teacher use just to get to know their minority students better.

### **Change the Dominant Narrative Into a Narrative of Acceptance**

Next, identify areas in the school system, building, and classroom where the Dominant narrative is pervasive, and ways in which it can be changed into a narrative of acceptance. This dual narrative exercise can be used to further the discussions about race and racism during staff professional development workshops. By understanding the effects of the Dominant narrative within the education system, we can move forward and address its influence in students' performance, achievement, or behavior. This analysis cannot be done without understanding systemic racism and discrimination toward People of Color. By trying to skip this step, teachers fall into the fallacy of colorblindness (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), or of becoming saviors (Flynn et al., 2009). It cannot be accomplished by a 30-minute culture night, nor by adopting what I call a *siestas* and *fiestas* mentality (i.e., sprinkle a few cultural holidays throughout the schoolyear and done).

Acceptance does not mean erasing or (*e*)*racing* (Carbado, 2002) the students' culture either. It means understanding people's lives are not straightforward and being able to respect their complexity and different meanings (Gordon, 2008, Tuck, 2009). As Alejandro mentioned, he considered himself Salvadoran, and even though he did not

know the beauty of his culture, he understood his identity was complicated. Yet, the Dominant culture only sees Alejandro as an immigrant, lumped with all other Latinx immigrants and in many instances his culture and identity get challenged, ignored, or (*e*)*raced* when he is called a “dirty Mexican.”

### **Create Counterspaces**

Counterspaces refer to ‘spaces’ or ‘areas’ that ULWD and other Students of Color carve out in spaces influenced by the Dominant narrative, where they develop a sense of belonging and self (Yosso et al., 2009). This concept has been interpreted in different ways by scholars around the country. Kris Gutiérrez, (2008) uses the term third space to identify a liminal space where both the Dominant culture and the marginal cultures interact on the same level and benefit Students of Color or as *refugios* (Lavín & Mock Muñoz de Luna, 2019), places situated in “the margins, [where] we work together to disrupt the dominant narrative” (p. 31).

Rogelio and Alejandro were active participants in their Spanish class and with their wrestling team. Both places provided the twins spaces where they felt safe, welcomed, and accepted. The Spanish class in particular became a *refugio* for the twins. In spite of their differences, the twins felt welcomed there. Their Dominant narrative-identified labels were not factors influencing their acceptance in the Spanish class. Additionally, Rogelio and Alejandro identified a sense of purpose in these spaces. They decided they would do their best to recreate this experience for more people in the future.

### **Continue the Work**

There are scholars across the U.S. and the world whose anti-racist work can be used to dismantle racist and oppressive systems that keep ULWD and other Students of Color in the margins. I believe that Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy (2017) can be used in this endeavor. Ladson-Billings' work has been misunderstood, co-opted, and discarded by the Dominant narrative as a failed attempt to provide equity for Students of Color (Alim et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017). Ladson-Billings mentioned that following the three original recommendations from her culturally relevant pedagogy (i.e., making instruction relevant to students' lives, becoming competent in a different culture, and disrupting the status quo) educators can make an impact in classrooms across the nation (2017). The problem arises when teachers do not adopt a critical perspective before adopting these steps. When this is the case, the Dominant narrative permeates the classroom culture and the teachers' perceptions, placing the blame on the students' shoulders once again. Except this time, the teachers can say they tried, and therefore the lack of achievement by ULWD and other Students of Color is not the teacher's fault (Flynn et al., 2009).

### **Connecting the Research**

In order to move the work forward and to effect real change, the driving force needs to be rooted on solid theoretical grounds. The narrative of acceptance, creation of counterspaces and moving the work forward fall in line with the three tenets of LatCrit described in Chapter Three. The narrative of acceptance by teachers and staff created an environment of anti-essentialism where students found a place in which they felt

comfortable. In the Spanish for fluent speakers class, Rogelio and Alejandro experienced the acceptance of being Latinx without focusing on the differences. This follows the idea of Pan-ethnicity that LatCrit proposes, where one identifies through the similarities and appreciates the differences within the Latinx spectrum as enriching additions. Finally, as Valdes, (1996) explains, because of the adoption of the first two tenets (anti-essentialism and pan-ethnicity), a third possibility arises. The third possibility is a way in which the work can move forward. Because of the counterspaces and the acceptance, Rogelio and Alejandro developed a desire to help, and focused their attention in their studies in order to become special education teachers.

In addition to the LatCrit tenets exemplified through Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio*, and following the idea of hope that things can change from my ontological perspective, Alejandro and Rogelio are now committed to creating spaces where ULWD students like them and other Students of Color can find the purpose to be successful in high school. They want to help find a way to create bridges across the river (Anzaldúa, 1987).

### **Suggestions for Additional Research**

Despite the contribution to the literature, there are several limitations to this study. Although the development of general claims is not the purpose of *testimonios*, the findings from a study with a small number of participants is not generalizable. In addition, ULWD are still a heterogeneous group and the needs of TPS students vary greatly from DREAMERS. Further, the needs of ULWD in the mid-Atlantic region may differ immensely from the needs of ULWD in California, Florida, or Texas. Additionally,

although this study addresses the K-12 educational experiences of ULWD who are enrolled in a university, further studies should consider using *testimonios* to understand the perspectives of ULWD who are not enrolled in a post-secondary institution, ULWD who did not graduate high school, or of ULWD who currently attend a K-12 school. Alejandro and Rogelio's K-12 experiences influenced their post-secondary goals and trajectory. The literature surrounding ULWD is scarce in all educational environments. Further studies with ULWD in college are in order to understand how their K-12 experiences influenced their postsecondary decisions. In addition, it is important to identify the type of narrative teachers adopt in K-12 settings about ULWD students. The current scarcity of research on teacher perceptions on ULWD demands that research be done in this area as well.

The findings from this dissertation can be used as a professional development model that aims to disrupt the Dominant narrative in educational spaces. Working alongside other educators to implement the recommendations for educators within a professional development workshop, can serve as an extension of this dissertation. In addition, further work can include adopting the workshop into university classroom teaching curriculum to continue disrupting the status quo within the formation of a new generation of teachers.

Finally, it is important to continue critical work within the field of special education. As critical special educators, more qualitative critical research methods need to be implemented within special education (Connor, 2019; Klingner et al., 2014). In order to truly identify the needs of ULWD and other Students of Color in special



education and become a student-centered discipline, more critical qualitative work needs to take place within the field.

### **Pupusas, A Tortilla Filled With Love**

Using *testimonio* as a research methodology in special education is not common. Yet, it is needed. Rogelio and Alejandro's *testimonio* was an emotional event. It described how two brothers went through school in a country that does not welcome them, even if for them it is the only home they know. Their *testimonio* narrated how the twins have found a home, a purpose, and their own sense of belonging in spite of the Dominant narrative influencing staff, teachers, and peers who discriminated them for being ULWD.

It also describes how, as a result of staff members espousing a narrative of acceptance, Rogelio and Alejandro's K-12 educational experience still had a positive impact in their lives. Finding a *refugio* in high school encouraged the twins to pass it forward. They decided to pursue a degree in a field where they could also make a difference. This is not uncommon among Latinx college students. Research shows that Latinx students often go to college with the idea of going back into their communities in order to give back (Villalpando, 2003). Rogelio and Alejandro decided they are going to do their part to make schools better places for ULWD and other Students of Color by pursuing a degree in special education. For Alejandro, becoming a teacher is just the beginning. He talked about the importance of working with communities and government officials to remind government officials to treat People of Color with dignity and as human beings, specifically People of Color with disabilities. He wants to ensure police

officers can see through the influence of the Dominant narrative and develop a better understanding of disability, ethnicity, and Race.

Especially in our field in special education, we need to be advocates not just teachers advocate for the change I want to see. If I can volunteer my time to the sheriff or the police training academy, to do something. Because so many of them do not know how to. It is [bad] enough that they target a lot of minorities but minorities who have a disability like autism or Down syndrome or they have a hearing disorder or speech impediment something, anything to make them stand out, they won't hesitate [to shoot].

I want to educate you know, not even change the system, because I can't do it by myself. Just advocate hey if a child is not responding to you, like so many other kids, if like a 6'4" big Spanish, Black, Asian, whatever is not responding to you, don't taser him, don't handcuff him, don't shoot him, maybe the child is autistic. Look for the signs look before you shoot.

When I asked the twins which aspects from their home culture would benefit the mainstream American culture they both said acceptance. A willingness to embrace other people. Alejandro explained "I like that charity in the form of treating a human being like a human being not like a number, not like a minority and I like a group. Not stigmatizing us with, you're them, but not us."

Rogelio used food to explain his idea. He used his grandma's cooking and enjoying a family meal as an example of coming together through our shared experiences and our shared humanity. "Nobody messes with grandma's cooking."

For the twins being lumped in with Mexicans, and having Mexican food considered their own had happened enough times that Rogelio wanted to show another aspect of his culture that he was proud of. He changed the Dominant narrative about El Salvador to a narrative of acceptance. Instead of focusing on social issues that drive people apart, he focused on something delicious that would bring people together.

If I could introduce my grandma's cooking to people... just knowing that [the way] people relate to El Salvador is all gang related, but at the same time, my sweet little grandma can make this amazing food and it is able to bring me this sense of home and love and I want to spread that around.

After he mentioned his grandma's cooking, and food as a way to overcome differences, I asked Rogelio what he would share from his culture with the world, he thought about it for a few seconds and then said to me smiling

It may be simple, but I would say... it would probably have to be *pupusas*. I would share *pupusas* with the world. Not many people know *pupusas* and you know what? **A *pupusa* is a tortilla filled with love.**

I end this dissertation with a call to action. As previously mentioned, Ladson-Billings (2017) described the third component of her culturally relevant pedagogy as a way to disrupt the status quo. As educators concerned with academic, social, and emotional growth of all our students we need to find ways in which to follow this advice. In a small way, this dissertation attempts to do so. With this dissertation I provide some tools that can further the work of special educators and educators in general. Preparing

teachers to adopt a narrative of acceptance -instead of the dualistic thinking of the Dominant narrative of us vs. them in their classrooms- is how I see myself disrupting the status quo (Ladson-Billings 2017) and following Gloria Anzaldua's (1987) advice. I believe it is one way to move forward and to heal the split between both sides.

## APPENDIX A

<p>Puritans found Jamestown, VA 1607</p> <p>First slaves arrive in Virginia 1619</p> <p>Massachusetts legalizes slavery 1641</p> <p>U.S. becomes an independent nation 1776</p> <p>Naturalization Act Citizenship is restricted to free whites 1790</p> <p>Mexican American war. U.S. defeats Mexico and acquires future states of California, Texas, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming 1846-1848</p> <p>All instruction in California must be conducted in English 1855</p> <p>Texas requires instruction to be in English 1870</p>		<p>The Dominant Narrative began with the story of Puritans braving the element and running away from Religious persecution to a new land (p.18).</p> <p>As time progressed, only white Europeans were considered part of God’s plan. Everyone else was seen as inferior and therefore not allowed to be a citizen (p. 19).</p> <p>As Mexicans became American citizens, the Dominant narrative found ways to categorize them as lesser than full Americans because of their culture, language, or skin color (p. 24).</p> <p>When slavery ended, the Dominant narrative distanced white citizens from Blacks and</p>
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<i>Plessy v. Fergusson</i> upholds doctrine of “separate but equal” among Blacks and whites in public places	1896	other minorities by segregating schools and services severe punishments over the same crimes (p.19).
Dictionary of races and Peoples describes differences between immigrants	1909	As the myth of the immigrant nation continued to take form based on the Puritan origin story, European immigrants buy into the Dominant narrative by assimilating into U.S. society in order to achieve integration (p.20).
Chinese immigrant were detained and deported from Angel Island at a rate almost six times higher than European immigrants at Ellis Island	1910-1930	It was a firmly held belief that immigrants who did not speak English and had different cultures would never assimilate to the U.S (p. 22).
Mexican Revolution Immigration from Mexico into the U.S. increases. Immigrant leave their country in search of a better life and stability	1917	Due to a U.S imposed cleansing process for immigrants at the border, the Dominant narrative begins calling Mexican immigrants dirty and full of diseases (p. 25).
Immigration Reform Acts restrict immigration from Europe. Only 3% of total U.S. population can be immigrants	1921, 1924, 1927	For South European immigrants, integration was more difficult to accomplish because of their appearance (p. 23).
U.S. conducts the repatriation of over 500,000 thousand Mexican immigrants and Mexican American Citizens based on the color of their skin	1930-1931	Based on a narrative of difference, the Dominant narrative creates the idea that Mexicans cannot assimilate to American culture because they are too different (p. 27).

Mexican Parents in Texas prove school district is discrimination against their children based on race 1931

*Alvarez v. Lemon Grove* is the first successful desegregation case in the U.S.

Bracero Program develops U.S. agricultural industry 1942

Zoot Suit Riots  
These “riots” happened in California when U.S. servicemen attacked Latinx people wearing Zoot suits. 1943

*Brown v. Board*  
The U.S. Supreme Court unanimously decided that separate is not equal and rules to desegregate schools 1954

Prince Edward County in VA refuses to integrate schools, school system shuts down, white students attend private schools 1959-1964

Immigration Naturalization Act  
This act lifted quotas by countries, but not by region. It was so stringent there was not enough allotment for Mexican immigrants. As a result the number of UI’s in the U.S. increased tremendously 1965

Even though segregation of students with Spanish sounding last names was proven, Mexican American students were still discriminated against (p.35).

Braceros were needed in the U.S. as agricultural labor, but the Dominant narrative continued to portray all Mexican immigrants as lazy and dirty (p. 28)

Although the law ruled segregation unconstitutional, segregation persisted until the 1970’s (p. 36)

The agricultural industry had a great demand for Mexican labor, and did not care if it was undocumented. This situation created a double standard, of welcoming the labor, while rejecting the laborer (p. 31).

<p><i>Lau v. Nichols</i> The U.S. Supreme Court decided it was the school's responsibility to teach English to newcomers in order for them to be successful at school</p>	1972	<p>ESL services became a requirement in schools, however they also became a way to segregate newcomers based on English proficiency (p. 37).</p>
<p>Congress passes Public Law (PL) 94-142 or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which gave rights to students with disabilities to have a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment.</p>	1975	<p>Although IDEA provides rights for students with disabilities, unintentionally it provides a way to segregate Students of Color by identifying them as having a disability (p. 38)</p>
<p><i>Plyler v. Doe</i> The U.S. Supreme Court decided that under the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment UIs have a right to public education across the U.S.</p>	1982	<p>The Dominant narrative about immigrants draining school system resources influenced administrator into charging immigrants tuition. The U.S. Supreme court had to intervene and say all children were allowed to have free public education, regardless of their immigration status (p. 38).</p>
<p>Immigration Reform Control Act (IRCA) Over three million undocumented people were naturalized with this act.</p>	1986	<p>Immigration from Central and South America continued to increase as the situation there became more violent (p. 32).</p>
<p>Temporary Protective Status (TPS) President George Bush creates the temporary protective status for victims of natural disasters an violence in their home country.</p>	1990	<p>TPS was granted to around 300,000 people from Central America, mainly from countries where ther U.S. had military intervened during the 1980's (p. 42).</p>
<p>September 11, 2001 (9/11) Terrorists highjack several planes and attack the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in D.C.</p>	2001	<p>Before 9/11 U.S. president George W. Bush, and Mexico President Vicente Fox ,were working on a new immigration plan between the two</p>



<p>Arizona shuts down all Mexican and Ethnic studies programs in high schools across the state</p>	2010	<p>countries. After 9/11 the plan was put aside for more stringent border control measures (p. 47).</p>
<p>In 2012, President Barack Obama signs the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Providing an opportunity for an estimated million UIs to go to school, issue a driver's license or get a job.</p>	2012	<p>Based on an immigration invasion Dominant narrative, Arizona legislature shuts ethnic studies because they are subversive to the American way of life (p. 46)</p>
<p>Donald Trump ends DACA by signing an executive order ending the program. Court injunctions are allowing DACA recipients to reapply for DACA until the matter is resolved by the courts.</p>	2017	<p>As an executive order DACA was rescinded by Donald Trump in 2017. Due to the Dominant narrative of the immigrant invasion, resource draining and the lack of acculturation, proper legislation has not been able to pass through Congress (p. 43).</p>
<p>Supreme Court hears arguments on DACA. The future of around 700,000 DACA recipients is now in the hands of the Supreme Court. TPS is extended until 2021, but it is unsure what will happen with the TPS in the future</p>	2019	<p>Following his campaign promises based on xenophobia and racist ideas, Donald Trump has used inflammatory rhetoric about immigrants to influence the Dominant narrative and scare his followers into complying with his ideas (p. 43)</p> <p>Future is uncertain for these students and their families. (p. 43)</p>

## APPENDIX B

**Note to reader:** I provide the interview protocols as appendices to help current and future scholars organize their own protocols for *testimonio* interviews. These protocols served as guides in the *testimonio* process only. There were specific questions that needed to be asked, particularly regarding good memories and bad memories from high school. The protocol, however, is not meant to be strictly followed. For the most part, I asked general questions and the twins and their family told their *testimonio*. Many times they answered the questions without prompting as part of their narrative. If there should be questions regarding how I conducted these interviews, please contact me at [clavin@gmu.edu](mailto:clavin@gmu.edu)

### Participants Interview protocol

The protocol includes questions about family life, relationships, and experiences surrounding schooling at home and at school. Questions will be asked throughout two interviews depending on the participants responses.

*Establish rapport with participants through small talk, and sharing stories about myself and my family.*

#### Family Life

- Tell me about your family.
- What is something you all ate or did as a family that stands out in your memory?

- How did you end up here (Institution)?
- Where does your family come from?
- How was it growing up in your family?
- Tell me about your childhood, what are some events from your time growing up that really help describe your family?
- Who did you grow up with?
- Do you have any brothers or sisters? Cousins?
- Who are you closest with in your family?
- How do you stay in touch with them?
- Are there any times/ situations now when you wish you could talk to them? Why? What are these times?

### **Memento**

- Tell me about this object.
- Why did you choose to bring it?
- What story does your memento help you tell?

### **School experiences**

- Tell me about your time in school (K-12)?
- What stands out the most from your time there?
- Who was your favorite teacher? Why? Is there a particular story about this teacher that you would like to tell me?
- Did you have any teachers you did not like? Why?
- Do you have any stories about them you would like to share?

- How about the resto of the school staff?
- What did you do different than the other students when you received special education services/interventions?
- Did you go to a different room? Tell me about this process
- Did you also receive ESL services? How did this work?
- Were there any conflict between these two services?
- Did you like special education or ESL more? Why?
- Did you ever feel things were easier/harder for you than for your classmates? Why?
- Can you tell me an example?

### Family Interview Protocol

#### **Interview protocol**

The protocol includes questions about family life, relationships, and experiences surrounding schooling at home and at school. Questions will be asked throughout two interviews depending on the participants responses.

*Establish rapport with participants through small talk, and sharing stories about myself and my family.*

#### **Family Life**

- Tell me about [student participant].
- What is something he/she ate or did as a family that stands out in your memory?
- Where does your family come from?
- How was it growing up in your as an immigrant family?

- What are some events that really help describe your family?

### **School experiences**

- Tell me about [student participant]'s time in school (K-12)?
- What stands out the most from his/her time there?
- Is there a particular story about some of his/her teachers that you would like to tell me?
- Did he/she have any teachers you all did not like? Why?
- Do you have any stories about them you would like to share?
- How about the rest of the school staff?
- Did [student participant] receive special education services/interventions?
- Tell me about this process
- Did he/she also receive ESL services? How did this work?
- Were there any conflict between these two services?
- Did you like special education or ESL more? Why?
- Did you ever feel things were easier/harder for him/her than for his/her classmates? Why?
- Can you tell me an example?
- Can you think of any types of support that made it easier for you than your classmates to be successful in school?



**APPENDIX C**

Presentation for Alejandro and Rogelio for the Online Collaborative Analysis



## Analysis session with Rogelio and Alejandro

### research questions



- The purpose of this research project is to seek to address the following questions:
  1. How do the counternarratives of ULWD describe the effects of the intersectionality of race, disability, and immigration status on their educational experiences k-12
  2. How do collective narratives by ULWD inform a model for understanding the types of systemic, cultural, or environmental barriers and support systems that ULWD experience in educational settings?

## as the researcher



I needed a framework that was ontologically and epistemologically congruent with who I am as a researcher

- Honor the humanity of participants,
- Co-construct knowledge
- Hope that the work will bring about change

## critical race theory



five central themes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001)

- Centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination.
- Challenge to the Dominant ideology.
- Commitment to social justice.
- Centrality of experiential knowledge.
- Transdisciplinary perspective.



## latino critical theory (larcrit)



- LatCrit three tenets (Valdes, 2005)
  - Pan-ethnicity and anti subordination.
  - Anti-essentialism.
  - Collaboration and coalition.

## Using a LatCrit/CRT framework fits with my Ontology and Epistemology.



- It changes the focus away from the individual student toward the education system.
- It changes the lens from deficit to asset based.
- Honors the lived experiences of participants
- It acknowledges that there are structures of systemic racism that impact the educational outcome of Students of Color.

## Methodology



Testimonios as counternarratives...

- Challenge Dominant narrative or understanding of those in the margins by centering their experiences as valid knowledge.
- Open new windows for those in the margins to understand possibilities.
- Can be used to show how to construct a better world together.
- Build community among those in marginal communities.

Participants tell their stories and work in collaboration with the researcher instead of being used as an example.

- To understand the realities of participants within a larger context of systemic and structural inequities.
- Witness to or experiencing an injustice (e.g., acts of extermination, racism, xenophobia, discrimination)

## What we are doing today



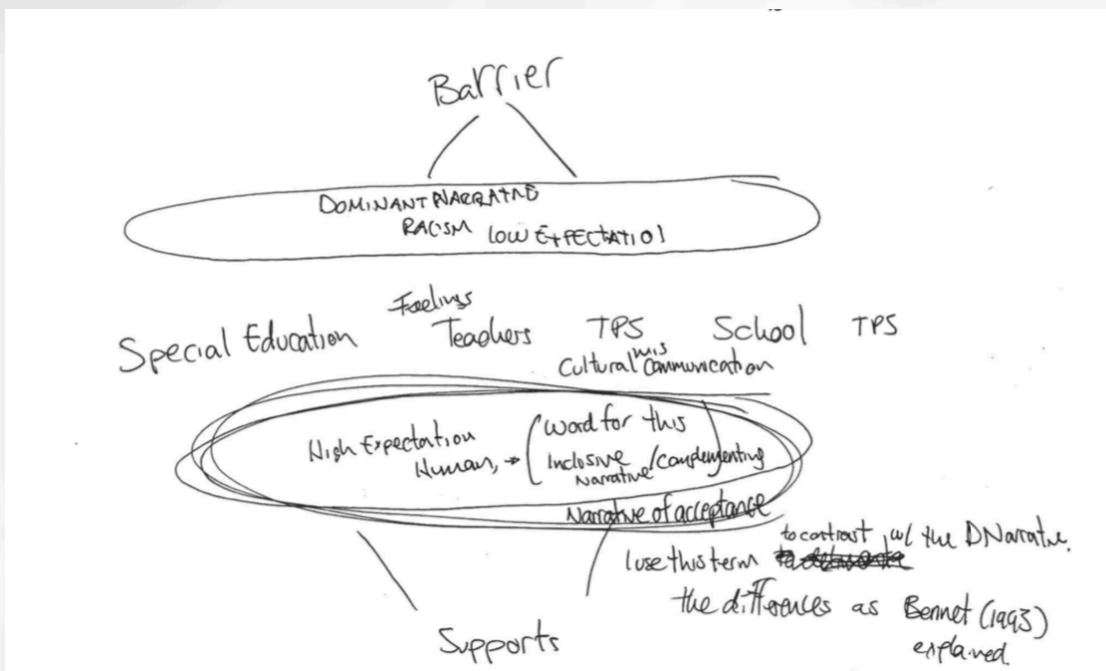
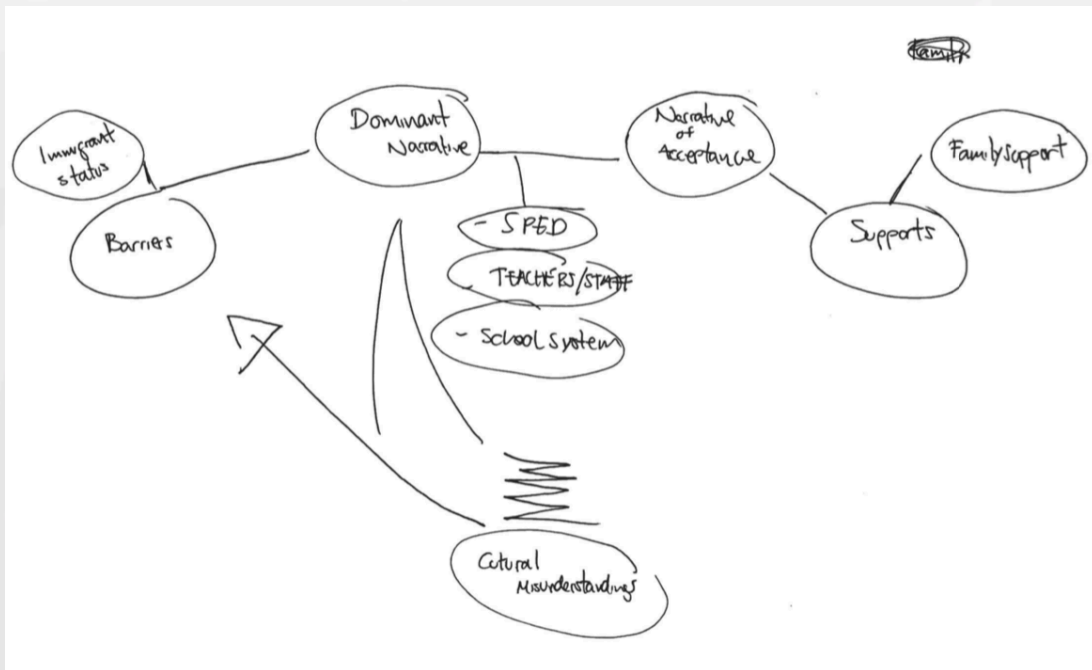
- Analyzing your testimonios
- Identifying the counternarratives
- Identifying support systems
- Identifying barriers

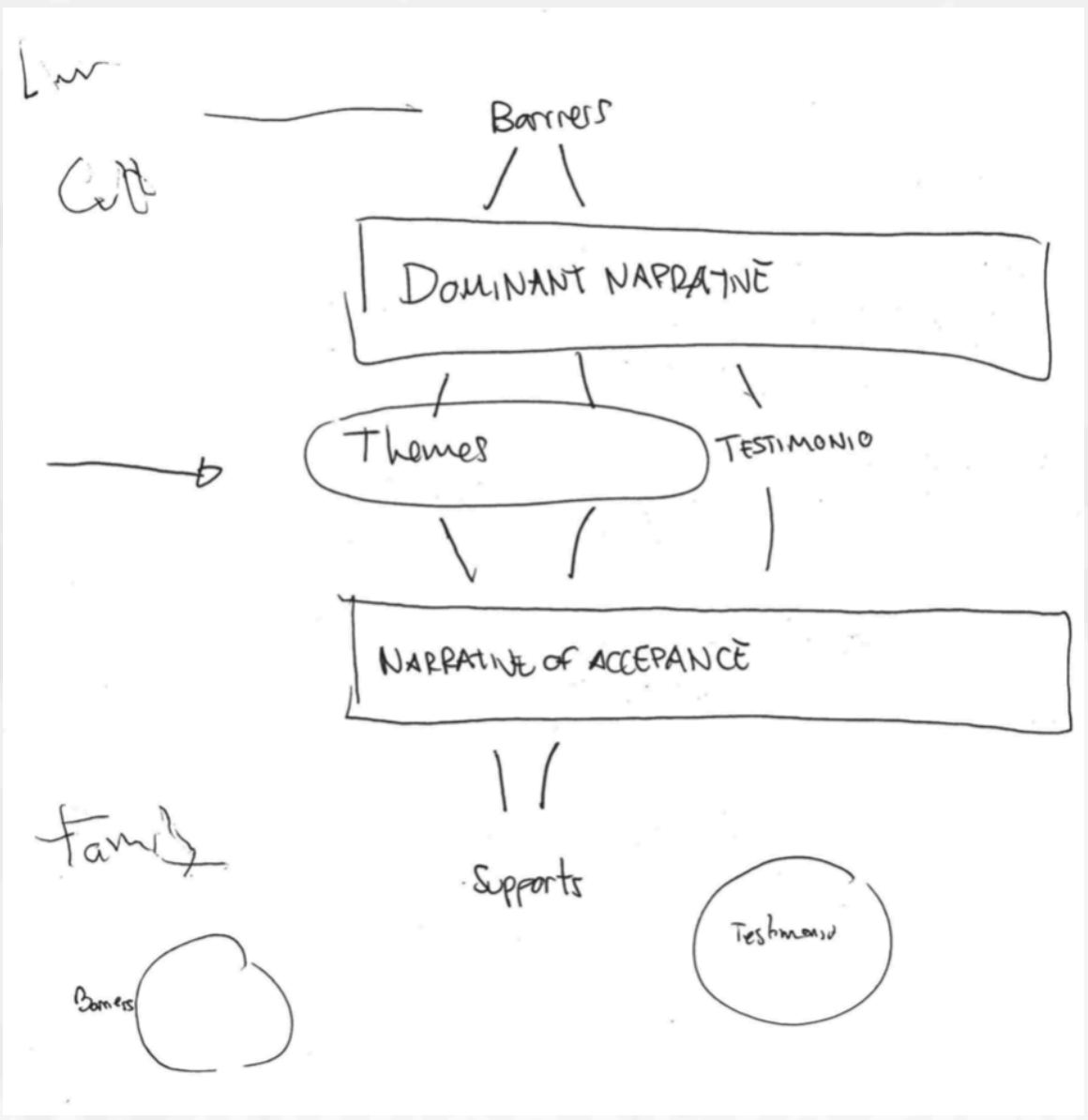


**APPENDIX D**

Conditional Matrix Process







## APPENDIX E

Example of back translation document.

Translation	Back translation
<p>Thank God my mom came to be with them during the summer and we did not have to leave them with strangers... she would take care... she'd make social relationships at school where she picked up the kids "look I know a woman who can pick the kids up from school while you are still working"</p>	<p><i>mi mamá venía en las vacaciones a estar con ellos en el verano sea gracias a Dios no tuvimos que dejarlo en manos extrañas, ...se encargaba... ella hacía las relaciones sociales ahí en la escuela donde los iba a recoger ella "mira, conozco una señora que se puede encargar de recoger a los niños después de la escuela cuando ustedes estén trabajando</i></p>
<p>we had a very heavy load on our shoulders that was to work, work, work in order for our <i>muchachos</i> to be successful</p>	<p><i>teníamos una carga bien fuerte encima que era trabajar, trabajar, trabajar para sacar adelante a los muchachos</i></p>
<p>Then we would dedicate, play with our work schedules either Sr. C went in early depending on his job at the time, or I would look for one where I could go in later so that Sr. C would be there when they got home when they were young</p>	<p><i>Entonces nos dedicábamos, jugamos siempre con los schedules de trabajo o Sr.C entraba temprano según el trabajo que él tuviera y yo me buscaba uno que yo pude entrar más tarde para que [Sr. C estuviera ahí ]cuándo llegarán a la casa cuando estaban pequeños.</i></p>
<p>We either focused on helping our <i>muchachos</i> succeed and dedicate our time to them or in preparing ourselves for a better future for us, but we would not pay close attention to them so... no, we can work hard now, and we always have arrived to the same objective and the same objective and it has always been the <i>muchachos</i></p>	<p><i>O nos enfocamos en sacar a los muchachos delante y dedicarles tiempo a ellos o nos enfocamos en prepararnos nosotros para un futuro mejor para nosotros, pero íbamos a descuidar la atención hacia ellos entonces... no, podemos estar dando duro ahorita, pero siempre estamos vamos a dar al mismo objeto y el mismo objetivo y siempre han sido los muchachos</i></p>

Upon returning, if a customs officer thinks about making trouble, [the officer] ruins my family. That is the word, frustration, because we feel frustrated knowing that we've been in the U.S for over 20 years, that we work hard, that we are honest that our *muchachos* have been focused and there has been not trouble with the law

Yes, always for me, fear. Especially for them because I knew if they mentioned it [TPS] at school their own classmates would be bullying them. Therefore in this household we would tell them not to mention that they had TPS

We are doing good, we need to work harder

But the great problem that we have is that we assumed everything was correct. And that is a mistake because that is due to a lack of information, because things are not clear, or the system makes it so that in just one seating one is given all the information and it is not all clear, right? And that is what they did with us.

*Al regresar, si a uno de ahí de la aduana se le ocurre ponerle cualquier traba, arruina a mi familia porque cualquiera de nosotros que vaya y hay un problema se hace un caos en mi familia. Esa es la palabra, frustración, porque nos sentimos frustrados que sabiendo que ya tenemos 20 años de estar en el país que trabajamos duro, que somos honestos que los muchachos se han enfocado no hay ningún problema con la ley*

*Sí, yo siempre miedo. Más que todo por ellos porque yo sabía que si mencionaban eso en la escuela los mismos compañeros los podían estar haciendo bullying entonces en esta casa le decíamos que no mencionaran que eran TPS*

*estamos haciendo bueno, tenemos aplicar más*

*Pero el gran problema que tenemos es que asumimos que todo está correcto Y eso es Un error porque eso es por falta de información, porque las cosas no son claras o el sistema hace que en una sola sentada le dan toda la información y no queda claro cierto? porque eso lo hicieron con nosotros*



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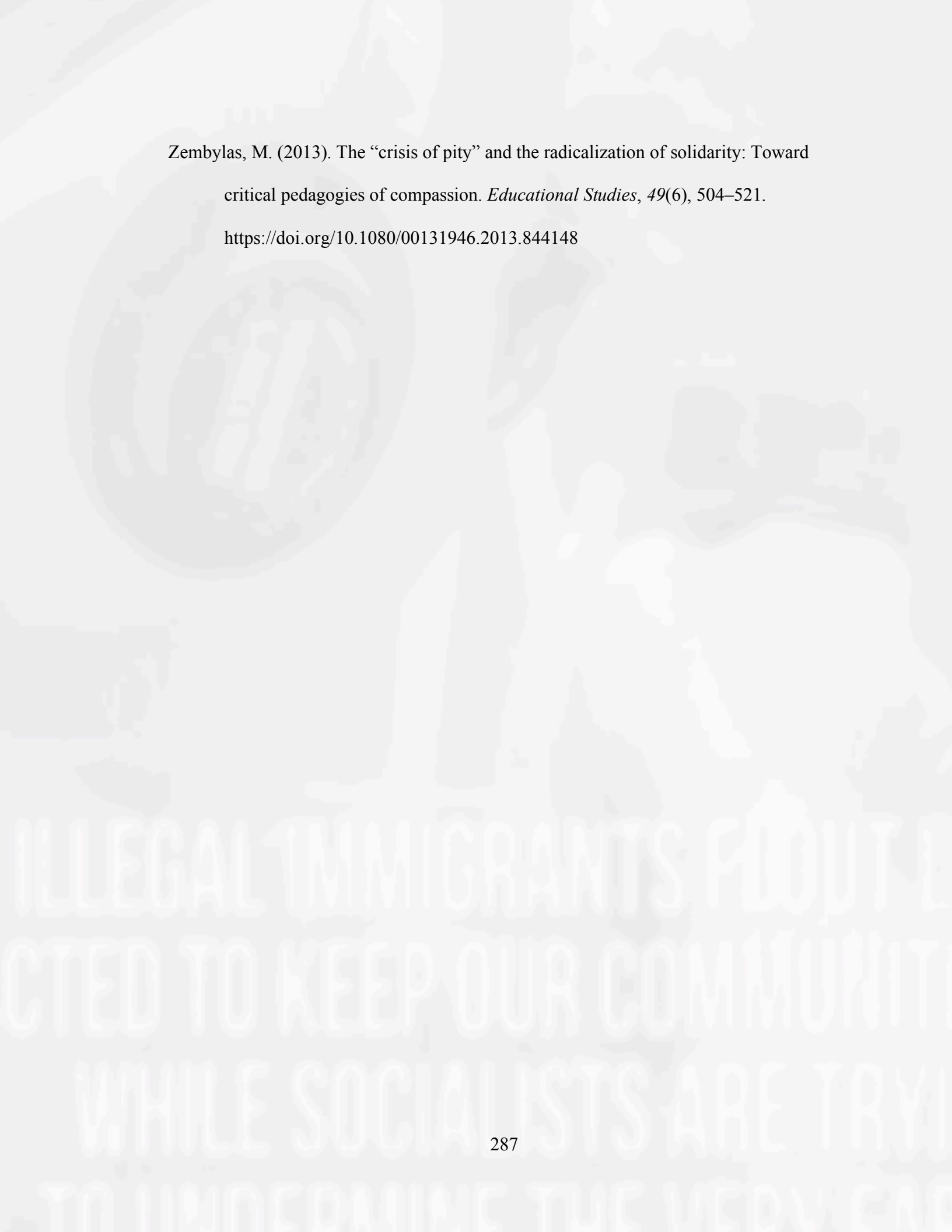
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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Carlos Enrique Lavín graduated from The Comunidad Educativa Tomás Moro, Mexico City, Mexico, in 1999. He received his Bachelor of Science from Loyola University, New Orleans in 2006. Carlos worked as a special educator in a resource setting, focusing on students with autism, behavior problems, and learning disabilities. Carlos has worked in dual language schools, charter schools and public schools in North Carolina for over 9 years and received his Master of Arts in teaching from North Carolina Central University in 2011.