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FRANCISCA MARTINEZ JENSEN
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LATINO STUDENTS' AND FAMILIES' NARRATIVES ABOUT EXPERIENCES IN

AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND ACADEMIC CURRICULUM

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Kyong-Ah Kwon, Chair

Dr. Vickie Lake

Dr. Timothy Ford

Dr. Heidi Torres

Dr. John (Ed) Frick

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the people I love, admire, and appreciate. My parents, Alfonso B. and Margarita R. Martinez, who unconditionally supported and loved me with the best they knew how and the best they had. Both overcame great challenges to provide the opportunities my siblings and I encountered and embraced. They loved until the end of their days, and their legacy continued through my siblings and me. We stand on the shoulders of giants, and I commit, daily, to continue the work that was laid before me with honor, value, and love.

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Abstract

Education is the gateway to success for Latino children and families (Cabrera et al., 2024; Marrun, 2018). Yet, the research shows a disconnect between the expectations of public schools and those of Latino parents (Auerbach, 2002; Gandara, 2002; Irizarry, 2011; Marrun, 2018; Murillo et al., 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2015). The primary focus of this study is to explore the common educational and collegiate experiences of Latino children and families as they navigate the American education system while also learning from Latino college graduates about how they navigated these systems. Through a qualitative narrative analysis study, the researcher takes a holistic approach in learning from multiple perspectives. This study informs educational professionals about Latino experiences and how to guide Latino students and families in their educational endeavors, while valuing their culture and assets they bring to the school and their communities. It also amplifies Latino voices in education by strengthening relationships between schools and Latino families to listen and learn about their Latino aspirations and understanding of college processes (Gandara, 2002). Lastly, it addresses the need in early childhood and elementary programs to expose and introduce young children to college pathways. Through a cross-case analysis, six primary themes were constructed: Resilience Built out of Necessity; Family as the Emotional Center of Support, Love, and Sacrifice; Education as a Pathway to Success; Identity Formation Through Their Struggles and Persistence; Cultural Values Served as a Resource; and, Navigating the Political Climate.

Keywords: Latinos, education, resilience, collectivist, capital, immigration, discrimination

Chapter 1: Introduction

Education is the gateway to success for Latino children and families (Cabrera et al., 2024; Marrun, 2018). A college education is viewed to advance in society and to achieve their goals (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Latino parents establish high expectations for their children from an early age, expecting them to graduate from college and provide for their future (Murillo et al., 2009). Yet, the research shows a disconnect between the expectations of public schools and those of Latino parents (Auerbach, 2002; Gandara, 2002; Irizarry, 2011; Marrun, 2018; Murillo et al., 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2015). It is in part because Latinos, in general, are not well understood in the American public school system. For example, educators who work with them may not know that Latinos have rich histories, experiences, and background knowledge that need to be valued in and out of the classroom (Irizarry, 2011; Velázquez, 2022). Latinos have made incredible contributions to American society through their medicinal practices, physical labor on various projects, and shared knowledge; however, they have often been forgotten or unrecognized (Anzaldúa, 2012). Thus, educational professionals need to learn about the students and their families so that American schools begin to see Latino families from an asset-based perspective and realize the strengths they bring to their communities (Castro & Calzada, 2021).

On the other hand, Latino families often lack understanding of the United States school system and require support to learn more about how it operates and how to navigate it (Irizarry, 2011). Latino families may need to understand the system that their child is a part of to build trust and stay engaged (Cabrera et al., 2024; Marrun, 2018). For example, Latino parents may not be as visible in the school community even though they have high expectations for their children's educational success. They may not feel as comfortable entering spaces that feel unwelcoming or feel invisible. Therefore, students can end up confused or perplexed about

navigating between the expectations of both worlds (Rodriguez et al., 2015). Hence, it is vital that the school community be welcoming and inviting the parents and show their knowledge of the diverse cultures represented throughout the school community (Gonzalez, 2015; Marrun, 2018). By learning about our students from Latino backgrounds, acknowledging their lived experiences, making learning meaningful and authentic, and supporting their families to learn about the U.S. educational system, we can begin breaking down barriers that our system created for Latino children and families.

Problem Statement

This study informs educators and administrators about what Latino students and families bring to educational institutions and addresses their knowledge on how to guide Latino children and families while valuing their culture. Latino families encourage their children in the best way they know how: by drawing "on cultural knowledge and values transmitted to them by their families and communities, such as caring for others, respect for educators, perseverance, self-reliance, and a strong work ethic" (Marrun, 2018, p. 164). The disconnect between what teachers and administrators know and understand about Latinos and how Latino parents prepare children for their educational journey dissuades Latino parents from seeing themselves represented in that environment. According to Chavez-Moreno (2023), there is a "need to learn about the struggles Latinxs face. People need to hear Latinxs' stories of success and how Latinxs navigate, are resilient, and overcome challenges to improve their experiences in unwelcoming contexts, for example, White-normative educational institutions or those in which they are underrepresented" (p. 518).

However, there is a lack of understanding of how to guide Latino children and families in an American school system while valuing their culture and backgrounds (Bernal, 2002; Cabrera et al., 2024; Chavez-Moreno, 2023; Newcomer, 2018). Many teachers hold on to their deficit

perspective about how Latino parents do not care about their children's education (Durand, 2011; Irizarry, 2011; Marrun, 2018, p. 164; Velázquez, 2017). They show support in ways that the American culture may not view as beneficial or important. Yet, immediate and extended family members have experience in understanding the hardships they can encounter without formal education. Consequently, they shared these stories to encourage young Latinos to pursue a college pathway and to graduate (Marrun, 2018).

In addition, there needs to be an increased understanding of how our school systems can support Latino parents who value education and have the desire for their children to attend college (Gonzalez, 2015; Marrun, 2018; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). While Latinos are the largest ethnic minority group in the US, they are significantly underrepresented in higher education due to various obstacles and challenges in navigating these educational systems (Bourdieu, 2021; Huber Pérez et al., 2021; Von Robertson et al., 2014). In fact, they have the lowest levels of college completion among other racial/ethnic groups (Von Robertson, 2014). As evidenced by Castro & Calzada (2021): "College completion rates continue to lag—at 79%—for Latinx students."

This is partly because most teachers have low expectations for Latino students (Castro & Calzada, 2021; Irizarry, 2011; Moll, 1992) and are not provided the best educational experience and learning environments, like their white peers. Also, as described above, the serious disconnect among the Latino population in their experiences and knowledge of the steps needed to go to college would contribute to the underrepresentation of Latino students in higher education (Gandara, 2002; Gonzalez, 2015; Marrun, 2018). Consequently, the researcher aims to address the need in early childhood and elementary programs to expose and introduce young

children to the college journey, as many studies focus on exposing students to higher education access beginning in secondary education.

Significance of Study

The focus of this study is to explore the common educational and collegiate experiences of Latino children and families as they navigate the American education system while also learning from Latino college graduates about how they navigated these systems. This study is intended to build a foundation for an intervention by investigating the Latino community's educational experiences in schools, expectations of schools and education professionals, and aspirations for their future careers. It includes potential obstacles and challenges they may encounter and necessary support and resources as they begin preparing for college and career pathways.

Hence, several gaps are identified to address to provide Latino children and families with the tools needed to navigate a positive and successful school experience. Many studies lacked information about helping Latino families navigate and engage in the American public school system using their cultural and background knowledge (Auerbach, 2002; Gandara, 2002; Irizarry, 2011; Marrun, 2018; Murillo et al., 2009; Rodriguez et al., 2015). The studies indicated that public schools desired to engage more Latino families, but always through the lens of the majority, which was White educational professionals (Chavez-Moreno, 2023). Therefore, the activities or planned events represented ideas that the school faculty and staff wanted Latino families to do or expect them to learn to assimilate into their classroom or learning environments. Latino children and families were disconnected from the content being taught because they could not relate or see themselves in the environment (Irizarry, 2011; Velázquez, 2022). Hence,

positive relationships with Latino children and families help them explore and understand the school system (Auerbach, 2002; Gallo & Link, 2016).

Also, a few studies exist about Latino children and families learning about college and career pathways in elementary schools (Gandara, 2002; Gonzalez, 2015; Marrun, 2018). Much of the literature focuses on preparing Latino students in secondary education settings. This creates a problem because Latino children and families need more information and support to understand what is expected in the college setting (Gonzalez, 2015; Marrun, 2018; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). Consequently, it is pivotal to take a more critical and comprehensive approach and engage families and the community to support and promote Latino students' educational goals (Auerbach, 2002; Marrun, 2018). Various student programs support secondary education students for college and career pathways, but none for early childhood children (okgearup.org, 2024; *Upward Bound*, 2024). By understanding the programs and interventions that already exist for secondary education, the researcher can begin to examine these and establish key components that may work in an early childhood intervention.

Therefore, this study will amplify Latino voices in education by strengthening relationships between schools and Latino families to listen and learn about their Latino aspirations and understanding of college processes (Gandara, 2002). Lastly, this study will address the need in early childhood and elementary programs to expose and introduce young children to college pathways, as many studies focus on exposing students to higher education access beginning in secondary education.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore the common educational and collegiate experiences of Latino children and families as they navigate the American education system,

including the perspectives of Latino college graduates. Those who work with Latino children and families need to learn how to support them in the American public school system by listening to their experiences and understanding how they navigate the public school system. In addition, acquiring knowledge and insights from Latino college students who have successfully graduated from a higher education institution in a midwestern state will help to understand their journey in higher education and how they navigated their undergraduate program in predominantly white institutions. A holistic approach would benefit current research by learning from various perspectives and better understanding how it can promote Latino children and families' engagement in the school system and ultimately support them in achieving their future goals.

Hence, this research aims to show how important it is to know a Latino's history and background, how to help Latino children and families navigate the American public school system, and how to begin providing Latino families with college and career information and support while children are in elementary school. It is critical to understand the knowledge and experiences that Latino children and families bring to their learning environment.

Through semi-structured interviews and a narrative inquiry research design, Latino families' lived experiences and histories will be documented. The study seeks to amplify their voices, provide insights into cultural knowledge among educators, and foster stronger relationships between schools and Latino communities to support student success. In addition, this paper will identify common educational and collegiate expectations, challenges, and aspirations of Latino families for teachers and administrators working with Latino populations.

Through a narrative inquiry research design, life *histories* of Latino families and their experiences in the American education system will be told, while the researcher engages with the participants and their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Understanding their culture through semi-structured interviews will provide insight into their experiences and histories.

It is important to "not only valorize individuals' experience but also explore the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 68). Hence, through my research, I will answer the following research questions:

1. How do young children narrate their understanding of college and careers, and what do their stories reveal about the influences shaping their perceptions?
2. How do Latino families perceive their role in supporting their children in preparing them for common education experiences and college?
3. What experiences do Latino college students encounter as they prepare for and navigate college?

Definition of Terms

Abuelos: Grandparents

Binary System: "black and white" thinking

Borders: Geographical or invisible boundaries placed around us and are established by the majority group in power.

Capital: Economic, cultural, symbolic, and social forms that provide someone with the power needed to maneuver situations or to achieve beyond what they were born into.

Colonization: The United States continuously taking away from brown people; taking from them their land, their identities, their languages, their people, their culture, their precious resources, and their citizenship status" (Anzaldúa, 2012).

Deficit courses: "Guidance counselors and teachers often direct Latino students into certain classes based on what they think about us – thoughts that are negative and based on deficit thinking" (Irizarry, 2011, p. 136).

Education: In the Mexican family, education is viewed as a primary tool for upward mobility, providing access and opportunities to a better life. Parents emphasize that getting a "good education" is desired because it is more than what they were offered. An education is more than just academics, but also encompasses hard work, perseverance, and respect. When one child is successful in their education, the family believes it will benefit them all. ***Educacion*** consists of both moral training at home and academic training at school (Auerbach, 2002, p. 1380).

Empeños: "…the dedication and commitment to the task or goal" (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 105)

Estudios: "…diligent study and effort that will bring success" (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 105).

Ethnic-minority group: "a particular ethnic group (a group of people with a shared culture, tradition, language, history, etc.) living in a country where most people are from a different ethnic group" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

Ganas: "…the drive and will to succeed" (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 105)

Immigrant: "…a person who has to come to a different country in order to live there permanently" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025)

Immigrate: "…to come to live in a different country" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025)

Inequalities: A situation where there is a lack of equality or fairness in access, treatment, or opportunities among individuals or groups of people.

Latinos: "This term refers to people of Latin American origin or descent, regardless of their gender. It is commonly used to describe individuals with cultural, linguistic, or ancestral ties to

countries in Latin America, including nations where Spanish, Portuguese, or other Romance languages are spoken" (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

Latinx: "This is a gender-neutral alternative to the traditional gendered terms 'Latino' (masculine) and 'Latina' (feminine). It emerged as an inclusive way to refer to people of Latin American heritage, particularly to encompass non-binary, genderqueer, or gender-nonconforming individuals. The term is most commonly used in academic, activist, and progressive contexts" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025).

Madres: moms

Mexican: "Belonging to or relating to Mexico or its people" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025).

Mexican American: "This term describes a wide category of people who live in the United States and who have a familial link to Mexico or Mexican culture. It can include people who have roots in the territory conquered by the United States in the Mexican-American War, and who might not speak Spanish, as well as recent immigrants, some of whom might speak an indigenous language." (Smithsonian Institute, 2025).

Padres: dads

Tias/os: Aunts and Uncles

In the following chapters, I will share the current research, my findings, and discussion resulting from the interviews I conducted. I will complete the study by stating implications and future research aspirations. In Chapter 2, I will review the literature about Latinos in the United States and what the current research states about how they navigate their public school experiences. I will discuss the theoretical perspectives that relate to this study. This study explores the challenges and experiences Latino children and families encounter as they enter the public school system. In addition, in Chapter 3, I will present the methodology and design for my study.

Then, in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, I will discuss and share my findings as they relate to the theoretical perspectives that this study is based on. Lastly, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of what Latino children, parents, and graduate students know about navigating the public school system and predominately white institutions and how they prepare for collegiate pathways. The review of the literature provides a foundation for the study by examining the history of Latinos in the United States and what impact it has on their future. This review will also examine three theoretical perspectives that relate to the study. Finally, this review will discuss some of the experiences and challenges that Latinos face in public school settings.

Latinos' History in the United States

Educational system inequalities have existed since the early settlers settled along the coasts of New England and Virginia during the early years of the seventeenth century (Rippa, 1984; San Miguel, 2005). According to Rippa (1997), these immigrants brought deeply rooted beliefs in the English religion, language, and social class system. These early settlers believed that the experiences, religion, and knowledge they shared were the best and set the expectations of what the United States would eventually become. These inequities continued to impact many vulnerable populations, such as Latino families. The colonization of brown people affected the way Latinos are viewed in the United States and gave them a presumed status that they are "not enough" or "unvalued" (Anzaldúa, 2012).

In the United States, racism is guided by a *White racial frame*, where Whiteness is seen as better than other racial groups, which are viewed as less important. Racism is built into systems and institutions, where unfair rules and practices create more inequality and harm people based on their race. This racism affects the daily lives and opportunities of people from racial

and ethnic minority groups in the U.S., no matter their background, how long their families have lived here, or their social class (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021). This perspective of brown people began with the United States continuously taking from them their land, their identities, their languages, their people, their culture, their precious resources, and their citizenship status (Anzaldúa, 2012).

The historical background of Latinos in the United States explains the harsh realities that they encountered as they sought refuge, a better life, or a new place to start over. There was a long tradition of white supremacy in the United States, so whoever did not speak English or differed from European traditions or beliefs struggled to be seen as an equal in their eyes (Heidenreich et al., 2020). The United States held many negative stereotypes towards Latin Americans and stripped "people of color of their individuality, cultural distinctiveness, and internal differences" (Gutiérrez, 2004, p. 16).

When immigration began in the United States, immigration laws and policies shifted as immigration numbers escalated. Yet, laws allowed immigrants from Western European nations to have priority in entering the United States, whereas the laws limited immigration from other *undesirable nations* (Heidenreich et al., 2020). The Latino immigrants were primarily Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans (Gutiérrez, 2004). The Latino immigrants did not see themselves as a vital part of our American Society, just as descendants of their ancestors.

Consequently, Latinos have a deeply intertwined history with the United States. They helped influence the economy, family systems, backgrounds, religions, and markets that reshaped the face of society. Many major historical events impacted the relationship between the United States and the Mexican people. For example, Mexico owned much of the land that is currently the southwestern United States before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, ending

the Mexican-American War (National Education Association, 2024). Many Mexican people's land was seized and taken over by the White Americans. And therefore, through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexicans could not move north across the border. They were allowed to become United States citizens or to return to their *new* Mexico.

Yet, those who chose to become United States citizens were not treated equally due to the color of their skin. Another way that Latinos provided support for the United States was through the "Bracero" program. This program, created in 1942 through the Mexican Farm Labor Program, brought Mexican men to legally work in the United States to complete short-term jobs (National Education Association, 2024). The United States would allocate resources to Mexicans arriving to complete the jobs through providing housing, food, transportation, and a set wage (National Education Association, 2024). Yet, as Mexicans and Puerto Ricans arrived to carry out their tasks, wages and living conditions were not honored. They were treated like *second-class* citizens. They were expected to assimilate into the dominant culture and way of life determined by *white* people (MacDonald, 2021).

Hence, on July 15th, 1954, a catastrophic event occurred that damaged any trust or security Mexicans had with the United States. A large deportation effort was carried out under President Eisenhower with the help of immigration officials and the U.S. Border Patrol. It was called *Operation Wetback*, a racist term used to describe Mexican immigrants who crossed the Rio Grande River. Driven by racist and anti-immigrant beliefs, the operation claimed that Mexican immigrants were taking jobs, lowering work standards, spreading disease, and causing crime. Around 200,000 to 300,000 people were deported, including some U.S. citizens of Mexican descent (National Education Association, 2024). Situations like these caused fear and

anxiety among the documented and undocumented Mexican people who resided in the United States.

Unfortunately, this continues to be true today through the inequities in power, white privilege, and continuous oppression of Latinos in the United States. The United States is quickly becoming a majority-minority place. The Latino population is the largest minority population, with a growing number in communities of color, and is predicted to double in size throughout the years (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021). Hence, the stratification of power, unequal distribution of privilege, and the history of oppression all impact Latinos in the United States in many areas of their lives. If society continues to exist in this manner, and history repeats itself, Latino children and families will continue to live in the shadows.

A clear example of us continuing to live in the past and not making strides toward a more inclusive future is when the United States elected Donald Trump as our 44th president in 2016. The Trump administration was not the cause of Latinos facing racism in the United States, but it exacerbated the White nationalism agenda (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021, p. 150). People in American society believe that people of color have the same opportunities as Whites do and that their histories do not impact their futures. In the research, many authors continue to believe that people of color have the same privileges as White middle-class Americans (Thayer-Bacon, 2013). Yet, this is not the reality, and it is critical to continue to explore how racism is still impacting people of color through systemic oppression (Thayer-Bacon, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987), and Latina/o Critical Legal Theory (LatCrit) (1995) as developed by scholars such as Frank Valdes and Lisa Iglesias. Together, these frameworks offer a robust foundation for exploring the

educational and collegiate experiences of Latino children and families within the United States. They provide critical lenses for understanding how structural inequities, cultural identity, and systems of power intersect to shape educational access, engagement, and outcomes for this population.

Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory

Bourdieu's Capital Theory (1986) offers a lens through which to examine the role of various forms of capital—cultural, social, economic, and symbolic—in shaping individuals' ability to navigate institutional structures such as education. Through these four forms of capital, we can begin to understand how social inequalities are produced and how they create social stratification (Bourdieu, 2021). *Economic Capital* is about the material wealth, financial assets, and property that people own or are connected to, and therefore is a part of what they can provide to any situation they become a part of (Bourdieu, 2021). *Cultural Capital* is the non-tangible assets one brings, such as education, knowledge, or cultural awareness (Bourdieu, 2021). *Social Capital* refers to the opportunities established through the network of social connections and relationships (Bourdieu, 2021). And, lastly, *Symbolic Capital* represents the social recognition or prestige that one brings to their experiences (Bourdieu, 2021).

Hence, in the context of this study, the theory highlights how educational systems often privilege dominant forms of capital aligned with white, middle-class norms, thereby devaluing or ignoring the cultural and social resources that Latino families contribute. This framework enables a critical examination of how such disparities impact Latino students' educational experiences and how families demonstrate resilience by leveraging their forms of capital within an academic context.

To understand the relationship between an educational context and how Bourdieu's theory applies, it is critical to acknowledge the three key pieces (habitus, field, and doxa) of Bourdieu's Capital Theory. Each of these pieces is intricately connected, so one cannot separate them, yet they will be discussed independently to provide the whole picture (Bourdieu, 2021). The first key piece is knowing about the *habitus*. The *habitus* is closely linked to cultural capital, and it is a system of dispositions, where one becomes situationally aware of their surroundings that shapes their perceptions and actions about their social position in that place (Bourdieu, 2021). This perception is created by the group of actors (individuals, groups, or institutions) that are present in that structure (situation, environment) (Bourdieu, 2021). Next, *fields* are the social structures where individuals and groups compete for status and distinction (Bourdieu, 2021). This is the place where the capital one brings determines the position of the person or group in that field because they must understand the rules in the specific field and how to navigate them using their knowledge or power (Bourdieu, 2021). Lastly, the *doxa* is the common sense that people or groups of people bring to a field. These are unquestioned assumptions or beliefs that are deeply ingrained in our consciousness (Bourdieu, 2021). It is how social order and power dynamics are maintained. One's doxa influences which cultural capital is valued and honored in specific contexts and which one will be rewarded. Doxa maintains the social hierarchy created by those in power (Bourdieu, 2021).

Bourdieu's lectures show that power emerges from capital. Absolute power is one form in which a person can create the rules at any given time and change them in their favor to win the game (Bourdieu, 2021). Therefore, the person who holds the absolute power can create rules to ensure they always get what they desire, since their habitus identifies that they have the capital to do so (Bourdieu, 2021). This suggests that those in power stay in power unless one reaps the

benefits of inviting someone into their field and exchanging resources to advance (Bourdieu, 2021). The habitus internalizes the doxa as it normalizes the power structures in the fields (Bourdieu, 2021). Those who do not have power may enter once invited. Because of their doxa, they accept that their cultural capital is not recognized and that they must earn their place in this structure.

Capital can be a tool for social mobility or oppression, depending on who possesses it and what is valued by the majority group in power. For example, one may enter the field, yet you are not recognized as a player in the game unless you can produce outcomes and show your worth (Bourdieu, 2021). This theory centers on how inequities in access to valued capital (e.g., education, cultural norms) reinforce systemic power structures. This theory analyzes how power dynamics are constructed and perpetuated, providing insight into social stratification and inequality. Hence, the researcher connects Bourdieu's work and findings to how school is a social system that creates power and capital. Once a child enters a school community, their existence, background, and culture all become surveilled, and they become a part of the "game" he speaks about.

In addition, Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory examines social inequities and how systems maintain balance, warning that disrupting these systems can cause societal instability. Those in power continue to create norms that rule in their favor because that's the system they created. Bourdieu stated in one of his lectures, "What is a stake in the game then? It's the very definition of the game, what can be played and who can play, and each agent shares a common concern, which is the existence of the game" (Bourdieu, 2021, p. 51). Hence, his theory emphasized that those in power make the rules of the game and are active agents in the game. They get to participate and actively make decisions.

Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory

Anzaldúa's (1987) Borderland Theory conceptualizes the lived experience of those who exist between cultures, languages, and identities. Particularly relevant to Latino students and families, this theory explores the tensions and negotiations inherent in living within *borderlands*, both physical and metaphorical. It provides a framework for understanding how Latino individuals navigate the psychological, emotional, and cultural complexities of bicultural identity formation in educational systems that may not affirm or reflect their experiences. The theory challenges traditional binary thinking and instead embraces hybridity, transformation, and the power of existing in in-between spaces. Anzaldúa uses the term *Borderlands* to describe a place where cultures mix—it's not fully Mexico and not fully the U.S. She also uses it to talk about people who live between these two worlds. They do not see clear borders but instead belong to both cultures, even though they're still expected to follow the rules of each (Anzaldúa, 2012). It is the majority race that influences these borders placed around Latinos through their narrow perspective, which seeks to oppress and limit their opportunities. The researcher will use this theory to show how there continue to be borders built around Latino children and families in the American school systems. These systems are not created equal for children of color.

In addition, people construct knowledge socially by creating meaning through their own experiences. Hence, they must continue to engage in expanding their knowledge through the interactions they embark on with their communities, societies, and groups around them. To create meaning, they continue to reflect on their prior experiences and understandings to interpret their newfound knowledge. This is evident in Gloria Anzaldúa's work as it implores the majority to take an initiative to challenge their own thinking and to learn from diverse perspectives other

than their own. This allows one to grow and to break the borders created around themselves and others (Huber Pérez et al., 2021).

Gloria Anzaldúa's theory encompasses how power manifests within these binary spaces and how self-transformations can occur when facing the oppression one encounters (Anzaldúa, 2012). This power is structured through physical and metaphorical borders imposed by society. These borders begin with interactions that Latinos had with the dominant culture in society. By being willing to learn the histories of Latino people in society, people can understand, appreciate, and learn through the challenges and struggles people have overcome to exist and live where they are. People need to know the history of others' struggles, and they need to know theirs. The dominant culture must continue to learn about Latinos and how it can support and engage them in their community. Anzaldúa (2012) stated, "The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance. By taking away our self-determination, it has made us weak and empty" (p. 108).

Latina/o Critical Legal Theory (LatCrit)

Frank Valdes and Lisa Iglesias' Latina and Latino Critical Legal Theory (LatCrit) extend Critical Race Theory, highlighting racism in immigration debates and the challenges faced by marginalized groups (Huber et al., 2021, p. 7). LatCrit centers the legal, social, and cultural realities of Latina/o communities in the United States. It examines how systemic racism, language discrimination, immigration policies, and other structural forces uniquely impact these communities (Valdes et al., 1997). Therefore, minorities begin to understand that their value is less than that of the majority race.

In addition, LatCrit is a lens to acknowledge the assets of Latinos. It emphasizes the importance of counter storytelling, elevating the narratives and lived experiences of those

marginalized by dominant educational and legal systems, as a method of resistance and a means to promote equity (Delgado Bernal, 2002). It is known for "community building based on shared principles, ethics, practices, and aspirations; LatCrits work both to create scholarship and activism through community and to create community through scholarship and activism" (Valdes et al., 2005, p. 148). To grasp the importance of advocacy, scholarship, and voice, one must know the history of Latino people in the United States. It portrays the brutality and violence that they encountered and the many challenges they had to overcome as they made the United States their home.

Critical Race Theory opposes white privilege and brings attention to research that omits the works of scholars of color (George, 2021). LatCrit critically examines the experiences of Latinos through the oppression that they encounter from the majority group in society. LatCrit shows how white supremacy gives unfair advantages to white people, treats non-white people unfairly, sees white culture as normal, and leaves Latinas/os out in schools (Von Robertson et al., 2014). Within the field of education, this framework critically interrogates how institutional practices contribute to exclusion while also recognizing the agency and resilience of Latino students and families. Hence, this theory will provide foundational information to understand Latino histories and their experiences living in a diverse society.

Synthesis and Integration of the Three Theories

Anzaldúa's (1987) theory is rooted in identity and the metaphor of borders and explores living with dual identities. Bourdieu's (1986) theory focuses on social and cultural capital. He seeks to understand and dismantle capital-based inequities. LatCrit (1995) centers on systemic racism and legal frameworks affecting Latinos. It challenges racism and advocates for policy and systemic change specific to Latinos.

The Capital Theory (1986) is overly simplified and measures how one gains capital is not an easy feat. The idea is that people build capital by associating with different economic groups or by exposing and engaging with groups of people with more social clout. In doing this, people should be able to provide each other with something that will benefit them in achieving what they intended. Cultural capital is learned at home and in school through exposure to certain cultural habits and knowledge (Bourdieu, 2021). Even though it comes from social experiences, it often looks like natural talent, making people seem gifted. Schools turn this passed-down cultural knowledge into academic success, which then looks like something the student earned on their own (Tittenbrun, 2018). Latinos are a cohesive group who mostly value helping the whole group, not achieving individually (Marrun, 2018). Therefore, Latinos bring their capital to all events and situations to better one another.

The Borderland Theory (1987) primarily acknowledges that there is binary thinking when creating borders around oneself or others. It focuses on the brown/white issue because Anzaldúa focuses on the Mexican versus the American side. Borderlands theory comes from Gloria Anzaldúa's personal experiences as someone who grew up in the area along the U.S.–Mexico border. She describes the borderlands as both a painful, harmful place and a space where people can create a new, mixed identity that brings new hope and possibilities (Murphy, 2016). Anzaldúa's theory also did not include Afro-Latino and African American perspectives. This theory focuses on her experiences growing up between two places bound by borders. It comes from her own experiences and, thus, can be seen as a limited perspective. She used her own lived experiences to identify the borders that were placed around her by the majority race, the white people. Her exposure to different races and the geographic region she grew up in narrowed her perspective and experiences with diverse cultures.

LatCrit (1995) has lumped all racial groups into one category and diminishes the experiences of specific racial groups. People who support Critical Race Theory (CRT) often focus on Black and white racial issues, but also understand that racism affects many other groups, like Latinx, Native Americans, and Asian Americans (George, 2021). Yet, CRT was never meant to take away from the experiences that racialized groups went through because their histories are a part of who they are and should be acknowledged as separate. Each group faces different challenges at various rates and times, and we can learn from them, but we should not see them all as the same.

Hence, borders can limit what people are exposed to, and this could disrupt the potential capital they could gain. A person cannot truly offer something if they do not have the capital to share or to give it. In addition, social capital is recognized to advance in our society and to create a better future for oneself. Latinos experience many social opportunities as they are raised in their culture to attend many events and create a community. Therefore, it is not possible to measure their capital based on their rich experiences. Yet, because it is cultural capital that translates into knowledge from home in these contexts, it is not, typically, honored in educational spaces (Bourdieu, 2021).

Together, these three frameworks provide a multidimensional understanding of the educational journeys of Latino children and families. Bourdieu's Capital Theory enables structural analysis of resource distribution and institutional norms (Bourdieu, 1986); Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory highlights the identity-based and emotional complexities of navigating bicultural realities (Anzaldúa, 2012); and LatCrit foregrounds the broader socio-political forces that perpetuate inequity (Valdes et al., 2005). The integration of these frameworks positions this study to both document the systemic challenges Latino communities face and to center their

perspectives, strengths, and strategies of resistance as essential to reimagining more equitable educational practices.

Each of these theories informs a different layer of this study. Capital Theory reveals how systemic inequalities in education are reinforced through the lack of recognition of the cultural capital that students bring from home. Borderland Theory highlights the personal, cultural, and identity-based conflicts experienced by Latino students and families as they navigate educational spaces. LatCrit provides a legal and institutional critique of racism, helping to frame educators' practices and policies that affect Latino student outcomes. All three theories underscore the interplay between power, identity, and systemic oppression, and collectively provide a multidimensional understanding of the structural and experiential barriers that Latino communities face in education.

In addition, all three theories address power dynamics and systemic inequalities, emphasizing how the majority group perpetuates these issues. While Bourdieu examines inequalities through capital, Anzaldúa focuses on cultural hybridity and borderlands, and LatCrit directly addresses Latino oppression and white supremacy. Yet, all critique societal norms imposed by the dominant group, though Anzaldúa's and LatCrit emphasize Latino-specific experiences, whereas Bourdieu takes a more general view of systemic inequality.

For the purpose of this study, the overarching connection between all three theories is Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory because it ties together how the Latino participants understand and navigate their lived experiences in various contexts. Then, Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory provides us a way to identify how Latinos acknowledge and bring their cultural capital to the different contexts they engage in and how inner conflicts arise because they must navigate between their family values and culture and the educational system or the

expectations of the dominant culture. Lastly, LatCrit Theory provides a lens to comprehend how these systemic barriers created by the dominant culture do not value cultural capital and, therefore, limit access and opportunity for Latinos.

Challenges and Opportunities for Latino Families and Students Across Educational Settings in the U.S.

This study explores the challenges and experiences Latino children and families encounter as they enter the U.S. public school system, an institution originally conceived to serve all children equitably. Rooted in democratic ideals, early educational reformers such as Horace Mann envisioned schools as the *great equalizer*, designed to offer every child the opportunity to succeed through effort and determination, regardless of race or class (Irizarry, 2011). Immigrant families have long viewed public education as a pathway to opportunity, economic mobility, and a better life for future generations (Hill & Torres, 2010). Therefore, I will share assets that Latino children and families bring to the learning environment, and also the challenges they encounter when entering school.

Experiences When Acknowledging Latinos' Assets

Latino families may lack access to dominant forms of capital valued by schools, such as English proficiency or familiarity with institutional norms, even though they possess rich cultural and familial capital (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). These valuable assets often go unrecognized or are devalued in mainstream educational settings (Gallo & Link, 2016). Hence, Latino parents need to be viewed through an asset-based perspective. It is essential to view a parent's skills, knowledge, and talents as assets to the learning environment and community.

Rich Cultural, Linguistic, and Experiential Resources

Using Counterstories to Resist Marginalization. Latino communities continue to resist marginalization through storytelling and advocacy (Murillo et al., 2009). As Murillo and colleagues argue, Latino families have long fought for access to quality education because they, like all communities, wish to prepare their children for meaningful futures and community contribution. Parents work hard to cultivate opportunities for their children, investing time, money, and labor to access resources that may help them thrive. Over time, these efforts contribute to intergenerational capital transfer, whereby children benefit from the social networks and knowledge their families have worked to build (Marrun, 2018). However, these gains are frequently hard-won in an educational system that was not built with Latino students in mind.

In addition, Latinos use counterstories, which are personal stories shared by people of color to show their real-life experiences from their point of view, not the majority's (Bernal, 2002). These stories are used to impact societal narratives towards Latinos and to awaken people to understand their lived truths (Bernal, 2002). Therefore, as teachers work with children from Latino communities, it is critical to provide them with opportunities to share their experiences and actively listen to their narratives (Bernal, 2002). Latino children and families need a space where they belong and are seen in the classroom and school community. This begins by teachers creating a safe place for them to share their life histories with people different than themselves and opening a dialogue about what they encountered.

Families Use Consejos to Nurture Their Children's Best. Latino families are nurturing and loving towards their children and want the best for them. They know their children are standing on the shoulders of giants and are expected to do better because they have these opportunities. Their parents work diligently to provide these experiences that will help shape a

successful life. Therefore, they use consejos to help their children. “Consejos are cultural values interwoven with life lessons through empathy and compassion. Latino parents relied on consejos to help their children overcome educational challenges. Parents and grandparents shared consejos as a means of motivating their children and demonstrating the consequences of not obtaining a college education” (Marrun, 2018, p. 175). Latino families want to be involved in their children’s educational journeys and strive to help them be successful.

Hence, teachers can offer support to their Latino students and families by developing caring relationships that include them in their classroom and school community (Newcomer, 2018). Teachers can also establish deeper relationships with family members to learn more about their backgrounds and communities and use this information to guide their learning and needs.

Collectivist Society. The Latino culture centers around a collectivist orientation, viewing family, relationships, and deference to authority as integral components to success (Fortuna, 2024). They enjoy including their immediate and extended family in all their joys and sorrows. There is great importance in how immediate and extended family members, like abuelitos, tias y tios, y primos, are involved in family matters and beyond the academic school environment (Marrun, 2018). They take pride in establishing relationships and forming connections with those around them because they value the people they engage with. Latinos center their strength, resiliency, and motivations around their family members and rely on their stories of overcoming to achieve success and find the strength to overcome challenges.

Consequently, teachers can learn better ways to include and engage parents and extended family members in their child’s lives (Marrun, 2018). Many times, schools create procedures for parental engagement using a White, middle-class lens, so it does not account for the Latino

family members to be a part of their learning and development (Marrun, 2018). By understanding the way Latino families function and including their cultural values in school events and activities, teachers will gain more participation and engagement.

Culture of Belonging Through Relationships. Bourdieu claimed that capital gives the power needed to maneuver situations or achieve beyond what they were born into. For example, Latinos rely on their social and cultural knowledge and skills to create their new community and social support networks; they establish a safe place that honors their culture, while sharing resources and abilities that empower and strengthen one another (Cabrera et al., 2024; Newcomer, 2018). Through this theory, as Latinos begin to make sense of their communities, it would be helpful to have a mentor or someone who can navigate them through this new territory and guide them on how capital is socially constructed through the majority and what they value. This may contribute to their success.

Teachers can encourage a supportive relationship by learning more about their students' experiences and home life; this creates a stronger bond with the communities they engage in (Newcomer, 2018). Through these experiences, they can share the successes and challenges that Latinos have encountered and rely on educators to actively listen to others' perspectives and reflect upon their ideologies (Fuller & Garcia Coll, 2010; Irizarry, 2011). It is critical to make space for Latino families to be involved, engaged, and included in the learning environment so they can be empowered as active members of the learning community. Hence, as a teacher builds a positive rapport with the students and their families, she/he can also learn how to help Latinos successfully navigate their school experiences.

Challenges For Students and Parents: Individual Levels

Navigating Dual Cultural Spaces

Working with Latino children and families in an educational setting goes beyond academics. Latino families see *education* as teaching academics, communication, behavior, and much more (Auerbach, 2002; Velázquez, 2017). Therefore, as teachers work with Latino families, they should acknowledge the positive attributes, skills, and talents that children and families bring to the learning environment. Many times, teachers do not know how to work with children of color, and they make assumptions or hold negative perspectives based on previous experiences. For example, many educators and administrators see a family's involvement negatively because they lack understanding of Latino family structures and culture. Yet, teachers can use counter-narratives to reflect on their thinking and address their deficit perspectives towards Latinos (Irizarry, 2011). Latinos need educational professionals to allow them to use many ways to show their knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

Likewise, educators must learn about working with Latino families and how to meet their needs, as they bring diverse backgrounds and experiences to the classroom environment. Teachers are important in children's development, and they use their expertise to provide opportunities for success (González et al., 2005; Irizarry, 2011). In addition, Latino families bring their positivity and strong identity to school, which impacts their development (Cabrera et al., 2024). This positive outlook on life helps them strive for success and stay motivated through the challenges they encounter.

Language Barriers

While language is a critical cultural asset, people continue to place judgment on how one speaks and thinks when they hear differences in dialect and syntax, and believe that they are

uneducated, poor, and barbaric. This was evident throughout Lozano's (2013) article, as there were many thoughts behind mandating schools to become *English-only*. In the United States, public schools have often fought to honor a child's home language or to create an environment that expects an "English-only" policy. These were created due to politics and policies throughout the United States. Educational policies have been influenced by segregation versus integration debates, local control versus federal protection arguments, and conflicting viewpoints of language as a problem, resource, or right (Gonzalez, 2015; Stritikus, 2010). This segregation continues to produce opportunities for Latinos that are not as equitable as their White counterparts.

Therefore, as children, they are told that the way they speak is wrong. Hearing this over and over makes them feel bad about themselves, and it keeps happening as they grow up (Anzaldúa, 2012). Latinos are required to speak English, and if they cannot, their language is viewed as a problem. In the United States, Language is racialized and serves as an indication that someone is a foreigner (Anzaldúa, 2012; Irizarry, 2011). Yet, their language is a part of their identity, and schools need to recognize the importance of providing the opportunity to use their native tongue. Anzaldúa (2012) stated, "My 'home' tongues are the languages that I speak with my sisters and brothers, with my friends" (p. 78). Hence, respecting their home language is essential as it shows they are valued. Teachers must show bilingual children that they are valued and accepted as who they are in their identity, which encompasses their language.

Because language is tied to one's identity, teachers must show Latino children that their language is valid and valuable in their classroom. "Spanish is the language that my parents use to tell me they love me and teach me about God, and it is the language that connects my family here in the United States with my loved ones in Mexico" (Irizarry, 2011, p. 122). A person's

native language is a part of their being and portrays joyous moments in their lives. This is why it was so detrimental to students who were not allowed to use their native language in school, as it was negatively viewed. Although changes are being made to challenge this way of thinking, American schools assimilate children by taking away their home language (Irizarry, 2011).

Consequently, the mindset of forcing children to forget their native tongue also implies that they must change who they are. Language is a part of our identity and represents an important aspect of our culture. Consequently, when trusted adults, such as teachers, do not value your language and convey that it is wrong, they are telling you that your culture and identity are worthless (Irizarry, 2011).

Hence, a Latino's ability to speak multiple languages, respect and revere various cultures, and dedication to their community make a positive difference in their families' lives (Bernal, 2002). This knowledge helps them make sense of the spaces that have failed them. Culturally responsive teachers view multilingual children's language and culture as an asset and establish effective relationships with their family members (Castro & Calzada, 2021). Their attitudes and practices impact their learning and development (Castro & Calzada, 2021). Learning environments must provide space and opportunities for students to share their native language and use it as they communicate with others around them, creating a welcoming atmosphere that shows appreciation for who they are and what they contribute.

Family-Level Challenges

Weak School-Family Connections

Latino families want to be involved in their children's educational journeys and strive to help them be successful. However, many educators and administrators see their involvement through a deficit lens, which demonstrates their lack of understanding of Latino family structures

and culture. Consequently, Latinos need schools to establish partnerships between their parents and educators to create a positive learning environment and promote success. When children see their parents engaging in a relationship with their teachers, it sets the tone that they are a team working to benefit the best for the children. When teachers engage positively with children in their early years of learning, academic achievement is higher (Castro & Calzada, 2021; Gallo & Link, 2016; Irizarry & Raible, 2011).

For instance, building a positive classroom community and establishing strong and nurturing relationships are strong predictors of academic outcomes (Castro & Calzada, 2021; Gallo & Link, 2016; Irizarry & Raible, 2011). These relationships form trust and understanding and provide a safe place for Latino families and their children to belong and learn. Therefore, the children, teachers, and parents establish a collaborative environment where they are seen, heard, and valued. Hence, Latino children need teachers to know and understand them, their families, and their backgrounds. Schools need to know the prior knowledge and experiences children bring to their learning environment so that they know how to best support Latino children's academic and social growth (Irizarry, 2011; Velázquez, 2022).

Teachers need to invite Latino students to share about their diverse background, experiences, and perspectives so that they can integrate these ideas into their learning environment (Auerbach, 2002; Castro & Calzada, 2021; Marrun, 2018). Through this deep knowledge of their students and families, teachers can prepare students to have the critical resources they may need to be successful in their learning endeavors. For example, they can use a technology device to translate specific words or phrases if they need assistance with the English language. Or they could use a dictionary to search for words that may be confusing. These simple techniques can demonstrate to Latino students that they are in an environment that

accepts and acknowledges them. And through providing the necessary resources to students, teachers provide the opportunity for students to share their real-world knowledge and establish trusting relationships (Auerbach, 2002; Gallo & Link, 2016). Students must have a place where they can share their prior experiences and still be treated with respect and dignity.

Educator and School-Level Challenges

Middle-Class Norms in Schools

The United States did not use its position of power to help Latinos navigate new spaces and experiences; its power could have created a space for Latinos to sobrevivir and, eventually, thrive. For both parties to gain something, an investment of one's time, money, skills, talents, or connections must occur, and many of these did not. The United States engaged in taking resources and capital from the Latinos but did not reciprocate. Unfortunately, those in power created a safe world for people who fit the European mold and did not deviate from the society they created.

Unfortunately, as the dominant race established societal norms, those who did not fit the binary system were given invisible borders that determined whether their differences were accepted or not. These norms did not allow for anything outside this *black and white* thinking. Because society creates norms that cater to the dominant group in power, the ownership of power always shifts in their favor. These experiences then influence their personal history, social interactions, and culture.

Yet, this did not stop Latino parents from immigrating to the United States in search of better educational opportunities for their children (Hill & Torres, 2010). Education is perceived as a means to gain economic capital and upward mobility. However, Bourdieu's Capital Theory reveals that success within educational systems is linked to effort and the accumulation of

economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, while schools were intended to support all learners, they were historically built upon white, middle-class norms that fail to reflect the increasingly diverse student population. Latino families, in particular, have been marginalized within this structure, facing systemic challenges rooted in racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic disparities (Murillo et al., 2009).

Hence, through the lens of LatCrit, these disparities are seen not as isolated events but as manifestations of institutional racism and colorblind policies that neglect the cultural wealth and lived experiences of Latino communities (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The LatCrit Theory critiques how societal norms privilege whiteness while marginalizing Latinos and advocates for a historical and power-conscious understanding of Latino experiences. This theory promotes equity by challenging racism and advocating for the inclusion of Latino histories, identities, and experiences in broader societal discussions.

Consequently, by creating norms that embrace our differences and teach others about our culture, people can begin to change the narrative of how Latinos navigate various spaces in the United States and extinguish these borders created around them. It is vital to look at the many ways that Latinos attempted to engage in using their capital to support, guide, and elevate others in society because culture forms their beliefs; and, the culture that Latinos have experienced and navigated through was made by those in power who were Eurocentric and male (Anzaldúa, 2012). Therefore, it is critical to understand that norms in society were created predominantly by White people and will differ from the norms established in Latino cultures and homes.

Deficit-based Perspectives

Bourdieu's theory reminds us that institutions, like schools, play a role in transmitting cultural capital and reinforcing social structures (Bourdieu, 2021). Therefore, schools continue to

function through a deficit lens toward children of color and low-income backgrounds. They have often believed harmful ideas that blame families of color for not doing well. These negative views lead to unfair treatment and lower-quality education for Latino children (Marrun, 2018).

Latino families often hold high educational aspirations for their children and see education as a key to future opportunity and stability (Hill & Torres, 2010). Unfair systems and power differences keep families of color from being truly involved in their children's schools. Negative beliefs about these families also affect decisions made about their children's education (Marrun, 2018). This disconnect is compounded by the lack of early interventions that acknowledge and build on the cultural capital and familial assets that Latino families bring with them (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Gándara, 2002).

Early educational experiences often fail to validate Latino identities. Such outcomes are deeply at odds with the asset-based approaches needed to build inclusive learning environments. LatCrit scholars argue for a shift away from Eurocentric frameworks toward more inclusive practices that honor the lived realities, histories, and knowledge of communities of color (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

Culturally Relevant Practices and Cultural Knowledge in Schools

Professionals who work with Latino children and families need to understand them as a close-knit society that is warm and inviting to all around them. Latinos measure success in a group and not through individualistic measures. For example, they stay with their family and succeed in elevating their circumstances. Irizarry (2011) and Anzaldúa (2012) both shared how students stated they were strongly committed to their families or the Mexican communities from which they came, a commitment that translated into a desire to give back and help others. Their identity is tied to their family history and culture. Their identity consists of the foods they eat, the

people they socialize with, the customs and traditions they create, and the experiences they encounter.

For many Latinos, specific smells and foods are what connect them to their identity and heritage (Anzaldúa, 2012). These ideas and things make them who they are. Therefore, being Mexican is in one's core being; it ties them to their ancestors and the shoulders of the giants they are standing on (Anzaldúa, 2012). Her Mexican identity encompasses all she is to the core of her body. She carries her Mexican traditions, culture, experiences, and background with her as she forges new paths in territory that has forgotten about her. She uses all her Mexican identity to stay strong, resilient, and encouraged. It is vital to know that Latinos strive for better, not just for themselves, but for their ancestors who came before them.

Recognizing how education systems function in other countries, learning about them through discussion with the family and children, and teaching them about the American school systems can provide critical information to the families new to these systems and help them navigate them. Research calls for culturally responsive programs that build on the strengths of Latino families, supporting language development, academic achievement, and positive bicultural identity formation (Cabrera et al., 2024). Strength-based models that recognize and incorporate familial knowledge, cultural heritage, and community ties are more likely to promote engagement and reduce disparities (Auerbach, 2002; Gándara, 2002). Understanding the specific educational needs of Latino families is essential for reimagining equitable schooling.

Integrating LatCrit, Borderland Theory, and Capital Theory enables a deeper understanding of how power, culture, and identity shape the educational experiences of Latino students. These frameworks offer a foundation for transforming schools into more just and

inclusive spaces—ones that validate all children's histories and create pathways for success grounded in cultural authenticity and structural equity.

Access to Academic and Enrichment Resources

Discrimination in Resources. Our education system is still being used to justify surveilling brown bodies and to legitimize brown bodies (Irizarry, 2011; Velázquez, 2022). This system was created to judge them and limit their capabilities. Therefore, schools became a place where students from diverse cultures form new communities and look for spaces where they belong (Irizarry, 2011).

Schools are one of the systems that exacerbate positions of power, privilege, and oppression. For example, minority students in low-income schools are placed in nonacademic tracks and have less access to guidance with educational goals (Thayer-Bacon, 2013). Due to being a minority in a low-income school, they are funneled to lower-level courses that do not challenge or meet their academic needs. Less-than-exemplary teachers teach these courses that contain many students with behavioral needs. Students in these courses are given basic work that lacks critical thinking.

Latinos receive inequitable resources, services, and courses that limit their true potential. This is evident in Jean Anyon's (1981) research, where she worked with two different schools that served very extreme socio-economic and diverse children (Irizarry, 2011). She wanted to learn if their educational opportunities and experiences differed. She found that there was a difference in the way schools taught children. Lower-income schools serve more children of color, and they are provided more worksheets and lower-level tasks; the students in higher-income schools are predominantly white and taught through instruction involving critical thinking skills (Irizarry, 2011).

Latino Teachers and Leader Representation

The Latino population has experienced growth over the past years in the United States (Cabrera et al., 2024; Irizarry, 2011; Velázquez, 2022). With the population change, school demographics represent an upward growth in Latino children and families (Cabrera et al., 2024). The Latino children and families bring great need to the school, as they may speak a different language, need assistance navigating the expectations of the United States public school, and require guidance to understand how to reach their goals through the educational system.

Therefore, it is important to increase the number of Spanish-speaking Latino teachers to provide the services needed in schools to students and families (Castro & Calzada, 2021). Also, Latino teacher and leader representation is lower in school systems across the United States, and this has a major impact on how Latino students are being taught and treated Castro & Calzada, 2021). Establishing teacher pipeline programs and developing a teacher workforce that can meet the diverse needs of our students is critical to enhancing their success. The research is clear that minority students need to be taught by minority teachers who have lived and experienced their diverse culture, because they will understand better how to support, teach, and care for these students (Castro & Calzada, 2021).

Systemic Level Challenges Across Educational Pipelines

Segregation and Tracking

The Mexican culture was seen as less important than U.S. culture, and people were expected to fully give up their own ways to fit into U.S. language, customs, and life (Anzaldúa, 2012). For Latinos to belong, they had to become like the white people. Yet, Mexican American students were placed in separate schools and did not get the same chances or benefits as white students (Perez, 2018). Therefore, Latinos have always been treated as second-class citizens in

educational spaces. This tone was set by the white people in power, who influenced societal norms. This impacted the way schools perceived children of color, and it adversely affected their educational experiences (Bernal, 2002; Irizarry, 2011). Through this lens, Latino children were treated as filthy because the Eurocentric community saw them as a threat to their pristine community (Perez, 2018).

The majority race created segregated spaces. In these spaces, courses offered to Latino children erased their strengths and successes and have persuaded educational professionals to see them as deficient and invaluable (Marrun, 2018). This caused Latinos to feel undervalued, unimportant, and disregarded. They have been seen this way because of the color of their skin and lack of knowledge about them from the majority race. The white culture is taking away the Latinos' joy through their ignorance (Anzaldúa, 2012). Latinos were feeling oppressed by the white race because they were being degraded and stripped of their true selves. As people began putting labels on groups of people, they always viewed brown and Spanish-speaking groups negatively and assigned them lesser value (Irizarry, 2011). The power was unequally given to the majority race, and Latinos were at a disadvantage because their skin color and background were viewed through a negative lens. This caused great stress in children's learning, development, and identities throughout their lives.

The social structures in the United States function through a White privilege lens and construct borders around those who do not fit into that society. One of the systems that impacts children and families in the United States is our educational institutions. Schools may act as agents of assimilation, stripping children of their languages, customs, and cultural knowledge in the name of uniformity (Chávez-Moreno, 2023). Therefore, teachers hold a great responsibility to create equitable and safe environments. They can do this by advocating for what is best for

students and dare to adapt or modify the curriculum to engage the student (Irizarry, 2011). Teachers must acknowledge that children bring their own understanding of race and ethnicity to the classroom. Therefore, an educator must receive the proper education and training to work with diverse and vulnerable populations.

There seems to be an unfair allowance of exemplary courses offered to white students, causing an unequal distribution of privilege, while students of color receive low-level basic courses that will not prepare them for a future in college (Moll, 1992; Irizarry, 2011). Schools oppress minority students' potential to achieve and excel in different fields and limit their capital gain. Unfairly, many of the students of color are Latinos who are positioned to accept this system. This system fails them and does not provide the opportunities that others of privilege or power receive. It is vital to provide opportunities for Latinos to enroll in these courses so they can challenge their learning, thinking, and doing. Those involved in this system need to start breaking down the borders put around Latinos in the American school systems so that they can achieve their goals, as well.

Multicultural Education in Early Childhood and Elementary Programs

Inevitably, Latino parents need teachers and administrators to welcome their children and themselves using multicultural methods. Unfortunately, too many teachers are teaching without the necessary skills to implement a multicultural approach to teaching. When teachers do not have these skills, they can make assumptions or generalizations that can have a significant impact on diverse populations.

One way that teachers can engage children from diverse backgrounds is through multicultural education practices. Multicultural education values a child's background, perspectives, and experiences to acknowledge their worth and contribution in the community

(Irizarry, 2011). These practices formed from the civil rights movement and helped to level the playing field for marginalized students in undereducated schools (Irizarry, 2011). Those who work in the public school system know that there is a "need to examine and clarify racial and ethnic attitudes of teachers and to develop the pedagogical knowledge and skills needed to work effectively with students from diverse, racial, ethnic, and cultural, gender, social class, and religious groups" (Banks, 2019, p. 40). Therefore, one reform movement that can help address these concerns is through multicultural education.

Multicultural education recognizes that stereotypes and discriminatory practices negatively impact students of color in the American public schools (Banks, 2019). One of the major goals of multicultural education is to ensure all children can function in diverse settings with people similar to them and those of different backgrounds. They must be able to effectively listen to differing opinions and function in these environments (Banks, 2019). Therefore, as our world becomes more diverse, teachers need to learn more about each other and how to celebrate the differences of their peers, while respecting who they are as human beings.

As teachers, it is important that they know who their students and their families truly are because it provides us a "better understanding of the student" and allows us to appreciate, value, and honor their "language, social class, ethnic identity, and the extent to which they identify with their ethnic group" (Banks, 2019, p. 2). By validating who they are, teachers are accepting their identity and building their self-esteem. They can use this information to help inform their peers of the diverse cultures represented in our school or classroom community. This can help build respect towards other cultures that are different from themselves (Banks, 2019).

Multicultural education focuses on helping and preparing diverse students for success in the world around them and to be able to prosper as they make their mark on the world (Banks,

2019). Teachers can use the information they know about their students and meaningfully connect it to their real-world experiences. This will provide their students with a strong foundation to create a new hypothesis and challenge their previous thinking. In addition, every child and their family has different experiences that impact their perspectives or thoughts. These opportunities help children explore, discuss, create, design, or reflect while building on their prior knowledge, which causes changes in their thinking. Through collaborating with peers from various backgrounds, they can continue to develop greater outcomes to stay competitive in our ever-changing world.

Future Outcomes in Lower-Paying Jobs

The education system discriminates against resources, services, and knowledge according to those who have always been limited based on their race, ethnicity, and income. For example, in the literature, Natalie Lira's book (2021) states that Mexican-origin men and women were placed into blue-collar employment, where working conditions were extreme and the pay was less than their white counterparts. Mexican-origin men and women were placed in these jobs and roles from the beginning of history in the United States. Also, the literature shows that women were excluded and not even thought of to hire in these positions, as they were viewed even less than the Mexican-origin men (Thayer-Bacon, 2013).

This creates a disparity in their future outcomes as they tend to attain lesser-paying jobs with lower incomes (Bourdieu, 2021, p. 193; Irizarry, 2011). Unfortunately, people of color are destined to receive lower-paying wages and jobs because they are stuck in a system that does not value them (Irizarry, 2011). They must join together and advocate for change (Irizarry, 2011). It becomes the work of those who are in the school systems to change the way people of color are viewed and treated to change their future narratives.

Access and Inclusion to Higher Education

Many Universities and Colleges are considered Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Therefore, there is a lack of research about how to best serve diverse students on these campuses. Having power in society means having control over the opportunities people can access. It's important to know if you have that kind of power, like asking, “Can people’s actions really change who gets the chance to go to college?” (Bourdieu, 2021). Hence, capital power is necessary to access higher education and to navigate this educational system.

One way that colleges and universities have leveled the playing field is to offer diversity programs that support students of color (Huber Pérez et al., 2021). Yet, current legislation in various states has cut funding for programs like this. PWIs create an atmosphere of privilege based on skin color, which can be compared to having ownership over property. Consequently, people who are white are receiving benefits than those who are not (Huber Pérez et al., 2021). Disrupting these resources for Latinos has a major impact on their ability to attend a higher education institution, as well as it changes the equal playing field. Latino students who attend PWIs begin their college career already seen through a deficit lens and feeling unwelcome in the collegiate community (Von Robertson et al., 2014). Consequently, more research needs to be done about how to provide a better learning environment with proper services that can help students of color succeed and have hope for a better future.

College and Career Exploration in Early Grades

Latino families want to be involved in their children’s learning and future plans for success. These conversations must occur earlier in early childhood grades and embrace how to help parents see the benefits of exposing children to collegiate pathways at a younger age. More research needs to be conducted on how to involve Latino family members in supporting their

children on their pathway to college and careers. The current research does not inform us about the engagement Latino families have in their college-aged children's lives (Gonzalez, 2015; Marrun, 2018). There seemed to be a disconnect between higher education institutions and how they view individualism as a benefit, whereas Latinos value the input of their immediate and extended family members. American schools need to acknowledge the influence that Latino families and communities have and how they support their children to pursue their dreams through an education. Hence, colleges and universities need to be aware of this influence and begin developing events and activities focused on the whole family as a unit of success (Marrun, 2018).

College and career readiness (CCR) has become a widely promoted initiative across U.S. K–12 education, yet there remains a lack of research and programming focused on CCR in early childhood education (Curry & Shillingstad, 2015; Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon, & Fancsali, 2015). Most existing efforts concentrate on secondary school settings, and this is often too late to meaningfully impact the long-term aspirations of students from underrepresented communities, particularly Latino children and families.

This gap is especially concerning for Latino families, who already encounter systemic challenges as they enter the U.S. public school system, an institution historically created to serve all children equitably, but which has frequently failed to affirm and support children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Irizarry, 2011; Murillo et al., 2009). While public education was designed as the *great equalizer* (Irizarry, 2011), it continues to reflect a system built primarily for white, middle-class families, leaving Latino families to navigate unfamiliar expectations, norms, and language without culturally relevant guidance or support (Yosso, 2009).

This study addresses this gap by exploring how college and career readiness can be introduced earlier in educational settings and more effectively tailored to Latino families. Borderland Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987) offers insight into Latino children's complex navigation between home and school cultures, reinforcing the need for educational experiences that reflect their bicultural realities from an early age. Through using Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), the study challenges deficit narratives and centers on the experiences and knowledge of Latino families. LatCrit provides a framework to critique how systemic inequities are embedded in school structures and to highlight the counter-stories of those historically marginalized (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Also, by investigating these experiences, this study aims to inform future early childhood interventions to incorporate college and career exploration in culturally sustaining ways. Doing so can help disrupt cycles of exclusion and support Latino children and families in visualizing and accessing postsecondary pathways from the earliest stages of learning.

The Present Study

My study is important because in most current qualitative research studies I found, there was a heavy focus on Latinos in other parts of the United States and not much focus on Latinos in the Midwest. This state has a growing population of Latinos in the United States, and it is imperative that we begin to understand the implications this population growth has on serving our students in the Midwest. Next, many qualitative studies about Latino participants were rich with insights but did not lend itself to become policy. Latino research needs to include findings that are actionable and produce outcomes, not only information. Another concern I noticed was that the current literature shared the data collected about Latinos in schools as a brief snapshot, but the studies did not consider their home lives and the impact of their community in the neighborhoods. Therefore, it would be important to address more longitudinal studies that

embrace the Latino child's background and educational knowledge. In the following paragraphs, I revealed several gaps that this study will address based on current research and literature.

First, there is a lack of research focused on how Latino families can successfully navigate and engage with the American public school system through the lens of their cultural knowledge and lived experiences. This study centers on understanding Latinos through their knowledge and experiences. By using this information to create learning environments and more supportive educational experiences, Latinos will be heard and valued in their learning community and not have to learn through the White, middle-class norms created in our schools. This will engage them as valuable contributing members and not as outsiders who must assimilate to belong. In addition, by focusing on Latino families 'lived experiences and understanding the background knowledge they bring, this study will inform educators and administrators about successfully guiding Latino families through their school experiences, while valuing their identities and aspirations. Administrators and educators play a big part in a child's learning foundation, and have a huge impact on their outcomes, so prioritizing culturally responsive practices in their schools will provide more relevant opportunities.

Secondly, another gap to address is the limited research on college and career readiness efforts targeting Latino children in early childhood and elementary education programs. Most of the available literature focuses on secondary education, thereby neglecting the formative early years when college-going identities and aspirations can begin to take shape. Consequently, Latino families often lack the foundational knowledge and support needed to understand college expectations and pathways. This study will address the importance of exploring how early childhood programs can introduce college and career concepts in developmentally appropriate

and culturally responsive ways and the benefits Latinos can reap as they prepare for their college and career goals.

A third gap that exists is the lack of studies with multiple perspectives in qualitative data. The studies I found were focused on the relationship between children and their mothers. The father may have been present, but the mothers, typically, stepped into collaborate, discuss, or share their perspectives. Therefore, for this study, I incorporated multiple perspectives through the Latino children, Latino parents, and Latino graduates. It presents a holistic view of our research.

Overall, in addressing the gaps, this study aims to amplify Latino family voices to reshape how schools build relationships and trust. My study responds to the urgent need for more inclusive, equity-driven practices that begin in the earliest years of education and answer the following four questions:

1. How do young children narrate their understanding of college and careers, and what do their stories reveal about the influences shaping their perceptions?
2. How do Latino families perceive their role in supporting their children in preparing them for common education experiences and college?
3. What experiences do Latino college students encounter as they prepare for and navigate college?

Therefore, this study will address research question #1, *How do young children narrate their understanding of college and careers, and what do their stories reveal about the influences shaping their perceptions*? by giving insights on how to support Latino families, beginning in the early years. This research will provide information about how Latino parents and their children

can best be supported in the United States school systems and how to begin preparing them for a successful educational journey, beginning in their early childhood years.

Second, the study will answer research question #2, *How do Latino families perceive their role in supporting their children in preparing them for common education experiences and college*? by emphasizing that educational attainment is important for Latino families, as they see education as a way to overcome great hardships and to secure their children's future and success. Through achieving their educational goals, families and communities are empowered to continue working through these obstacles and to strengthen one another in becoming and doing better for their families. Hence, it is critical to increase accessibility and connection to meaningful learning experiences for Latino children and families to achieve social equity.

Third, it will answer question #3, *What experiences do Latino college students encounter as they prepare for and navigate college*? by raising awareness of the importance of exposing, receiving, and understanding early postsecondary information. It will help disrupt long-standing cycles of exclusion by exploring how early learning environments can introduce and support postsecondary pathways. This proactive approach centers equity from the beginning of a child's educational journey.

Last, I will summarize the patterns or trends that are similar in these participants' narratives. I will determine the meta-themes through conducting an analysis across all three groups of participants. Hence, narrative analysis is the best method to add to the current research because previous studies focus on a group of participants while this study focuses on many perspectives. Narrative analysis is rich and in-depth in data. It will tell the stories of the participants.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the common educational and collegiate experiences of Latino children and families as they navigate the American education system, including the perspectives of Latino college graduates. This chapter will describe the research design, participants, setting and procedures, subjectivity, data collection methods, and data analysis.

Research Design

The qualitative approach that best suits this study is a Narrative Inquiry methodology. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative method focused on interpreting the human experience of a person's lived experiences, stories, or narratives. People interpret what they encounter through their social interactions, culture, and histories. When people perceive and interact with the world around them, it influences their knowledge base. Therefore, people construct their knowledge socially by creating meaning through their experiences. Hence, they continue expanding their knowledge through interactions with their communities, societies, and groups. By gaining an understanding of the participants' culture, we gain insight into their lived experiences and histories. These stories provide information about how individuals identify and represent themselves (Creswell & Poth, 2018). S

In addition, as researchers, we are connected to our participants, who relay their experiences and those they are connected to (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, narrative inquiry allows the participants to express their perspectives about experiences they have encountered and lived, and for the researcher to reflect on the stories told. The focus is on telling stories based on their experiences, such as those of Latino children and families and Latino Graduate students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, through semi-structured interviews, I

engaged with the participants as an active interviewer. Each interview was specific to the different participant groups being interviewed. During the interview, observing the participant's non-verbal body language and taking copious notes was important because the non-verbal cues can communicate key ideas.

I also conducted a second interview (see Appendix E: Latino Narratives Follow-Up Interview Questions for Transcript Checking) to do "member checking" and to ensure that the translation on the transcripts honored the participants' words and narratives and reduced researcher biases. I provided the participants their interview transcripts and the codes I assigned to their narratives a few weeks before we scheduled our second meeting so they could read through them and be prepared to answer questions about the narratives and codes they read. Through the dialogue in this interview, participants confirmed and clarified any words or ideas that came up in the interview. The second interview took between 15 - 30 minutes for both sets of participants.

Lastly, I brought in my experiences as a Latina educator and my work with children from Latino backgrounds. The stories shared by the participants provided me with rich insight into a Latino student's school experience and how they prepared for college and career pathways. Interviewing Latino students and their families and Latino Graduate students allowed me to hear about their experiences from their perspectives and learn about the critical events that occurred in their lives and impacted their futures.

Methods

Participants and Setting

The 20 participants in this study shared information that provided an extensive look into their upbringing, childhood, educational navigation, and preparation for college. Each participant

had the opportunity to provide me with a pseudonym or allow me to choose it. Therefore, the names have all been changed to protect their identities.

The nine Latino elementary children and the five parents were from one elementary school located in the midwestern suburban school district. The school district serves over 17,000 students between 17 elementary schools, four middle schools, three high schools, an alternative school, and a virtual program. This school is known for a smaller student count (around 210 students) and has a strong reputation for providing a culture of belonging.

Each of the college participants knows the school district and attended a university located close to it. Out of the six graduate students, five attended a 4-year research 1 institution that is classified as a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), and one attends a 4-year regional university that is classified as a Predominately White Institution (PWI).

I wrote the participant's background using vignettes. These serve as restoried accounts that honor participants' voices while situating their experiences within time, place, and social context. Through the participant vignette, I was able to beautifully share their story about themselves and to honor their lived experiences. Together, these participants' narratives demonstrate that college readiness extends beyond academic preparation to include family context, identity development, mentorship, and access to institutional support. The findings that follow built upon these narratives to explore shared patterns, tensions, and meaning making across participants' stories.

Latino Children

This section focuses on interviews performed with nine elementary-aged students: Amanda, Anjela, Armando, Christian, Evelyn, Maria, Mateo, Raquel, and Tito. Table 1 will show you the children who participated and their demographics that I gathered from their

interviews. The nine participants represent varied levels of exposure to higher education, clarity of career aspirations, and academic self-concept.

Table 1

Latino Children Participants

Child Number	Race/Ethnicity	Generation of Immigrant	Age	Grades	Gender
Child #1 - Amanda	Honduran	1.5 Generation	9	3rd	Female
Child #2 - Anjela	Honduran	1.5 Generation	9	3rd	Female
Child #3 - Armando	Honduran	1.5 Generation	9	3rd	Male
Child #4 - Christian	Honduran	1.5 Generation	8	2nd	Male
Child #5 - Evelyn	Mexican	Third Generation	8	2nd	Female
Child #6 - Maria	Multi-racial (El Salvador/Native American)	Second Generation	10	4th	Female
Child #7 - Mateo	Multi-racial (El Salvador/Native American)	Second Generation	8	2nd	Male
Child #8 - Raquel	Venezuelan	1.5 Generation	10	4th	Female
Child #9 - Tito	Mexican	Second Generation	8	2nd	Male

*Note***.** This table represents the demographics of the Latino children who participated in the study.

***Amanda*.** Amanda is a 1.5 generation immigrant because she was born outside the new country and immigrated at a young age to her new country. She is a 9-year-old third-grade female who was excited about art and learning. She was expressive in her joy of being creative but also held a remarkably serious vision for her future. She shared that she wanted to become a police officer because she wanted to protect girls from being "stolen" and reduce the violence she saw in the world around her. She talked about the sad things happening around her in this world, and her words carried a sense of responsibility. She would prepare to become a police officer by "studying," and understood that future schooling would require independence, maturity, and doing things "like an adult."

She shared confusion about the structure of schooling beyond elementary school, but she was eager to understand what came after she graduated fifth grade. She was surprised but intrigued by the way the American school system functioned. She had once lived directly across from the local university and was familiar with the university's presence in her community, though not yet with the pathways that led there. What stood out the most from this young girl's interview was her moral clarity. For Amanda, education was not only about learning, but about preparing to help others, protect her community, and confront the injustices she saw.

Anjela. Anjela is a 1.5 generation immigrant because she was born outside the new country and immigrated at a young age to her new country. She is a 9-year-old third-grade female who was ready to impart her words. She shared many visions for her future career. She wanted to be a teacher, a doctor for kids, a doctor for dogs, a singer, and even a house cleaner. She spoke with confidence about who she was and shared that her talents and interests were essential to her preparation for her future. Her academic identity was shaped by her strong sense of commitment to her family at home. She described cleaning the house, caring for her younger sister, and helping her older brother throughout her after-school or weekend time. These roles gave her a mature understanding of how hard work produces strong outcomes.

Anjela's mother encouraged her to become a teacher first. Anjela eagerly imagined attending college, possibly the same one her brother will attend, or the one her teacher attended. She already associated college with working hard, passing tests, and learning "everything" she needed to pursue her goals. She was playful in her interview, but her words were heavy with responsibility about helping her siblings, supporting her mom in chores, and keeping up with her studies because she knew that education could help her "do more stuff" for her family and future.

Armando. Armando is a 1.5 generation immigrant because he was born outside the new country and immigrated at a young age to his new country. He is a 9-year-old third-grade male who was gentle and thoughtful as he shared his response. He delighted in drawing nature, such as animals, plants, and scenes that reminded him of his home country in Central America. His stories about growing a pumpkin vine in his backyard revealed a patient curiosity and an attentiveness to growth. These were qualities that also shaped how he thought about learning. Armando wanted to become a nurse because "you help lots of people," a simple but sincere articulation of care.

He believed college was a place where you "learn a lot" and answer "harder questions," though he was still unfamiliar with college names and had only noticed the local university flag while passing by. His limited understanding of college showed when he revealed his answer about who attended college. He was hopeful that his brother might be the first in the family to go, and he believed his mother "probably" went because she was "smart."

Armando's academic confidence surfaced in small but meaningful ways. Learning in a structured environment had posed difficulties for Armando, but he proudly shared that he had learned multiplication. He imagined that going to college would make him "even smarter." Armando desired to learn and become smarter, but the system he was learning in was restricting his ability to truly show his knowledge.

Christian. Christian is a 1.5 generation immigrant because he was born outside the new country and immigrated at a young age to his new country. He is an 8-year-old second-grade male who was certain he wanted to become an astronaut because it would be fun and exciting. He shared that reading had been difficult for him, but that now he has joy in it because he is getting help. He knew that being a strong reader was very important for future success. His

preparations to become an astronaut focused on learning more, reading better, and understanding what it meant to be an astronaut.

While Christian believed that astronauts must attend college, his understanding of higher education remained abstract. He conceptualized college as a "bigger grade" where people learn more, reflecting emerging awareness without direct experience. Christian had not visited a college campus and was unfamiliar with local institutions. However, he believed that some family members had attended college and thought that his family would enthusiastically support his goals. This suggested that encouragement and affirmation played a key role in sustaining his confidence.

Evelyn. Evelyn is a second-generation immigrant because she was born in the U.S. and has at least one foreign-born parent. She is a female 8-year-old second grader who excitedly shared about the activities she enjoys doing. She participates in gymnastics, which she identified as both an interest and a potential career pathway. She expressed a desire to become a coach because she loved exercising. Then, she realized that gymnastics could also be a part of her future. Evelyn emphasized the importance of consistent practice, explaining that improvement came from "practicing a lot," and she described learning directly from her coach through hands-on guidance and instruction.

Family support validated the career aspirations Evelyn was considering. She recalled doing gymnastics outside at her grandmother's house, and that's when her family recognized her talent and encouraged her to participate in gymnastics. This reinforced her belief that coaching gymnastics could be a realistic future goal. Evelyn's interview demonstrated an emerging understanding of college, as she stated that coaches need college training and described college

as a place where there is “hard stuff to learn.” She expressed a strong desire to find a college where she could enjoy doing gymnastics and continue learning to be a coach.

Evelyn was able to imagine herself in a college setting and referenced exposure to a university through a family visit. Her interview highlighted a child whose aspirations are grounded in lived experience, supported by family affirmation, and shaped by early exposure to postsecondary environments.

Maria. Maria is a second-generation immigrant because she was born in the U.S. and has at least one foreign-born parent. She is a 10-year old female in fourth grade who seemed confident about her future. She shared that she really liked math and art. She knew that school served as a purposeful preparation for her future. Maria dreamed of becoming an early childhood teacher because she liked younger grades and ages. She shared that her teachers always made it look like fun. She knew that having her own classroom would be fun to decorate. In addition, her mom always gave her teachers the best gifts, so she was excited to receive fun gifts from her students. Lastly, she could not wait to build close connections with their parents, as her teachers had with her mom.

Maria’s enthusiasm for her career was socially constructed as she could not wait to teach alongside her best friend, who also wanted to be a teacher. She easily shared that they had plans to do activities together with their students and decorate alike. She knew they would be a great team, as their friendship was strong. This young lady has been her best friend throughout elementary school, and they had extensive and long conversations about doing this together. Maria discussed her perspective on college, which was sophisticated for her age. She explained that teachers attend college to learn what they will later teach. She remembered a student-teacher in her third-grade classroom, and learning from this person a lot about what she did in college.

She experienced being on a college campus in many ways. She attended field trips and camps, which provided her with concrete and positive memories of college as a place that is both fun and full of opportunities.

Mateo. Mateo is a second-generation immigrant because he was born in the U.S. and has at least one foreign-born parent. He is an 8-year-old male in second grade who shared that it was too hard to decide on a specific career choice. He expressed uncertainty about his future because he felt that he could change his mind at any moment. Yet, he enthusiastically talked about exploring multiple possibilities to figure this out. Mateo shared that he had strengths in math and in doing research. He recalled doing animal research in first grade and provided me with great details about the animals and things he had learned about. Mateo described himself as being capable in many academic tasks. He felt certain that he could achieve what he put his mind to.

Mateo had a limited understanding of college, and he could not recall going to a higher education event or campus. He did not know people in his life who had attended college, and was not sure he would attend college. But while Mateo talked, we discovered that he had awareness of activities that could provide a pathway to college. His exposure came from activities that his siblings were involved in, including playing E-sports, discussing scholarship opportunities, and family members having multiple jobs. Through his interview, his future possibilities could be led by his interests, extracurricular experiences, and emerging understanding of himself.

Raquel. Raquel is a 1.5 generation immigrant because she was born outside the new country and immigrated at a young age to her new country. She is an energetic 10-year-old fourth-grade female who spoke confidently about her future and expressed clear goals to become a dentist. She enjoys math and knows that you need to be successful in school to have long-term

success. Her interest in being a dentist was highly influenced by her mother because she had been a dentist in her native country. Throughout the interview, Raquel frequently referenced her mother's encouragement and shared that she was so proud of her for wanting to be just like her and have a secure, well-paying job. This parental messaging appeared to strongly shape Raquel's motivation and career outlook.

Raquel shared that she would be attending college because it was necessary to achieve her goal. She identified it as a place where one learns how to fix teeth and treat cavities, indicating a concrete and skills-based perception of higher education. She also shared that one of her concerns about attending college was the expense of going. She learned that college costs a lot of money. We talked about scholarship opportunities as a way to pay for college, and she became excited. She said she could also work to pay for college. While her mother expressed a preference for a specific university, Raquel stated her own concerns about cost and remained open to exploring other colleges in the future. Overall, Raquel was academically motivated and strongly influenced by family expectations.

Tito. Tito is a second-generation immigrant because he is a child of immigrants who was born in the new country. He is an 8-year-old second-grade male whose career goal was inspired by his family experiences to become a famous soccer player. His desire to be a soccer player was because his father was his coach, and Tito described learning soccer skills directly from him. Tito knew that his family would be supportive and excited once he shared his goal of playing soccer because his family had been very supportive of other things he wanted to do.

Tito shared that to be a famous soccer player, he would have to engage daily in practicing his skills, eating healthy, exercising, and getting enough sleep. He acknowledged that soccer training was difficult and that he would have to try even when skills were hard to learn. In

addition to sports, Tito expressed enjoyment of reading and math, indicating engagement with academic subjects alongside athletic interests.

Although Tito demonstrated limited understanding of college, he recognized it as a place for learning and preparation for becoming what one wants to be. He also showed awareness that academic performance matters, acknowledging that making bad grades could interfere with playing soccer. Tito's narrative showed that he was supported by his family through encouragement and training and that education played a role in his future success.

Parents of Latino Children

The five participants, Christina, Jessica, Patricia, Surry, and Velma brought together a tapestry of lived experiences shaped by immigration, education, motherhood, responsibility, and deep commitments to their children's education. Table 2 represents the parents of the Latino children who participated in the study and the demographics that I gathered from their interviews. When I recruited parents, I encouraged both father and mother to participate so I could gain both of their perspectives. Yet, I was told by the mothers that they would be representing for the both of them. Fathers play a crucial role in these decisions, but the mothers signed up to participate in the study. All women positioned education as a central pillar in their children's lives, informed by their own schooling experiences in their countries of origin and their navigation of the U.S. education system.

Table 2

Parents of Latino Children

Parent Number	Race/Ethnicity	Generation of Immigrant	Age	Gender
Parent #1 - Christina	Honduran	1.5 Generation	30 – 35 years old	Female

Parent #2 - Jessica	Multiracial (Caucasian/Native American)	Native born – no immigration classification	30 – 35 years old	Female
Parent #3 - Patricia	Honduran	First Generation	30 – 35 years old	Female
Parent #4 - Surry	Honduran	First Generation	35 - 40 years old	Female
Parent #5 - Velma	Mexican	First Generation	30 – 35 years old	Female

Note: This table represents the demographics of the Latino parents who participated in the study.

Christina. Christina is a 1.5 generation immigrant because she was born outside the U.S. and immigrated at a young age. She is a female native of Honduras and is between the ages of 30 and 35 years old. She is married with three children and works as a housekeeper in a hotel. Christina's narrative portrayed scarcity in her childhood, immigration as a form of hope, and aspiration in her children's futures. She was raised in Central America with limited economic resources and experienced education as a rare and valued opportunity rather than an expectation. Her access to schooling and university access was only made possible through her father's immigration to the United States because her parents believed that was the only way to pay for her education. This marked separation in the family, but it was a sacrifice her parents were willing to make for her future.

Because of her family's sacrifices, Christina completed a university degree and became a trained primary school teacher in Central America. This pathway required her to study long hours, plan extensively, and engage in hands-on teaching practice in the field. Christina learned quickly that education requires dedication and commitment. However, when she immigrated to the United States, her professional credentials were not recognized, resulting in underemployment.

Christina understands that her primary role as a parent is to motivate and guide her children. Each day, she began by giving her children verbal encouragement and reminding them of the importance of their education. She stated that her children's main goal was to do well in school. She described her children's responsibilities to: eat, sleep, attend school, and study. Her parenting reflects both cultural values and personal experience. She emphasized discipline in achieving their goals, respect for those who are a part of their community, and gratitude for educational access.

Christina shared that she would be interested in obtaining information about college preparation at an early age. She noted that while her children are still young, she believes that families need exposure to college costs, scholarships, and academic requirements well before high school. Without this information, she feared that her children and other Latino children would not receive critical information to pursue college pathways. An important piece that she shared in her narrative was that she received most of her information through social media and informal networks, which highlighted systemic gaps in school-to-family communication.

In her home country, Christina shared that she had a wonderful school experience and enjoyed going to school daily. Yet, Christina shared that she still did not understand how to navigate the U.S. education system, especially when it came to helping her children apply and enroll in college. She lacked understanding of concepts such as concurrent enrollment, scholarships, and unclear career pathways. This reinforced her belief that schools must play a more proactive role in educating parents alongside students. She viewed preparation as collective work, shared between families, schools, and communities.

For Christina, education represented hope for her children's future and the American society. She was strong in her faith and had created a supportive, collaborative community

around her. This would provide her with the pursuit of opportunity that immigration once promised.

Jessica. Jessica is a native-born US citizen who is bi-racial Native-American and Caucasian 25 – 30-year-old female. She is married and has four children. Jessica shared her childhood experiences, her role as a mother, and her identity as an education support staff member. Through her story, I learned about the experiences she had and how they shaped her identity today. Her memories of growing up without strong educational support contrasted sharply with the intentionality she now brought to her own children's schooling. She discussed that she is actively involved in her children's lives because it matters that she knows what they are involved in.

Jessica's early schooling was something she "went to" but was not fully guided through. She recalled her mother advocating for her IEP, showing that moments of support were present but unevenly distributed within her family. These past experiences inform how she constructed her role as a mother. She is "on top of" her son's grades, checks in frequently, and has built her presence in the school as a support staff employee and volunteer. Through her story, Jessica positioned herself as someone determined to interrupt cycles of under-support by becoming the advocate she once needed.

She also shared how her children were receiving experiences to learn more about education beyond elementary school. Opportunities such as field trips to career-tech centers and a local university, marked these essential to their understanding of collegiate pathways. She described the excitement and anxiety associated with these transitions, showing how educational spaces carry emotional meaning.

Patricia. Patricia is a first-generation immigrant because she was the individual who immigrated to the new country. She is a female native from Honduras who is between the ages of 30 – 35 years old. She is married and has four children. She is the youngest of all her siblings and came to the United States to escape the violence occurring in her native land. She navigates her new experiences as a young multilingual learner, anxious to understand her new life and the culture she resides in. She shared memories of her early schooling and the roles she played within her family, offering glimpses of how responsibility, immigration, and language acquisition intersect in her lived experience.

As Patricia told her story, she returned repeatedly to the emotional landscape of learning with moments of confusion yet finding the strength and courage to overcome it with her family's support. She spoke about her older son helping her at home, even when his patience ran thin. She also described the challenges of writing and understanding English, and depending on her son to help translate documents to the best of his ability.

She wanted the best education and opportunities for her children, so she identified that relationships were key to their survival. She formed a community with her older sisters, teachers, staff, and people at her work. She identified teachers who took the time to "explain things slowly," who do not become upset, and who make her feel supported. These interactions formed pivotal narrative moments because in her children's school, she felt capable, seen, and safe. For Patricia, these relational experiences strengthened her belief in her ability to continue learning and succeeding.

Patricia's narrative represented a young parent, immigrating to the United States with her children and leaving behind family and community in hopes of safety and a better future for her children. She embraced the hardships and overcame them with community and love.

Surry. Surry is a first-generation immigrant because she was the individual who immigrated to the new country. She is a female native from Central America between the ages of 35 and 40 years old. Surry's narrative shared that she grew up in Central America, where she remembers living in poverty, but having a childhood filled with love and faith. She held many roles in her life: the eldest sibling, caretaker of many siblings, and a daughter shaped by Christian teachings. These identities formed the foundation for how she understood education today. She sacrificed going to school and getting an education in order to help her younger siblings thrive and receive what they needed. From her childhood to now, these memories anchored her understanding of why education is so important.

Surry shared that when she immigrated, she was shocked and pleasantly excited to see the resources that her daughter would be able to utilize in the American public school system. She contrasted growing up in resource-deprived schools from her childhood with the abundance she sees in American classrooms filled with breakfasts, lunches, supplies, and teachers with time to care. She grew up in so much poverty and scarcity that she could not believe that children in the United States had such great opportunities.

Her role as a mother was highly regarded, as she talked about daily routines she enjoyed doing with her daughter. She liked waking her daughter up, ensuring she arrived clean and prepared to school, and responding when teachers called about academic needs. She wanted her daughter to have the support to be her best self at school and in her community. She was a parent determined to ensure her daughter's access to the opportunities she once lacked.

Through Surry's interview, she situated herself as a mother who was both shaped by her origins and firmly rooted in the hope that her daughter's story would unfold differently from her own.

Velma. Velma is a first-generation immigrant because she was the individual who immigrated to the new country. In addition, she is a Mexican female who is between 30 and 35 years old. She is a married woman with four children and works as a food preparer in a restaurant. Her narrative was grounded in her experiences as a child growing up in Central America to a single mother who worked and studied long hours. Through this experience, she learned early independence, where education was non-negotiable, and responsibility was learned through necessity rather than choice. Velma learned early that schooling was her primary obligation, as her mother reminded her before she left for work and school. She navigated many things alone, like completing her homework at a small table late into the evenings. Once her mother returned, she would check her work before heading to bed. Velma learned self-discipline, accountability, and intrinsic motivation toward learning because she navigated many things by herself.

As a student, Velma took pride in excelling academically and socially. She was highly engaged in school activities, and she earned honors through her grades. She participated in athletics and dance and was even selected for leadership roles reserved for the highest-performing students. These experiences reinforced her belief that responsibility and effort lead to opportunities. Even though she navigated many experiences alone, she understood that education not only served as personal advancement but also as a reflection of family sacrifice.

She immigrated to the United States at age 23, which had a great impact on Velma's future and perspective. Velma described her decision to leave Central America as impulsive and emotionally driven, stemming from conflict with her mother rather than a pursuit of material gain. She spoke softly and quietly about how she abandoned her university studies in

criminology to immigrate, and that she regretted leaving her studies incomplete. This regret drove her fierce commitment to her children's emotional and educational success.

Velma saw her role as a mother as the most important, and she positioned herself as an advocate and encourager within her children's education and development. She emphasized the importance of being present in all that her children did, especially their education. This belief was instilled in her as she grappled with memories of her childhood and recalled feeling worried, anxious, alone, or scared. She never wanted her children to feel that way, so she believed that this support was essential to effective parenting. She spoke about honoring her children through listening to them and communicating about their emotions. Velma described having daily conversations with her children about school experiences, emotions, and expectations, and framing education as their primary responsibility. She believed strongly in holding her children accountable for their academic performance and paired rewards with their learning outcomes.

Velma shared frustration with the U.S. school system's lack of early guidance regarding college and career pathways. She saw the disconnection between grade-level progression and future planning. She hoped that there would be future engagement in interest inventories, career exposure, or structured preparation during elementary and middle school. Drawing from her own lost educational opportunity, she intentionally taught her children about long-term educational pathways, emphasizing their power in bilingualism, navigating higher education, and sustaining economic mobility as tools for stability.

Latino Graduate Students

This study includes six participants: Carena, Marcela, Micah, Natalia, Norma, and Stephanie whose narratives illuminated how Latino students experienced public schooling and navigated pathways to higher education. Although their educational journeys differed, all six

participants identified as first-generation college students and described navigating systems in which college expectations were present, but guidance and access to institutional knowledge were limited.

Table 3

Latino Graduate Students

Student Number	Race/Ethnicity	Generation of Immigrant	Age Group	Gender
Student #1 - Carena	Biracial (Mexican/Caucasian)	Second Generation	20 – 25 years old	Female
Student #2 - Marcela	Mexican	1.5 Generation	20 – 25 years old	Female
Student #3 - Micah	Biracial (Mexican/Caucasian)	Second Generation	25 – 30 years old	Male
Student #4 - Natalia	Mexican	1.5 Generation	25 – 30 years old	Female
Student #5 - Norma	Mexican	Third Generation	20 – 25 years old	Female
Student #6 - Stephanie	Biracial (Mexican/Caucasian	Second Generation	25 – 30 years old	Female

Note: This table represents the demographics of the Latino Graduate students who participated in the study.

Carena. Carena is a second-generation immigrant because she was born in the U.S. and has at least one foreign-born parent. She is biracial Mexican and Caucasian female between the ages of 20 and 25 years old. She is currently attending an urban, predominantly white institution to achieve her goal of becoming a criminologist. As the youngest of four children raised by a single mother, Carena grew up in a transient household when her mother had to work overnights or study to pursue her education. She would frequently leave her with her maternal grandparents in a different state. Her parents divorced shortly after her birth, resulting in limited contact with her father and minimal exposure to Mexican cultural traditions during her early childhood. She

was raised primarily within her mother's cultural context, so Carena described a childhood in which her Latina identity existed quietly in the background. It was present but often devalued.

She explained that her family dynamics caused racial tension, which created an absence of a connection to her father's side of the family. Carena learned about her Mexican heritage gradually, but largely through her older sister, who reintroduced cultural traditions, stories, and meaning during Carena's adolescence. This process of reclamation became central to Carena's evolving sense of self, transforming what she once viewed as a burden into a source of belonging.

From an early age, Carena imagined herself as a college student and researcher. She articulated a longstanding interest in statistics, psychology, and criminal behavior, describing a fascination with understanding human behavior through scientific and analytical lenses. These interests guided her academic choices throughout secondary school, including participation in STEM-focused summer programs and enrollment in criminology and forensic science courses. Her siblings played a significant role in Carena's transition to higher education by providing emotional guidance during the college application process. Financial assistance was limited, but she learned about programs that could support her, such as OP's and multiple scholarships. These resources enabled Carena to pursue higher education with financial stability and reinforced her belief that preparation and planning were essential to success.

Carena chose to attend a college that was not the same as her siblings'. As a first-year college student living independently, Carena described navigating many challenges. She talked about learning to balance coursework, personal care, and employment searches. She relied on organizational strategies as critical tools for her academic success. She utilized institutional supports like access to a student advocate and participation in a campus Latino organization to

provide guidance and connection. Through these spaces, Carena began finding ways to engage with peers who shared similar cultural experiences.

Marcela. Marcela is a 1.5 generation immigrant because she was born outside the U.S. and immigrated at a young age. She is a Mexican female between the ages of 25 and 30 years old. Marcela shared that her success came from family sacrifice, cultural negotiation, and personal determination. She was raised in an immigrant household, and she learned that having a strong work ethic and perseverance could help her achieve her goals. From an early age, Marcela understood education as a collective responsibility, one that honored her parents' sacrifices and aspirations.

Marcela graduated from an urban, predominantly white institution and became a teacher. She navigated higher education through her bicultural lens and learned to move fluidly between Mexican traditions at home and American norms in school. She held serious obligations as a young child, such as translating documents and conversations for her parents. These responsibilities, while burdensome at times, cultivated resilience and adaptability that later became assets in higher education.

As a first-generation college student, Marcela encountered barriers that extended beyond academics. Financial constraints required her to balance work and school, while cultural expectations shaped her self-concept and decisions. Despite these challenges, Marcela described college as a space of liberation, where she began to rediscover aspects of her cultural identity that had previously been muted or fragmented. Participation in cultural events and connection with other Latina students fostered a renewed sense of pride and belonging.

Representation was important to Marcela, as seeing Latinas in leadership roles affirmed her sense of possibility and fueled her desire to give back. Through her educational

opportunities, Marcela was a strong advocate in supporting younger Latino students and serving as a role model for those navigating similar paths.

***Micah*.** Micah is a second-generation immigrant because he was born in the U.S. and has at least one foreign-born parent. In addition, he is a biracial Mexican and Caucasian male who is between the ages of 25 and 30 years old. Micah was the oldest of four children and the only male in the family. His father was deported at a young age and his mother and he grew up as best friends. He never challenged what she said and always supported her decisions. Many times, his younger sister looked up to him, but at times, she resented his allegiance to her.

Micah graduated from a suburban, predominantly white institution, majoring in education. Micah shared that he was a first-generation college student and navigated his educational experiences with a supportive community. His family emphasized that achieving his educational goals could provide stability and employment. When Micah went to college, he described feeling unprepared, academically, but highly motivated to succeed. Unlike traditional-aged peers, Micah's persistence was rooted in purpose rather than exploration because he knew that to survive in this world, he needed a college degree. He encountered setbacks, but he welcomed them as learning experiences rather than failures.

***Natalia*.** Natalia is a 1.5 generation immigrant because she was born outside the U.S. and immigrated at a young age. In addition, she is a Mexican female between the ages of 25 and 30 years old. Natalia was raised in a household where hard work was emphasized over formal schooling. Natalia learned responsibility at a young age. Her parents' experiences as immigrants influenced how education was discussed and valued deeply. College was seen as important, but the processes surrounding it remained unfamiliar.

Throughout her elementary schooling, Natalia balanced academic expectations with family responsibilities. She often served as a cultural and linguistic broker for her household, navigating systems on behalf of her parents while managing her own responsibilities. Teachers recognized her work ethic, but college preparation was largely self-directed. Natalia relied on limited school-based guidance and informal peer knowledge to complete applications, explore financial aid, and imagine herself in higher education.

She attended an urban, predominantly white institution and graduated with her teaching certification. She possessed strong perseverance skills, but she struggled with academic confidence and imposter syndrome, particularly in competitive or unfamiliar academic spaces. She questioned whether she truly belonged, even as she met academic expectations. She began to find community through student organizations. These became cultural spaces where Natalia developed relationships with peers who shared similar backgrounds. These spaces and friendships became sources of affirmation and support. They allowed her to integrate her cultural identity with her academic goals rather than viewing them as competing forces.

Norma. Norma and her parents were born in the US. Her grandparents first immigrated to the US, so she is a third generation of immigrants. She is also a Mexican female between the ages of 20 and 25 years old. She currently attends a suburban, predominantly white institution, majoring in education. Norma's persistence to achieve her college education was led by family expectations, being a mother, and the realities of navigating higher education as a Latina student in predominantly white institutions. Raised in a border city within a predominantly Latino community, Norma's early life was grounded in strong familial bonds and cultural continuity. Education was not optional in her household; it was an expectation reinforced by both her

parents and her grandmother, who viewed college as an opportunity they themselves had been given.

Although her parents valued education, Norma was also taught that financial responsibility for college would largely fall on her shoulders. This understanding cultivated independence, and she learned to navigate scholarships, athletics, and institutional resources. Initially pursuing college through a soccer scholarship, Norma's educational trajectory shifted following pregnancy and relocation, requiring her to repeatedly adapt her plans without relinquishing her goal of earning a degree.

Motherhood reshaped Norma's experiences in higher education. Balancing coursework with childcare introduced logistical and emotional challenges that were not always met with institutional flexibility. While some professors demonstrated compassion and allowed her to bring her son to class or offered alternative arrangements, others reinforced structural barriers that left Norma feeling unsupported. These moments highlighted the uneven nature of institutional care for student-parents and the additional labor required of Latina parents pursuing degrees.

Norma also described navigating racial isolation and microaggressions within the classroom. Experiences of exclusion, assumptions about her financial status, and questions about her legitimacy as a college student contributed to feelings of invisibility. She articulated a keen awareness of how race, language, and appearance shaped her interactions with peers, often positioning her as an outsider within academic spaces.

Stephanie. Stephanie is a second-generation immigrant because she was born in the U.S. and has at least one foreign-born parent. She is also a biracial Mexican and Caucasian female who is between the ages of 25 and 30 years old. Stephanie attended a large, suburban,

predominantly white institution and achieved her goal of working in the health field. Stephanie represented a young lady navigating multiple environments and overcoming family hardships. She grew up where her cultural identity was all around her, and she felt a sense of belonging. Yet, because of her parents' repeated separations, eventual divorce, and her father's deportation, relationships in her family became strained, and this altered her sense of belonging. As a young girl, Stephanie learned early how these challenges can define one's future.

As a child, Stephanie often felt caught between conflicting narratives about her father and her cultural heritage. This led to feelings of isolation, particularly as she struggled to reconcile loyalty to both parents while navigating her own developing identity. These experiences intensified when her family relocated to a midwestern state. She became one of the few Latina students in a predominantly White, rural school. She described experiencing racism, microaggressions, and a persistent sense of being "out of place," both socially and academically.

Despite these challenges, higher education was an expectation in her family. College provided the opportunity to elevate their social and financial status. While this expectation provided direction, it did not come with guidance. Stephanie entered the college application process with little institutional support, limited knowledge of financial aid systems, and no clear roadmap for navigating the university environment.

Once enrolled at a large public university, Stephanie experienced significant academic and emotional disorientation. She recalled being overwhelmed by attending classes in lecture halls, not understanding specific academic expectations, and navigating the hidden curriculum of college. She had to learn about time management and note-taking in a collegiate environment, which differed from her high school experiences. In addition, she had to navigate faculty

relationships through trial and error, rather than preparation. While working through these challenges, health concerns and ongoing family stressors slowed her academic progress down.

Over time, Stephanie found stability through campus-based support programs designed for first-generation and low-income students. Relationships with mentors within these spaces became pivotal, offering not only academic guidance but affirmation of her experiences. By her later years in college, Stephanie described a growing sense of confidence and belonging. Her narrative illustrated how resilience was cultivated through relationships, access to resources, and persistence in the face of systemic barriers.

Research Procedures

Using purposive sampling procedures, such as snowball and criterion sampling, it was the best way to gather participants that I was seeking to understand and learn from. Hence, recruiting Latino children and their parents, as well as Latino college graduates, snowball sampling was one of the two methods to help me locate information-rich key informants and share their lived experiences attending schools in an American society. For snowball sampling, each person was asked, "*Are there other people I can contact to recruit for this study?"*

The other sampling method I chose was criterion sampling because I wanted to interview Latino children, families, and college-aged students who met the following criteria:

1. Be a Latino child/student and/or of Latino heritage.
2. (For children) Have experience attending an elementary school system in the United States and be between the ages of 4 to 9.
3. (For parents) Have children attending or have attended an elementary school system in the United States.

4. (For college-aged students) Participated in an elementary school in the United States and graduated from any rural, suburban, or urban mid-western college or university that is classified as a predominantly white institution (PWI) and is between the ages of 22 and 30.

To begin recruiting participants, I used my professional connections at two elementary school sites in a midwestern suburban school district to contact potential participants in each category. I sent an email and a text (See Appendix F) message directly to them and asked them to contact me with any potential questions. Next, these contacts were asked if they had recommendations for others that I could connect with about this research project. I was striving to recruit six to ten participants in each category, as that would allow me to reach saturation in a narrative inquiry qualitative study (Riessman, 2008).

Both schools have a growing population of Latino children and families, and teachers and administrators have experienced a shift in the culture and ethnicities they are teaching and working with. The schools have similar class sizes and diversity in teaching staff and administration. I aimed to recruit six to ten Latino parents and their children from two Title I public schools in a midwestern suburban town. Consequently, I recruited from these two schools as I worked full-time as an English Language Resource teacher and served many of the children that I aimed to recruit and had strong rapport with their families.

I knew that this relationship would help in my recruitment efforts, as I built a trusting relationship with the parents, yet it would still be difficult because of the political climate that we were facing in our country. Many of the families I served were scared to draw attention to themselves, as federal agencies were beginning to target Latino children and families in a large-scale deportation initiative. It took me several hours of discussing with the families that

(ultimately) agreed to participate that their information would be kept confidential because I would remove any identifiable information from their interviews. So, after many efforts to recruit children and their parents, I successfully recruited nine children and five of their parents from one of the elementary schools. All the eligible participants at the second elementary school declined participation.

In addition, I aimed to recruit six to ten Latino college graduates who attended an elementary public school in the United States and graduated from any rural, suburban, or urban mid-western college or university that is classified as a predominantly white institution (PWI) and were between the ages of 22 and 30. I reached out directly to contacts at various universities around the mid-western state and, also, to several Latino graduates that I knew, personally. I successfully recruited six Latino college graduates. These college graduates were all from universities centrally located to the midwestern suburban community that the elementary school was located in.

Applying to the University Institutional Review Board and, also, the Public School District for approval to initiate research in their district was completed first (Appendix M & N). In this application, I completed an attestation form (Appendix L) to translate several of the documents for the parents since many of them were Spanish-speaking. Therefore, once I received approval from both institutions, I sent a consent form as a PDF file (See Appendices G, H, I, & J) in an email for those who desired to be interviewed over Zoom or I provided it to them when they arrived for their in-person interview. This form explained the project, the risks and/or benefits of participating, the amount of time they would invest, and privacy protocols. If they chose to participate, they would sign the consent form document and agree to participate in two 30 - 45 minutes (as the parents or college students) Zoom or in-person interviews and in one 30 –

45-minute interview (as the children) in person. If they choose not to participate, no consequences were given, and they could stop their participation at any time. I created a participant log (Appendix K) to begin documenting the demographic information the participants shared, under their pseudonym.

For the child interviews, the amount of time for the interview worked best with each child because I had done this type of interview protocol previously, and they were comfortable and communicated with me while drawing their career interests. The interviews for children were conducted during school day hours, unless parents requested a different time that best fit their schedule. They participated in a 30 – 45-minute interview. The interviews were done in the school conference room for privacy and confidentiality. The interviews included a prompt for drawing their interest and dream profession, to better understand their initial knowledge and that of college and careers, and what their desires were for learning or attaining an education. For their interviews, children were provided with an assent form (See Appendix G) to sign to give their permission. This was provided after parents signed the permission form. If a parent agreed and a child disagreed, then parents would be respectfully informed that their child chose not to participate and that there were no consequences attached to this decision. I also communicated my appreciation for considering the project and reminding them that no repercussions would occur once students or parents choose not to participate.

The college students and parents were scheduled based on their preferred time. For both online and in-person, each participant was offered a secure and comfortable location, such as the school conference room. For the parent's first interview, the focus was to learn about their upbringing, family's perspective on education, their educational experiences, perspective on their role in their child's education, or collegiate journey. I asked about the parents' definition of

success and their hopes and dreams for their children. Then, for the college graduates' first interview, I focused on gathering data that delved deep into the history of how the participants were raised and the exposure they received for college and career preparedness. For both parents and graduate students, their second interview (Appendix E) was for me to follow up and address any additional questions from the initial interview and to perform member-check. They were provided with a copy of their initial interview transcript weeks prior to the second interview to ensure they had time to read through the transcription and the codes I assigned to their narrative.

Using a narrative inquiry approach to collect my data, each semi-structured interview consisted of multiple questions that provided me with an in-depth and extensive look into their lives and experiences with the American public school system. All questions were crafted so that the participants reflected on their experiences of attending an elementary school, being a parent of a Latino child in an elementary school setting or having higher education experiences in American educational settings. Since all participants have their own stories to share and background experiences, it was vital to listen and engage in their narratives to learn about patterns that could arise between participants.

I used Artificial Intelligence transcription by OTTER AI for the first round of transcriptions of the interviews at the end of the same day of the interview or the following day. I read through them and cleaned them up, as the transcription missed some words or did not pick up the Spanish as well from our Spanish-speaking participants. As a primary researcher, I read and reread each transcript many times while listening to audio recordings. Doing this helped me recall pieces that may have been missed during the AI transcriptions. Then, on the third day, I listened to the audio recording, only leaving one day between the actual interview and initially

listening to it. When all the transcriptions were complete, I translated the Spanish transcripts into English.

After transcribing the initial interview and doing my first cycle of coding (Appendices O, Q, & S), I scheduled the adult second interviews to member-check the transcriptions. I provided them with their transcriptions, which also had the codes I assigned to their narratives. They met with me to discuss the accuracy of these documents. The participants and I collaborated throughout the data collection to ensure their stories were accurately documented and that they aligned with their experiences.

Data Sources

Data sources for this study included a different interview for each group of participants (Latino children, parents, and Latino graduate students). One individual interview was included for the Latino children, which consisted of two parts. The first part encompassed a question-and-answer portion, and the second part had the children draw their career portion. The parents of Latino children and the Latino graduate students received two interviews. The first one consisted of questions and answers. The second interview (Appendix E) was about member-checking and ensuring their voices were heard and that the codes I found aligned with their narrative. Table 5 demonstrates the research questions and which data source aligned with them.

Table 5

Study Research Questions and Matching Data Sources

Research Questions	Data Sources
How do young children narrate their understanding of college and careers, and what do their stories reveal about the influences shaping their perceptions?	• First Individual Interview (Children) • Drawing Interview (Children)
How do Latino families perceive their role in	• First Individual Interview (Parents)

supporting their children in preparing them for common education experiences and college?	• Second Individual Interview (Parents)
What experiences do Latino college students encounter as they prepare for and navigate college?	• First Individual Interview (Latino College Students) • Second Individual Interview (Latino College Students)

Latino Children's Interviews

The purpose of the Latino Children's Interviews (See Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Latino Children) was to learn about helping children navigate college preparation and to work towards what they want to be when they grow up. Through the questions, they let me know what they wanted to be when they grew up. I asked them to draw what they stated they wanted to be when they grew up, and then I asked them questions about what topics excite them. I completed the interview by asking them about their understanding and knowledge of college.

Parents of Latino Children and Graduate Student Interviews

The purpose of these first interviews was to tell the life histories of Latino families and their experiences in the American public education system (See Appendices B & C: Interview Protocol for Latino Parents, English & Spanish; and D: Interview Protocol for College-Aged Graduate Latino Students). Through these interviews, I wanted to better understand how parents navigated the American public school system and how Latino graduate students' experiences led them or prepared them for college pathways. The first interview took around 45 minutes to complete.

Both participant groups were asked to delve deep into the history of how they were raised, and the exposure or information they received for college preparedness. They were asked to provide a pseudonym for this research, and if they did not, one was assigned to them to protect their identity.

This purpose of the second interview (see Appendix E: Latino Narratives Follow-Up Interview Questions for Transcript Checking) was to do "member checking" and to ensure that the translation on the transcripts honored the participants' words and narratives and reduced researcher biases. This strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings. I provided the participants their interview transcripts and the codes I assigned to their narratives a few weeks before we scheduled our second meeting so they could read through them and be prepared to answer questions about the narratives and codes they read. Through the dialogue in this interview, participants confirmed and clarified any words or ideas that came up in the interview. The second interview (Appendix E) took between 15 - 30 minutes for both sets of participants.

Positionality Statement

It is critical for me to acknowledge that I am the sole researcher and main instrument of this narrative study. I had a great interest in this study because of my own upbringing and pursuit of college achievement. As a child of Mexican immigrants, I was raised with a value for college attainment as a source of success. Therefore, I have a strong bias towards preparing Latino children for college pathways. In addition, as I entered the teaching field, I predominantly taught Latino students whose first language was Spanish. In my teaching experiences, I realized the inequities in the school system and that they primarily impacted language learners. I became fascinated by understanding how Latino children and families navigated the American school system. Hence, I brought an insider (emic) perspective that helped me build trust and rapport with the participants.

Through this project, the epistemology that I used is constructionism because the participants shared how they created meaning of their role in the American public school system as a Latino in the United States through their interactions in this world. I realized that I had an

insider-outsider perspective because I have been a part of a Latino household in which I learned about my roles through my family, my community, and my experiences in school and how they shaped my identity and life path.

This interest, through a narrative inquiry research design, engaged me with the participants as an active interviewer, bringing in my experiences as a Mexican American daughter and former public school educator working with children from Latino backgrounds. So, defining my axiology was important to identify and outline the biases or assumptions that I brought to the research or subject I chose to work on. I positioned myself by identifying my 'positionality' in relation to the context and setting of the research" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). It was important to keep in mind my experiences or prior understandings of the topic, and that it could impact the narrative I heard from the stories of my participants.

Therefore, I engaged in Level 1 coding to construct the themes and ultimately discuss them with the adult participants. Then, through Level 2 coding, I revised and organized the codebook to reflect my participants' thoughts on the themes and codes assigned to their narratives. The second interviews with my adult participants were necessary because I wanted to ensure their narrative was heard and that their voice was acknowledged, without my biases. Last, in Level 3 coding, I examined the themes and codes in the three participant groups and formulated each group's narratives portraying the common themes and codes. And, ultimately, I designed narratives surrounding similar themes and codes for all three participant groups to show the cross-case analysis.

Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry, the main purpose of data analysis is to preserve the uniqueness of everyone's lived experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that "data analysis is the process

of making sense of the data, which involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what the people have said and what the researcher has seen and read because it is the process of making meaning" (p. 202). Hence, I utilized various procedures to understand my participant's narratives. I began preparing and organizing my interview tools (IRB approval, consent forms, assent forms, interview questions, etc.). Second, I initiated the coding process through my initial interviews. I shared these with my participants, and we discussed the codes and their transcripts. Third, I identified first-cycle codes and then second-cycle codes. Finally, I interpreted the data to share my findings.

I engaged inductive coding throughout my data analysis process. To begin this process, I clearly defined my research questions. Then, I reviewed the transcripts from each participant's interviews to define key concepts and themes. I engaged in iterative readings to identify recurring patterns or themes in my data. Finally, these insights became my initial list of codes that were relevant to my research topic.

In addition, I utilized a constructivist approach in which the participants and I co-created meaning through the words they shared in their interviews. One of my major tasks during this process was to engage in active listening while carefully reviewing the transcripts multiple times. During the first cycle of coding, I applied open coding strategies aligned with narrative thematic analysis to identify recurring ideas and concepts within the narratives. I focused closely on what the participants stated and analyzed the content of the text to identify constructed patterns and recurring themes (Saldaña, 2016).

To guide this coding process, I drew on the qualitative coding framework developed by Johnny Saldaña (2016), who describes coding as a cyclical and iterative process of assigning meaning to qualitative data through systematic categorization. Using Saldaña's approach, I

implemented first-cycle coding, which involved open coding of the interview transcripts to identify key phrases, concepts, and ideas present in the participants' narratives. These initial codes captured participants' experiences in their own words and reflected significant actions, perceptions, and meanings expressed during the interviews (Saldaña, 2016). I constructed these codes manually by reading each interview and highlighting key words or phrases from each narrative. Then, I assigned a code and wrote it in the margins of each transcript. After I coded the first transcript, a master code list was constructed.

During this phase, I developed the initial codebook to organize and define the constructed codes. According to Saldaña (2016), a codebook serves as a structured system for documenting codes, including their definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and examples from the data. As I reviewed the transcripts, I recorded each code in the codebook along with a brief description of its meaning and representative excerpts from participants' narratives. The codebook evolved throughout the analysis process as new codes were constructed, and existing codes were refined or combined. According to Butina (2015),

> initial analysis begins during the first interview or observation while the researcher identifies emerging insights or hunches. This can direct the researcher to probe further or refine the interview questions. Once data collection is complete, a more intensive analysis begins" (p. 192).

This process helped maintain consistency in coding and supported transparency in how themes were developed from the data (Saldaña, 2016).

Following Saldaña's coding framework, I then conducted second-cycle coding (Appendices P, R, & T) which involved reorganizing and refining the initial codes into broader thematic categories. This stage allowed me to identify relationships among codes, group similar

concepts together, and develop overarching themes that represented shared experiences across participants' narratives. Through this iterative process, codes were refined and consolidated into meaningful thematic categories that reflected the central elements of the participants lived experiences (Saldaña, 2016). After developing these themes, I conducted a cross-narrative thematic comparison across the 20 participants' stories to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in how individuals experienced and interpreted their experiences.

Lastly, I engaged in Level 3 coding by examining the deeper meanings embedded within the narratives and identifying themes, patterns, and underlying messages across participants' stories. The thematic categories developed during the coding process were used to interpret how participants understood and made meaning of their lived experiences. I noticed that their stories were told in chronological order at specific times in their lives. These meanings or understandings became the findings within my study (Riessman, 2008).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Issues

I established trustworthiness according to the standards of validation and reliability in qualitative research. To do this for a narrative study, validating that the "data reflects the truth" of the participants' stories "by focusing on the individual and what they have to say; collecting stories about a significant issue; and being reflexive about the lived experiences they provide and finding the patterns or themes amongst their stories" will be critical (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 253).

In addition, it was important to understand the ethical considerations that I engaged in throughout this project. According to Clandinin & Connelly (2000), "ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process. Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry" (p. 170). Therefore, I considered the ethical issues that may arise during this

research study and was ready to provide a nurturing, safe, and respectful relationship to all my participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was important to reassure my Latino participants that I would abide by ethical standards and honor their words and voices. I found out about differences that needed to be respected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I completed each interview, I asked if they needed resources, such as counseling, to help them navigate the story they shared with me. All of them declined and ensured me they had support systems to communicate with and process the information they shared.

Using gatekeepers, I was able to learn more about the population I studied and how to be more respectful towards their needs or concerns as we engaged in the interviews. I helped them feel safe about participating and providing their honest answers by gaining verbal and written consent after contacting the participants to explain the study. Also, the participants assigned themselves a "pseudonym" to respect their privacy or allow me the opportunity to assign them one. It was important to protect the participants' identities so that they would be comfortable in sharing their true experiences. In addition, through member checking, I shared the codes with the participants and, ultimately, will share "the findings with the participants" to honor their words (Kafle, 2011, p. 197). This allowed the participants to review their interviews and to ensure that I truly amplified their voices and messages.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion from Latino Children

Through the narratives of the Latino children, I will share the findings and discuss how they support the research question: *How do young children narrate their understanding of college and careers, and what do their stories reveal about the influences shaping their perceptions?* Their stories show how young students articulate academic interests, imagine future careers, and conceptualize college and educational pathways. Using thematic coding, individual case findings were first analyzed and then cross-referenced to identify shared patterns and meaningful differences across participants. I identified three major themes: (a) early academic and career aspiration, (b) understanding of learning and preparation for college, and (c) exposure to college and educational social capital, as noted in Table 4. The findings illuminate early processes of academic identity formation, career imagination, and college-going awareness.

Table 4

Findings from Latino Children's Interviews

Themes	Categories	Categories	Categories	Categories	Categories
Early Academic and Career Aspiration	Academic	Sports Professionals	Service Professionals	Science Professional	Medical Professional
Understanding of Learning, Preparation, and College	Motivation for Learning	Preparing for their Career	Reason for Pursuing this Career		
Exposure to College and Educational Social Capital	Knows about College	Awareness of a Local University	Future College Goal		

Theme 1: Early Academic and Career Aspiration

All the participating elementary school children described strong interests in academic subjects, sports, medical, service, or creative activities that shaped how they saw themselves and their futures.

Three participants wanted to be a part of the medical field as a dentist, nurse, or doctor. For instance, Armando loved to learn about things in nature and pursued opportunities to serve others and desired to be a nurse in his future. He knew he must study to be successful. He also shared that he liked helping people, so he thought that would be a great job for himself. He said, "Because you help people. You help lots of people" (Participant 3). Another participant, Raquel, had a mother's influence on her career choice, as she said that she "would like to be a dentist" (Participant 8). Her motivation was grounded in extrinsic rewards as she shared, "'I will get money if I do my job. If I do it, it's hard, and I have to take my time on it, I will win a lot of money" (Participant 8). Yet, she also shared an intrinsic motivation as she said, "Because my mom told me here that if I were a dentist, I would be so proud of myself." Equally important, Anjela had many dreams and ambitions to pursue various careers. One of her choices was to be a veterinarian to help animals. She liked helping others.

Three of the participants expressed a deep interest in the service profession as teachers or police officers. Specifically, Maria was driven by external forces as she shared she wanted to be a teacher "because you can get your own classroom, and you can have like, if like there's like a teacher, like a thing, and like your students bring flowers or like something to eat candy. That's what I want." She was interested in "like smaller kids, younger kids...Pre-K, kindergarten or first grade" (Participant 3). She also shared that she wanted to become a teacher when she grew up because she had plans to teach right next door to her best childhood friend. She showed extensive exposure to college environments through experiences she has participated in. Another

participant, Amanda, was intrinsically motivated to help others and serve her community. She wanted to be a police officer because she wanted “to help with the fear and violence when girls are taken away" (Participant 1). Her interview grew serious as she shared what she saw on television, and that the news showed girls were missing and taken without their parents’ permission. She was saddened by knowing they were not with their families and felt scared for them. Lastly, Anjela’s ultimate career goal was to be a teacher to help children. She worked hard at school to learn and support her family at home, taking care of her sister and household when her parents were at work. Her career choice was influenced by her mother, as she stated, “my mom says to be a teacher first, and then be a doctor for dogs, and then be a doctor for kids, and I can stay for kids" (Participant 2).

Two participants were interested in being sports professionals, such as soccer players and gymnastics coaches. For instance, Evelyn was ecstatic to share her career choice because she liked to be active. As a gymnastics coach, she said that she liked to dance, “and to exercise, because I really like to do that" (Participant 5). Evelyn identified that she wanted to pursue something that she loved and enjoyed doing. She was clear on her career goal and understood that she would go to college in her future; yet she was unfamiliar with what that would look like and where she would attend. Likewise, Tito was excited to play soccer because his father coached his team and his two older brothers’ teams, as well. When asked why he wanted to be a soccer player, he shared, “Because my dad is the coach" (Participant 9).

Two participants wanted to be in the science profession as researchers and astronauts. Namely, Mateo presented an exploratory stance toward the future, with emerging academic strengths but minimal familiarity with college. He shared how he loved researching since first grade and thinks that will be fun to do in the future. At first, Mateo was hesitant to declare a

career choice. He said he was just confused about all the choices in the world. After further discussion, he stated that he remembered how he “was good at researching. I was in first grade" (Participant 7). So, he recalled that being fun and he wanted to “keep on researching to look for more information and continue his research about other animals" (Participant 7). Yet, Christian, on the other hand, knew exactly what he wanted to do when he grew up and declared it proudly. He stated, "I want to be an astronaut" (Participant 4) because “it's fun" (Participant 4). Christian expressed a strong aspirational career identity with limited direct college exposure. He was proud of his learning to read and understood that he would need to keep studying to be an astronaut.

Across all interviews, students demonstrated emerging academic identities grounded in enjoyment, perceived competence, and engagement with learning. Academic interests served as a foundation for how students imagined their future selves. Each child could imagine themselves in a future role. The children’s interests were expressed through action and participation, serving as early markers of identity development. They engaged in future-oriented thinking, though with varying degrees of clarity and certainty. Their career aspirations were consistently framed around enjoyment, curiosity, and personal interest, with a few stating external rewards.

Although the children expressed understanding of a career, they could not verbalize what steps it takes to reach their career goal. Therefore, one of the gaps in literature remains that college preparation does not begin until the adolescent years, which impacts their understanding of the pathway to achieve their career. Without children having intentional conversations and direct communication in developmentally appropriate ways about the steps to take to prepare for this career, the children could not prepare for their future. These early developmental stages are often overlooked in college and career readiness conversations (Savitz-Romer et al., 2015).

One of the challenges that Latino parents face is that related to college readiness. Most parents state that they have not had much experience or exposure to learning about American universities or how this system worked. According to the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (2026), formal college planning information begins to be shared in 8th grade. Also, Rodriguez et al. (2015) shares that the number of Latinos attending higher education institutions is low because they lack direction and guidance from high school faculty and staff. They must find their own resources or person to help them navigate their collegiate pathway.

According to Torrez (2004), Latino parents are interested in receiving and obtaining more information about preparing their adolescents for college. Yet, in the study Torrez (2004) completed, when Latino parents received this information for their 9th – 12th graders, it was in English and the preferred it in Spanish. Parents show the desire to learn about collegiate pathways at earlier times to ensure their children are receiving the proper information, guidance, and support before it becomes too late. One concern that came out of Torrez's (2004) research is that when students are in educational systems, they get placed on a specific educational trajectory. This, typically, determines the courses that students will take and if they are college-bound. These decisions are happening with school counselors and educators and are not being communicated to the parents. Therefore, students are enrolled in lower-level academic courses and are not receiving adequate preparation for collegiate courses.

Hence, Latinos need early and culturally responsive exposure to college and career pathways. Without this intentional dialogue, Latino children may struggle to see themselves within the academic narrative promoted by schools. As evidenced by the children in this study, they hold big hopes and dreams for their future. They have interests that fascinate them, and they desire to explore them as potential future careers.

Theme 2: Understanding of Learning and Preparation for College and Future Success

For Latino children and families, the earlier they have exposure and understanding of preparing for college, the better outcomes they will have. Across the board, participating children recognized a connection between learning in school and their future success. This equated success with education and inferred that many careers required a college education. However, the inferred depth and specificity of this understanding varied in their interviews. For example, eight of the nine children stated something that they could do to be better at their career or to prepare for it and set future goals. One of the nine children had a limited view of how to prepare for his future career and did not understand how to set those goals.

Evelyn shared that she started gymnastics after her family noticed she was doing many incredible things during her play time at her grandma's house, such as, cartwheels, monkey bars, handstands, etc. "They (her family) said, 'Yeah, you can be in it (gymnastics).' And the first time I ever got to do that, I was doing it in my grandma's house, and then they said they were gonna sign me up, because they saw how good I always did it" (Participant 1). Also, Armando shared that the way he would prepare to become a nurse was to "go to nursing school" (Participant 3). Similarly, Amanda shared that she knew the expectation after completing college was to go to work. She talked about a family member who had just completed his college pathway and stated, "Yes, but he's finished with school and now he's working. When you go to study at college, you finish, and then you go to work" (Participant 1). Raquel also expressed the importance of going "to Dentist College" (Participant 8) so that the experts could "show you how the teeth work and how you can fix them when there's...yeah, when there's like, holes or cavities" (Participant 9). As we walked back to Raquel's classroom, she visited with me and informed me that her mom was a dentist in her native country and that she was so proud of her. She shared that she would go and

hang out in her office and was able to “play” dentist when her office was closed or empty. She was proud of her mom for completing college to be a dentist and wanted to be proud of herself, as well. It reflects Raquel’s understanding of the connection between education and achieving her aspirational career, shaped through her indirect experiences and observations of mothers’ education and work.

All children also understood success by requiring work and persistence. They acknowledged that effort is an individual responsibility, not institutional support, and emphasized that they should “try harder,” rather than accessing resources. For example, Evelyn shared that she understood that to be an athlete, she would need to be "practicing a lot, practicing a lot" (Participant 5). She also knew that to be the best, she would need to train with a strong coach. She shared, "then those people who know, they'll help you, for they can make you good with training" (Participant 5). Maria also declared that teachers need to start “doing lots of math and work. So doing a lot of work and studying and learning" (Participant 6) to become excellent teachers. In addition, Christian stated that astronauts must "learn a lot. Learn a lot. And I think read a lot" (Participant 4). They must learn about things, such as how to “drive a rocket ship" (Participant 4) and how “to wear the right protections, like protective gear" (Participant 4).

Correspondingly, Tito heard of college, but he was not too involved in pursuing it at this point in his life. His understanding of success was different from his peers’ understanding of success. They demonstrated that success requires hard work and persistence at the individual level. His was focused on being a member of a collectivists society, like with his family. Fortuna (2024) speaks to the importance of Latino culture being a collectivist society and that they are a close-knit society that is warm and inviting to all they encounter. Therefore, Tito demonstrated that his career choice was based on what he does with his family, which is playing soccer. Tito

shared that he played with his cousins and practiced his running by playing the game “tag.” He said that he practiced all the time “to keep yourself learning it. Keep trying to get it right" (Participant 9).

Most of the children had an understanding of the importance of preparing for their future goals. Boden (2011) discusses that academic preparation is more than academics, it encompasses graduating and obtaining a successful career that could finance a high quality of life that allows them to provide for themselves and their families. And, ultimately, this is achieved by earning a college degree (p. 101). Hence, the intentionality of exposing younger children to colleges and universities becomes the guidance they require to understand how to prepare for their graduate timeline (Guevara-Cruz, 2018). According to OKCOLLEGESTART.ORG, they offer a timeline that can help children prepare for college pathways. They suggest a timeline that begins in 6th grade with beginning to understand how to find one’s voice to start asking have intentional communication about one’s interest in college.

Theme 3: Exposure to College and Educational Social Capital

Specifically, four of the nine children reported no to minimal exposure to college, stating that they did not know anyone who had attended college and were unfamiliar with local institutions and why they needed to attend college. Namely, Mateo explained that he did not know why he needed to go to college. He shared, “Yeah, I don't know why you have to do research and go to college" (Participant 7). I visited with him about my experience as a researcher and how I got to learn from other researchers’ studies and through my research, they would learn about new things from my studies. Even after that, he still finished his interview with uncertainty about the needs for attending college by saying, “I don't really know about, like, big researchers" (Participant 7). Likewise, Christian shared that he does not know any

universities or what the purpose of college is, but that he does know “that it's a bigger grade, and they help you learn a lot better" (Participant 4). Tito also did not know what college was and that we had a local university a few miles from his elementary school. By the same token, Armando had limited experience with college exposure, too. He shared that he remembered passing the university, but that he "only saw the flag. It has an “O" on it" (Participant 3). He ventured to guess that at college you "probably learn a lot" (Participant 3) and that “probably there's more hard questions. Harder questions and things" (Participant 3).

Three of the nine children stated their college exposure to some extent, but their exposure was mostly indirect, primarily through family members who had attended college or lived near a university. To demonstrate, Evelyn had been on a local college campus, as her older brother attended a workshop. She stated, "I have been into one because my brother was just visiting there to go see it and to go do some stuff there" (Participant 5). She observed her brother in his workshop and shared that "there's hard stuff to learn" (Participant 5). I visited with her about the outstanding record the gymnastics team had at this university and she replied, "One day I will see them" (Participant 5). Furthermore, Anjela shared that she knew about the local university because she had a family who lived by it. She had it all planned for her future in college. She shared, "And I think when my family used to live by it, I thought, ‘I can go there because and I can walk to her house and wait for my mom there, because it's gonna be closer" (Participant 2). Yet, she shared her thoughts on what she thinks happens at college. She said, "I know about college that they work very hard on the things, and they do hard things, and, like, you help people, and I know they do a lot of math, and it's very difficult to do that" (Participant 2). Equally important, Amanda shared that she used to live in front of the local university, so she knew about it, but never went to it. She said, “Yes, I know the local university. My house was in

front of the local university before. But not anymore. But I didn't go to that school" (Participant 1). She understood, though, that "At college, you study a lot" (Participant 6). Consequently, Amanda had exposure to college, as she used to live near the local university, but did not know much about what college really was.

A smaller group of children had extensive direct exposure to college through field trips, camps, and campus-based activities. As a result, college was described in vivid, emotional, and positive terms, emphasizing fun, exploration, and memorable experiences. For example, Maria has had several opportunities to visit the local university in town. She shared that she is biracial, as she is Native American and Latina. Therefore, as a Native American student, she attended "a field trip with Miss M. and went to a camp. Then I went to this shop" (Participant 6). She was familiar with it because she also "drove past it, and then that's it" (Participant 6). Maria understood that people go to college "so they can learn the stuff that we're supposed to be teaching and know all like this" (Participant 6). At college, "like, we have to walk to other classes. It's like 10 minutes, I think" (Participant 3). I think college will sometimes be hard and fun" (Participant 6). Raquel knew about the local university clearly through her direct experience with the college. She attended a local after school program and she believes that they will "probably have field trips. Yeah, when I'm a teen. So like, in two years. I'm gonna be a teen. And the teens last summer went to the University. They went and did a special project there" (Participant 8).

Her mom would like her to attend the same university. However, Raquel hesitated to do so as she even understood the barriers to going to college. She said she did not want to do it because it's kind of expensive and she did not like want to go there (Interview 8, line 115). Her knowledge about college is that "College is expensive and I will pay for it by working"

(Interview 9, line 161). I discussed potential scholarships and she was excited to learn that there are potential funding sources available. She stated, "yeah. It would be awesome to get that to pay for my college. Yeah!" (Participant 9).

While most children understand that hard work and persistence are important for future success, their actual exposure to hands-on experiences with college vary considerably. Many have limited exposure, and only a few have had ample opportunities to connect directly with college during their early years. These varying levels of exposure to college and access to educational social capital can be attributed mostly to children's experiences with family members who attend college, as well as their more direct experiences with college (e.g., field trip), and engagement in family discussions about college preparation and college life.

Seven out of nine children knew family members who were going to attend college in the future or had attended college. One participant, Evelyn, shared that "her aunts will go to college" (Participant 5). Maria stated that she knew several people who attended college and graduated from there. She mentioned that the student teacher in her second grade class graduated from a local university. She was excited to share that "she was my student teacher in second grade, Miss B" (Participant 6). And also that she knew "all the teachers" had to go to college to teach (Participant 6). Anjela had shared that there were intentional college discussions occurring in her household, so she stated, "I know who's gonna go there" (Interview5, line 110) and later shared, "My brother" (Participant 2).

As the fastest growing minority youth population in the United States, there needs to be more resources and benefits to recruiting and retaining Latinos in colleges and universities. According to Tonatzky et al. (2002), colleges have the most to gain when enrollment is higher and Latinos have more information. Hence, it would serve colleges well if they were to begin

introducing children to collegiate pathways and understanding the steps necessary to navigate this endeavor. Some of the suggestions that Tonatzky et al. (2002) shared were to have more "visibility of college 'events' such as college nights, open houses, and campus visitations" (p. 23). This notion aligns well with children being able to have more exposure to a college environment in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Chapter Summary

Differences in exposure to college experiences emerged as a key distinguishing factor across several narratives. This aligned with Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory (Anzaldúa, 2012), and Latina/o Critical Legal Theory (LatCrit) (Huber et al., 2021). In their theories, many themes arise, yet the most common ones that impact Latinos are those of power, privilege, and oppression. These three theories identified the struggle Latinos had with being oppressed by the majority race and placing borders around them and limiting their opportunities. Economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital cannot be attained when power has been taken away from minorities to achieve. All three theories also agree that the power held by White people was created through binary thinking to fit the European way of life and to continue racism in society.

The Latino children participants expressed an understanding of a career, but did not fully grasp the picture of the pathway necessary to pursue their dreams. Therefore, they required more opportunities to learn about this process. According to Guevara-Cruz (2018), the earlier the idea of college becomes a daily part of a Latino child's everyday life, it must be nurtured. The more they hear about this pathway, the benefits, and the obstacles, the more they can prepare with their family and extended connections to pursue success. In this study, this was primarily evidenced when there were different levels of exposure to colleges, yet, less understanding of career

pathways. Some students have ample opportunities because of the resources or groups they belonged to. And other students were limited because their parents did not have those connections to provide that information.

Direct exposure to college and social relationships played an important role in shaping how students thought about their futures. In particular, there are benefits when a family is tied to resources or connections that can elevate their social status (Durand, 2011). If they are not privy to this benefit, it takes power away from them and creates social inequalities in society. This forms social stratification where capital can be suppressed, as well (Bourdieu, 1986). The role of social influence varied across participants, functioning as reinforcement, encouragement, or contextual background depending on the student's experiences and environment. Families played a central motivational and validating role in preparing the children and inspiring them to attend college.

Taken all together, college was seen as important but understood at varying levels of sophistication. These differences suggest that direct experiences with higher education contribute to more concrete and positive college schemas, while limited exposure may be associated with uncertainty and psychological distance from college pathways. Also, they perceived college through developmental and experiential differences, not a lack of motivation. Direct experiences with college appeared to support clearer and more positive educational trajectories, while limited exposure may result in abstract or uncertain understandings despite strong curiosity and motivation (Durand, 2011).

The way the families influenced them to attend or prepare them for college varied in several ways. Several children received emotional validation through encouragement or being prideful; some children saw college as a pathway to success and recognition to uplift their family

and to elevate their capital and were motivated to seek this pathway to honor them; and, a few children were influenced by their parent's role in their future and received encouragement through skill's transmission. These in-depth narratives provided insight into how early experiences and social contexts shaped children's educational meaning-making. Children's future thinking was relational, imaginative, and grounded in personal interests, underscoring the importance of early, equitable exposure to higher education environments. While understandings of college varied, participants consistently viewed education as instrumental in achieving future goals. Effort, practice, and family support emerged as central mechanisms through which children made sense of success, highlighting the importance of early exposure, validation, and structured opportunities in shaping postsecondary aspirations. Still, the research is clear that social capital is a key element to helping Latino children enhance their chances of success.

The findings and discussion in this study extend the current understanding of Latinos because it provides us with specific information about what young children want to explore for their futures. 8 out of 9 children are already thinking about it and we need to capitalize on those thoughts. This section also emphasizes their knowledge about college pathways and early planning. Children have various forms of exposure to what college truly is, but it was clear that they had some understanding.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussions from Parents of Latino Children

This section answers the question: *How do Latino families perceive their role in supporting their children in preparing them for common education experiences and college?* It presents the findings from in-depth interviews with five parents: Christina, Jessica, Patricia, Surry, and Velma, whose stories illuminated the complex realities of parenting, immigration, and navigating the U.S. educational system. Although each parents' experience was shaped by distinct histories and contexts, strong patterns were constructed across their narratives.

Together, their narratives illuminated shared commitments to educational attainment, while also revealing how structural barriers, immigration status, and limited access to institutional knowledge influenced how Latino parents support and advocate for their children's academic and future pathways. The specific themes include (a) navigating childhood into adolescence, (b) navigating immigration, (c) education as the center of family life, and (d) navigating the current political climate, as noted in Table 5.

Table 5

Findings from Parents of Latino Children

Themes	Sub-Themes	Categories 1	Categories 2	Categories 3
Navigating Childhood into Adolescence	Expectations	Familial Expectations	Cultural Expectations	
	Challenges	Lack of Family Support and Presence	Educational Barriers and Inequities	
	Educational Persistence	Family Tensions		
Navigating Immigration	Immigrating Due to Structural Barriers	Scarcity		

	Parent's Emotional Strains and Psychological Weight Carried	Former Tensions	Current Tensions
Education as the Center of Family Life	Education Benefits	Cultural Capital	Moral Framework
	Intergenerational Sacrifice and Aspiration	Expectations From Parents	
	Navigating College Opportunities Through Deficits	Barriers	
Navigating the Current Political Climate	Supporting Each Other Through the Political Climate	Supporting Children	Communication Preparation
	Challenges of the Political Climate	Undocumented Status	

Theme 1: Navigating Childhood into Adolescence

Across all five participating parents, their childhood experiences led them to assume early familial responsibilities and sacrifices, such as caring for younger siblings and giving up their own education. These experiences were further shaped by strong parental expectations, adherence to religious values, and constrained opportunities, all of which influenced their transition into adolescence as a Latino youth. In future sections, the reader will see how this upbringing influenced or impacted the parents' own parenting decisions.

Expectations

Familial Expectations. Three of the five Latino parents described the sacrifices they had to make, as the oldest children, to support their siblings instead of pursuing their own education. In many of their native countries, they faced scarcity in resources and had to make the difficult

decision of who would attend school and who would stay home to work and make the money necessary to pay for the educational opportunities.

In Patricia's interview, she shared that she made the decision to stay home to support her younger siblings when they came home from school and worked to provide income to pay for their schooling. She stated, "Yes, I was supporting my siblings and also giving advice to follow school" (Participant 3).

Likewise, in Surry's interview, she openly discussed the educational challenges she faced when she had to sacrifice her own education to take care of the younger children due to financial hardships. She stated:

> Well, fortunately, as in those times it was good (at home). But, in my country it's very... money is very scarce... there is a lot of poverty. Well, my siblings went to school, I couldn't go anymore because I was the oldest, I made it to the age of 14...fourth grade" (Participant 4).

She continued by sharing, "Yes, I helped them grow a lot. They went to school, I was always there looking after them because I was the oldest, I couldn't go anymore" (Participant 3). Her face was saddened as she reminisced about the sacrifice that she made to help her younger siblings be successful.

Expectations in the Latino culture are highly connected with a parent's value system and embedded in their Spanish language and cultural practices (Olayo Mendez, 2006). Fontes (2002) indicates that familismo, the value of closeness and interconnectedness among extended family members, is prevalent in Latino culture. Familismo includes a sense of family obligation, respect for elders, and a sense of responsibility and obligation to care for all members of the family.

These parents shared that the expectation was to care for their siblings, which in turn, sets them up for a successful future.

In addition, LatCrit (1995) explicitly examines how Latina women experience unique forms of marginalization. Many of the parents shared that they sacrificed their own educational experiences in order to prioritize caregiving for their siblings. They were to uphold family expectations and traditions. This reflects the patriarchal norms embedded within cultural and contexts that helps us understand how power operates within it.

Cultural Expectations. Two of the five parents faced cultural expectations that shaped the way they were supposed to live their life, and many were gendered. For Surry, the religious expectations represented what girls could wear, where they could go, or how long they were allowed to remain in school. For instance, Surry believed that she honored her parents by abiding to religious expectations. She shared:

> I grew up in the Christian belief, always wearing my long clothes. I think that was a belief that as a pastor he said that the clothing of the pants was for men and we had to always walk with a skirt and a cover (Participant 4)

Also, she talked about how she left those gendered expectations but never forgot her trust and faith in God. She said:

> I think I used that belief until I was 16 years old, because from there I think I started working and I left the things of God a little, but I always grew up in the Christian belief. I always believed in the realm of God (Participant 3).

For Velma, she found strength in her culture and family. These cultural expectations lead her to create a sense of autonomy and success. She understood that she and her mother were

alone in this journey, so she needed to rise up and meet the expectations of being raised by a strong single Latina. She shared:

> I left every morning for school and I took the bus. Then, I came home after school and went home on the bus. Already in those years I could make food or my mom left me something from the day before or this day or I already made my own food. But I was always very independent and I am of the idea that talking and saying things exactly as they are, what you have to do, what you can do, is the way where children learn more by telling what you expect of them all at once (Participant 5).

Through a LatCrit (1995) framework, the obstacles Latino parents encountered can be understood as emerging from intersecting cultural, religious, and gendered expectations that shape family roles and responsibilities. While these expectations often reflect deeply rooted values, they may also reinforce gendered norms. LatCrit theory (1995) highlights how these dynamics are not merely cultural, but are situated within broader systems of power, allowing for an analysis that recognizes both the constraints imposed on these parents.

Challenges

Lack of Family Support and Presence. Two of the five participants shared that growing up, their parents were unavailable due to working several jobs or having other commitments, which caused them to grow up quicker than other children and navigate their experiences, mostly, independently. Both Jessica and Velma described their parents being unavailable to support their educational journey as they developed their identity or engaged in social contexts.

In her interview, Jessica talked about her parents being strong advocates when it came to her Individual Education Plan (IEP) for specialized educational services, but not about social

issues. Therefore, she (and her siblings) struggled with achieving higher than high school. She stated:

> Me and my older sister did graduate high school. My little sister didn't. Nobody went to college. So I tried, but just I feel like the parents weren't there to help you through it. Yeah, to motivate you (Participant 2).

Therefore, she attempted to pursue a higher education degree, but her parents were not available to help her navigate the process or support her education, so she felt lost and essentially gave up on that pathway.

Velma had support from a single, hard-working mother, but because of her mother's work schedule and pursuit of her own educational journey, she had to learn how to be responsible at an early age. Velma shared, "I practically had very little time with my mother because in the morning she worked, went out, and I went to study" (Participant 5).

At times, tension arose in the families as they continued to encourage their children to persist in going to school and doing their best, regardless of whether the parents were available to be at home to help or not. One of the participants, Velma, showed profound resilience as she navigated great responsibilities placed on her at a young age. Yet, Velma was intrinsically motivated and innately driven to succeed. She knew whether her mother was going to be home or not; she had to show her that she was capable. In her interview, she stated:

> I didn't have the opportunity to decide whether or not I wanted to do this or wanted to accept it. But when I got older, my mom told me, 'Look, it's both of us. We have to support each other. You help me do your homework and I'll check on you when I get home' (Participant 5).

Throughout these childhood memories, the Latino parents shared the idea that their parents maintained high educational expectations and aspirations for them even when structural barriers, such as time resources, or involvement, limited their ability to support their children directly. For example, Yamamoto & Holloway (2010) shared that parental expectations are deeply shaped by their cultural beliefs about effort, responsibility, and success. Hence, the expectations that parents place on their children are through their cultural lens and past life experiences. Bourdieu (1986) discussed this concept in his lectures on cultural capital. Cultural capital encompasses several forms. But, the one that connects to what the Latino parents stated is embodied. Embodied capital is the habits of mind that are developed over time and through the experiences people have (Bourdieu, 2021). This is what Latino parents brought to their educational environments based on their lived experiences and the opportunities they engage in with their family and social circles. Therefore, in these narratives, the Latino participants navigated their childhood into adolescence understanding that they were expected to continue achieving in their academics, regardless of the support their parents could provide. The expectations were not just based on prior grades, but on beliefs about putting in the effort through hard work (Yamamoto & Holloway, 2010). These cultural expectations were developed in their homes and their parents expected them to achieve them.

Educational Barriers and Inequities. Some of the participants saw their own parents struggle with inequities in education and watched them overcome the barriers they faced. For example, in Christina's interview, she shared the experiences her parents encountered as young children and, later, shared how that impacted her own educational trajectory. She shared:

> Oh, my parents…my dad couldn't go to school because they were so poor that he couldn't go. And my mom did, but she made it to the 6th grade, nothing more. Yes, primary

school, nothing more. He did not have the opportunity to go to school" (Participant 1, Lines 62 - 64).

Overall, these early interruptions were not isolated events but recurring structural barriers. What emerged from their stories is that educational scarcity in childhood becomes a foundational memory, one that not only influences their worldview but also fuels their later parenting decisions. As the Latino parents shared their stories, they were provided with a space for them to pass on their cultural values, wisdom, hopes, and dreams for their children futures based on their past (Marrun, 2018).

Furthermore, in a study performed by Lagenkamp (2019) about Latino immigrant parents' education aspirations for their children, "Data from their focus group interviews with immigrant Latino/a parents suggest that parents' high educational aspirations are shaped by their lived experiences of their own educational and occupational struggles, their immigrant status, and perceptions of opportunity in the United States" (p. 231). Their children's opportunities are understood in direct contrast to their own losses.

Consequently, Latinos are a collective society and hold a group-minded responsibility towards the concept of family (Fortuna, 2024; Irizarry 2011). The Latino culture holds family in the highest esteem, and they overcame many obstacles and challenges because it would not only make them better as a group, but also stronger (Marrun, 2018; Fortuna, 2024; Irizarry, 2011). In Anzaldúa's (2012) book, *Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* she shared that the strength she gathered from her family became her rebellion to challenge the expectations and outcomes that society had placed on her. She knew her family empowered her and gave her strength to overcome the obstacles that she would encounter.

Bourdieu's Capital Theory (1986) states that power can emerge from elevating one's capital. As these families navigated their experiences, they built symbolic, social, and economic capital. Throughout their narratives, Latino participants shared stories about how their parents supported and provided them in the best way they could (Marrun, 2018). Several parents were unavailable due to their obligations and responsibilities to elevate their professions to provide for their family. As they achieve their professional goals, they can use their capital to empower others, as well.

As young children growing into their adolescent years, these Latino parents encountered many physical and metaphorical boundaries, as Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory (1987) states. Through watching their own parents suffer from inequities in their native land and being oppressed from attending school due to limited financial resources to giving up their own dreams to provide the opportunity for their younger siblings. These parents were continuously overcoming boundaries set for them. Ultimately, they did through their decision to immigrate for a better future, but that came with different borders placed around them.

The LatCrit Theory (1995) emphasizes the Latino experiences shaped by overlapping systems of power, including religion and gender. Some of the obstacles that the Latino parents encountered and overcame were due to cultural expectations that were expected to be met. In some instances, these were based on their religious beliefs, but were gendered, as this was the expectation in their culture. These obstacles were produced by intersecting cultural and structural expectations. These expectations operated within the systems of power that shape how it is experienced.

Theme 2: Navigating Immigration

The five parents shared that they navigated difficult decisions to prepare for a better future. Immigration appeared as a turning point that was simultaneously filled with longing, fear, hope, and sacrifice. The parents' decisions to immigrate were rarely simple. Some left home to escape economic hardship; others sought safety, stability, or educational opportunity for their children; and one participant committed to this decision as an immature response to her mother. The decision to immigrate to the United States was not made lightly by many of the parents who participated in this study. At the time of their migration, two of the five parents were immigrating with an older child, and three did not have children. This was not an easy decision for any of the parents, but they understood the sacrifices they had to make in giving up happiness with their family, friends, and community in exchange for the American dream of a good job, prosperity, land, and a brighter future for themselves and their family. The themes that were constructed gave me insights into the challenges they faced and overcame to achieve a better life in the United States. Yet, this life did not come with great sacrifices, as they had to leave behind many of their loved ones and good memories.

Immigrating Due to Structural Barriers

Scarcity. Many of the parents shared that in their native country, they encountered many hardships and obstacles that stemmed from scarcity of resources and opportunities. Christina sacrificed her career as she immigrated to the United States. She discussed the scarcity of resources in her country by saying, "I grew up in my country, in a country with very low resources, in a very poor country and there are not the same opportunities that this country (the United States) has" (Participant 1). And she openly showed her pride in overcoming the scarcity in resources with her family's support, allowing her to attend college. She graduated to be a teacher in her native country, but when she arrived in the United States, she became a hotel

housekeeper. The United States does not recognize her college degree, so she found a job to provide for her survival in a new country. She loved to be around children and teach them but knew that the sacrifice she would endure would be to give up her career in search of better opportunities. She stated:

> Well, it is hard to go to school. It's hard because it's a very poor country, so it's hard to graduate. I graduated. I graduated as a primary school teacher. Yes, but it was hard for me because I had to study for hours. I came from let's say, practically from school, and I had to write a lot of this didactic material to teach children in their studies. I, also, had to write educational plans that they gave us topics to do, as well (Participant 4).

Furthermore, Patricia became sad when sharing about her journey to the United States and what she was leaving behind. But she was willing to make this decision to help her children have better resources and support in their educational journey. She shared, "In my country, if you can't buy a notebook, a backpack, a shoe, a uniform, you can't go to school" (Participant 3). Although she knew this would be a difficult decision, she understood the limitations in her home country. She did not want the same life for her children as she had encountered. Her sadness showed on her face as she talked about how her family was beginning to get older and experience medical challenges and situations that she wished she could be there to help with. She said:

> In Central America, my mother is there. She is undergoing treatment for her heart. So it does affect me a lot to know that this is happening. It's very difficult, to be honest, very heartbreaking. Yes, these are things that one would like to set aside, but unfortunately, cannot (Participant 3).

This was the most difficult situation to overcome because she loved her parents, but made her decision based on what was best for her own children.

Christina felt greatly supported by her parents because they made the decision for her father to move to the United States so he could provide funding for her schooling back home. She felt a deep sense of gratitude as she shared, "I had the resources to go to school and I had the opportunity to enroll in university because my father immigrated to this country (US). And then my father could send me money to go to school and university" (Participant 1). Christina's life was transformed through the opportunity of obtaining her education, which was made possible through immigration. As a trained teacher, she viewed education as both an opportunity and obligation, emphasizing motivation, preparation, and collective responsibility between families and schools.

Their narratives shared an important concept that they immigrated to the United States for better opportunities that would serve in the best interest of their children's future (Stefkovic & Frick, 2021; Cabrera et al., 2024). Yet, Yosso et al. (2009) found that a main theme in their research is that systems in education do not consider the lack of academic resources Latinos have endured as they attempted to navigate these educational spaces (Irizarry, 2011; Fuller & Garcia-Coll, 2010).

The history of the United States shows that there are hundreds of years that Latinos have been marginalized bodies in these contexts (Yosso et al., 2009; Irizarry, 2011). Susan Obler (1995) discussed this concept in her book, where she referred to specific ways that people from Spanish-speaking countries were put into a single ethnic category, and mixes of other races or languages were not recognized.

Parent's Emotional Strains and Psychological Weight Carried

Former Tensions. The decision to immigrate as an emotional response can have major consequences. For instance, Velma shared that she immigrated to the United States as a response to a problem between she and her mother. She stated that her mother was a provider, and she never wanted anything while in Central America. Yet, she reacted to a situation in the spur of the moment and shared:

> Well, I never had that idea of having a dream of doing something here (in U.S.) because my mom always gave me everything, she fulfilled everything I needed. So, I never had the idea of saying, 'Oh, I'm going to go to the United States to buy a house.' Or like young people, 'I'm going to go to the United States to buy a car.' It was simply a bad decision that I made because of anger with my mother and so I decided, 'I am going to the United States.' I mean, but in my mind (never in my life), I was never growing up as a kid who said, 'Oh, my dream is to go to the United States.' Or, 'I'm going to go to work in the United States to get my house, my car.' Not me (Participant 5).

As I interviewed this participant, it became clear that she carried a deep sense of regret related to leaving her mother and the educational opportunities she once had. Fortuna (2024) stated that many Latinos immigrate to the United States for many reasons. However, rather than remaining a source of loss, this regret became a powerful motivator that shaped her commitment to her children's success. Drawing on Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), this experience reflects the emotional and psychological tensions of living within the "borderlands," where individuals navigate the space between past and present, loss and opportunity. Through this in-between space, she transformed regret into resilience, using it as a driving force to support her children in pursuing opportunities she felt she had sacrificed. From a LatCrit Theory (1995) perspective, her experience also illustrates how personal hardship is shaped by broader structural and cultural

contexts, while highlighting the agency she demonstrates in redefining her narrative to invest in her children's academic futures.

Current Tensions. As these parents made the decision to immigrate, they made many sacrifices that they would have to live with for the rest of their lives. For instance, one of the sacrifices that Velma made was knowing that the decision to move to the United States was made from anger but ultimately would cost her so much sadness in missing her mother and extended family, whom were still in their native country. She shared:

> Yes, I like it, but I also miss my home, my roots. I like this one, but I also say, 'My mom is older. My family is dying…because I have an aunt who died three months ago.' So, I say, 'My family is leaving' and I am far from my family (Participant 5).

Even with legal protection, the emotional residue of immigration persisted. The parents spoke of missing their parents, living with the pain of family separation, and carrying a sense of responsibility to make the hardships of immigration "worth it" (Fortuna, 2024). Despite these challenges, immigration is consistently framed as an act of love and an investment in the next generation.

Many of the parents in this study made the difficult choice to immigrate to the United States for the possibility of better opportunities and outcomes for themselves and their family (Fortuna, 2024). They understood that the United States could enhance their life, which would also elevate their economic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This social mobility could provide them with the power to attain success and support others in this position.

Yet, one of the parents shared that she immigrated due to overreacting to a family dilemma. She was not looking to immigrate for a better life, as she enjoyed the life she had with her mother. She immigrated as an emotional response to her mother. Gloria Anzaldúa's

Borderlands Theory (1987) highlights that borders can be physical or metaphorical and influence the identity and experiences of individuals living between two cultures. In this instance, this participant was living between their lives in Central America and, now, the United States.

Theme 3: Education as the Center of Family Life

Regardless of their constrained Early Childhood experiences, limited schooling, and hardship in immigration processes, all five parents describe parenting as deeply intertwined with their children's schooling. Their engagement went far beyond attending parent–teacher meetings. They monitored grades meticulously, helped with homework, volunteered at school, communicated frequently with teachers, and taught discipline and respect as essential academic skills.

Education Benefits

Cultural Capital. The five parents shared about the support their parents provided them, which instilled in them a deep sense of connection and dedication to support their own children. As Latinos, they strived to support their children as an act of love and commitment to their futures and success. Specifically, Surry's words summarized what all parents shared, "Education is the fundamental thing in the life of a child, of an adolescent. It is the most fundamental thing (Participant 4). Christina recalled how her parents worked hard to ensure that she had a quality education and could attend the university, so now she worked diligently to support her older son, who is getting to an age that college preparation is beginning to start. She said:

> Because well, at least my oldest son enters high school next year and I understand that in high school he can enroll in advanced classes for college. I don't know, I don't understand much of it, but I say, 'Okay, when the child starts, I'm going to get help find out about it' (Participant 1).

She continued by reflecting on what her role is in supporting her children at school:

> Well, at my son's school and at my daughter's school... My role is to support them so that they can put in the effort every day and that they want to get to the point of improving themselves and reaching university. That they can graduate. Every day I wake up and tell them, “Son, give it your all.” Work with them so they can have that thought to say, “Okay, I'm going to learn in school, I'm going to put in the effort.” All they have to do is sleep, eat, go to school and study (Participant 4)

Equally important, Velma described daily conversations with her children about their school day, treating academic check-ins as part of her family’s rhythm. She stated:

> I do understand that sometimes they may not choose to listen and must be punished if they do something wrong. Yes, but first we have to talk, we have to have communication because if we don't, it can put a barrier with our children. It’s not okay to punish a child if we don't know the child. Maybe, the child did something because he felt bad or he was bothered. Or maybe he was tired. But we also have to open up to be able to have that communication with them (Participant 5).

Additionally, Jessica shared how she volunteered and is involved in her children’s school so that she could be present to advocate on their behalf, but also to know the school’s climate and culture. She stated that parent visibility at school is important "because I feel like they get really excited when they see me" (Participant 2, Line 92).

Cultural capital refers to the intangible things, like an education, mannerisms, or intellect, that are viewed as a type of currency in obtaining power and social status (Bourdieu, 1987). Through the parent interviews, the Latino participants shared various ways they supported their children in their success, which showed forms of cultural capital. For example, one of the main

ideas they shared is that education is fundamental to their futures. Pierre Bourdieu calls this institutionalized cultural capital because it is a credential or a qualification they obtain (Bourdieu, 2021). In addition, the Latino parents shared a deep sense of connection and dedication to their children based on the way their parents supported them in their childhood and upbringing. This form of cultural capital is the incorporated state, which refers to inherited dispositions of the mind and body, like the way the parents committed to helping them be successful (Bourdieu, 2021). Another example of incorporated cultural capital is how parents wanted to be involved in their children's educational settings. This visibility provides their children with opportunities that will elevate them in their educational context and in their future.

Moral Framework. Several parents understood that education was something that could empower their children and encourage them to reach higher dreams and aspire to be greater than they imagined. They wanted even better for their children than what they were able to achieve. One parent, Patricia, stated:

> I tell my kids, 'If you don't go to college, you're going to be just like me as a cook and in a kitchen.' 'Look, one is burnt (I showed him my hand). And, if something goes wrong, you have to go back and redo it.' Some children close their minds, and they don't want to study anymore. There is no going back if you do that…it's very complicated... yes, if he can work and study, let him do it. Yes, I am going to support him as much as I can (Participant 3).

She recalled a childhood where basic educational access was uncertain and does not ever want her children to strive for this form of lifestyle. She wants them to learn from her experiences. She tells them her stories so they can seek better opportunities.

Likewise, Surry emphasized hygiene, attendance, and reinforcement at home as practices that support school success and help her children persist. She shared:

> As a mother, I am tired, but, I am not an irresponsible mother. She always has to go to school…she always comes clean and that she is there. If the teachers call me and tell me, 'Look, your daughter is not performing,' then we will figure out how to help her. For example, she has a very difficult time with English right now, so in that area the teacher told me to work with her. So we are always working, guiding, and helping my daughter because then that helps the teacher. The work that the teacher does is going to pay off. That is her responsibility. And, we as parents have a part in it, too (Participant 4).

She also reinforced that supporting her child's learning and having communication and a partnership with the teacher was crucial to her child's success in school. She revealed that education is the most important thing in her child's life and how she planned on supporting excellence in her schooling. She said:

> Well, education is more than anything. I help her at home with my support of what the teachers tell me she needs. So I always instill in her also to be an educated girl, not to be a problem child for a teacher because no one is going to love her acting like that. Misbehaved children are not wanted in a university, in a school. Then, my job is to continue to also help her with the little I can in the house. Whether she has difficulty in a subject, I am there to always give her a little help. Yes, and as for teachers, I feel that they are excellent (Participant 3).

Through these narratives, we gain an understanding that education goes beyond the academics and entails providing for them in other domains. For traditional Latino families, being educated is also about being well-behaved (bien educados) and presenting themselves in an

appropriate manner in public spaces (Fontes, 2002). The parents take this responsibility seriously and know that educators are a part of their extended village to provide support, guidance, and communication to provide the best environment for their children. As Fontes (2002) states, "It is common in Latino families for extended family members, friends, and even neighbors to contribute to a child's socialization through sharing resources and freely "correcting" bad behavior (p. 56). Consequently, being well-behaved, dressing appropriately and being presentable, and navigating their social environment is an expectation that Latino families expect children to navigate in their own learning spaces.

In addition, studies like Canizales & Vallejo (2021) state that Latino parents have had to navigate racialized spaces, as they engage in social structures. Yet, through the parent's narratives, they themselves, consistently framed schools as supportive institutions. They highlighted caring teachers, emotional safety, and school-based resources as anchors that helped counter wider societal exclusion. For instance, Surry talked to her children about persevering through hard days and continuing to show up at school. She stated, "Keep going. Mom and dad are not going to be there one day, but you are going to be a person who is going to excel in this country; you are going to be someone with a future" (Participant 4).

Parents acted as advocates, even when they were faced with these systemic barriers. For example, Velma shared how she advocated for her son at his new school and shared her frustrations for the lack of communication the school district provides when her children transitioned from one grade level to the next, especially when it was to another school. She stated:

> So, I talked to her (the school secretary) and she told me that she knows. So, they are going to put him in another program. She is going to talk to the teachers. She said,

> ‘Thank you so much for telling us what was going on.’ I think they also spoke to the elementary school principal and homeroom teacher to find out more about his learning and attitude. This gave them more information to know what they could do with him, to treat him, or how to help him begin to open up’ (Participant 5).

Parents provide their children with experiences that reinforce or develop their cultural capital. This embodied cultural capital is intangible and helps them navigate society as they bring the consejos, love, and guidance they developed in their home throughout their lives (Marrun, 2018). Yet, as the Latino children and families encounter these spaces, they are seen through the lens of institutionalized cultural capital. These are university degrees, diplomas, professional certifications that give them the influence and social status to open academic opportunities in a school context (Bourdieu, 2021). When they do not contain these recognitions that give them status, they must learn to navigate them through their embodied cultural capital, which consists of their manners and social skills.

Intergenerational Sacrifice and Aspiration

Expectations From Parents. The Latino parents held many expectations for them to achieve and reach their goals. Even when they were not present, they instilled in their children how to be responsible and how to meet these expectations. To illustrate, Velma shared that she remembered that even though her mother was absent due to working and attending school, she knew her well and would check in on her. She stated, “I loved coloring and my mom bought me colors, and I did a lot of things. I always do my homework. With my mom, she would arrive at about 9:30 p.m. and check my homework and leave" (Participant 5).

Also, she was provided with a space to do her academic work. She stated, “I always do my homework. I have always loved school. Always. So, I did my homework, I sat at a small

table that I had at home, and I put myself on it" (Participant 5). Therefore, her mother invested the time she could to help her feel seen and supported even in her absence.

Furthermore, Surry, whose schooling in Central America ended abruptly due to poverty and family responsibilities, spoke from a place where memories of scarcity made the resources and support found in U.S. schools feel both abundant and life changing. Surry's appreciation for her child's teachers and the support they provided her family motivated her to continue to support her child at home.

In particular, Velma shared her thoughts on the importance of supporting her children at home and at school because she is a mother, first, and is responsible for her children. This gave her strength and empowered her to carry out her responsibility wholeheartedly. She stated:

> The most important thing is to be aware of our children. For example, every day I pick up my children I ask, 'How did it go, what did you do today? Did something happen?' And in the morning, I always bring them to school and say, 'Have a good time. Put your whole heart into your schoolwork' (Participant 5).

This section continues to speak to the embodied cultural capital that parents model and provide their children at home and teach them how to navigate different environments through their love and guidance (Marrun, 2018).

Navigating College Opportunities Through Deficits

Barriers. When I asked Jessica about if she had been shown how to access university resources, she stated, "Not really. I don't know who to reach out to (Participant 2). When Patricia talked about higher education access or exposure, she shared, "Yes, we used to live by the University in an apartment across the street. My daughter was like, 'Oh, the traffic was awful!' But that's the experience that she has with the university" (Participant 3). Consequently, their

exposure has been limited. In particular, Surry returned to her faith and hope in God that He will help His daughter (her child) navigate college experiences when it is her time. She shared:

> About the university? Well, I have her, God first, because she is going to finish her school years and see if she would have the opportunity to enter college. Because as Latinos, we don't have that many who go. So, you have to pray to God because for God, nothing is impossible (Participant 4).

The lack of information that parents receive to understand the collegiate pathway in ample time is a systemic barrier that impacts marginalized groups from preparing for college the best way possible (Zengilowski et al., 2023). The parents frequently noted that schools do not provide accessible or timely information about postsecondary pathways. They expressed confusion about timelines for college admissions and their requirements, information on financial aid, and what a FASFA entailed, scholarship opportunities, academic tracking, or when information should be received (Torrez, 2004). Many felt that by the time information reached them, their children were already falling behind in the college process. These structural inequities will create achievement gaps that their children may fall into (Zengilowski et al., 2023). This created a sense of urgency, frustration, and helplessness, especially for parents who deeply value education, but lacked access to institutional knowledge.

Moreover, Jessica, who grew up navigating limited academic support, now worked in the school her daughter attended and channeled her past into active advocacy for her children's future college and career pathways. For her, learning about scholarships and financial assistance was important so that her children have a plan to pay for their college degree. She shared that her children are also part Native American, so they would get some of their college education funded; yet, that she needed to learn, more, about scholarships that her children could apply to

for the rest of their schooling. She said, “And so you don't have to pay for it by yourself. Then they can also try to reach for that scholarship too" (Participant 2).

One of Jennifer’s hopes is that, as her children continue with their education, the school invites people from the community to introduce college pathways so that they can be ready to explore it. She stated, "People coming out and talking to the kids about it (college) and getting their minds excited" (Participant 1). She also was proud in the time she spent helping her children with homework as an investment in avoiding the educational gaps she faced as a child. She shared:

> With my oldest child, I'm always pushing him, like I don't really let his grades go down to a C. But when he does get a D, I try to push him through it, because he is in E-sports, so he has to stay eligible to even play. So, I try to be on top of him" (Participant 1).

All five parents described navigating educational systems shaped by racial and cultural hierarchies. They recounted encounters with exclusion, prejudice, or racialized assumptions about language, family structure, or immigration status. These experiences shaped their own sense of belonging and influenced how they prepared their children to navigate similar spaces. According to Lagenkamp (2019), parent’s hold high expectations and aspirations for their children based on their own experiences and challenges with educational attainment. Also, that they are strong supporters of educational attainment, but their focus is on cultural capital and preparing them to overcome inevitable obstacles (Lagenkamp, 2019).

Likewise, the parents attempted to support their children at school, even when they did not feel confident in their language skills or lacked understanding of how the system worked. Many parents reported learning English through their children’s homework or family

interactions, highlighting how linguistic barriers intersect with institutional navigation. For example, Patricia said:

> And I don't speak English, so I am learning more with my older son. It's because he's helping. He is the teacher in the house. Yes, he does not have patience, but you have to be patient. He is the older brother, and it gets very complicated (Participant 5).

Likewise, Velma shared her same sentiments about wanting her children to aspire for greater social mobility and to do better with their life than she could. She stated: "I don't want my kids to end up in a restaurant like me. I want them to have professional careers. So, as a parent, I also have to support them" (Participant 5).

Despite these challenges, they continued to push forward, often piecing together information from community members, teachers, or online resources. Throughout this theme, cultural identity emerged as a source of strength (Cabrera et al., 2024). Some parents reconnected to cultural heritage through their children's schooling or community networks. Others expressed pride in their traditions and reinforced cultural values within the home. Resilience, in this context, was both inherited and actively practiced, as a protective factor against systemic barriers (Murillo et al., 2009).

Across these stories, all parents articulated a shared belief that education is the most powerful gift they can offer their children (Marrun, 2018). This belief drove consistent, proactive engagement with school, even when language, work schedules, or unfamiliarity with school systems presented barriers. Despite their high engagement in their children's academic journey, the parents described systemic barriers to navigating school processes, particularly those related to their children's academic and social success in school (Murillo et al., 2009).

The Latino parents embodied the foundations of LatCrit by advocating for their children's educational needs and embracing support from their school community (Delgado Bernal, 2002). They were deeply intertwined with their children's schooling and capitalized on the cultural capital that they brought to their educational settings. Parents supported their children through recognizing that they bring diversity in language, upbringing, and educational experiences (Bourdieu, 2021). To them, they emphasized that obtaining an education was something that could empower their children and encourage them to reach higher dreams. Yet, it was fundamental that their community partners understood that education went beyond academics (Olayo Méndez, 2006).

The Latino parents lacked the collegiate experiences and did not have essential knowledge and skills to mentor their own children or to navigate this system. This is an example of both embodied and institutional cultural capital that Bordieu discusses in his lectures (Bourdieu, 1986). Bordieu's Theory of Capital (1987) was evident as the Latino parents shared that they were not receiving information for collegiate pathways in ample amount of time to begin preparing. The ones with higher capital oversee this process and engage students in their time. Therefore, more parents are asking for information earlier to start planning for their children's futures in attending college. Even when parents don't have the institutional cultural capital themselves, they advocate for wanting to understand this pathway to support their children in the best way possible.

As the Latino parents supported their children, Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory (1986) emerged from their narratives. Many of the parents shared that they navigated multiple communities in order to support their children to the best of their ability. As they did this, they worked through physical or metaphorical borders placed around them through the majority lens.

Theme 4: Navigating the Current Political Climate

As I began my dissertation, Donald Trump was entering his second term as president and his message continued that being undocumented in this current political climate has unjust outcomes. His new agenda encouraged and lobbied for more detention centers and for increasing the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. This push was to locate Latinos who were undocumented and had a criminal record to send them back to their home country (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, n.d.). The narratives of the Latino parents shed insights on this political climate and offered their personal perspectives of how it was impacting their lives.

Supporting Each Other Through the Political Climate

Supporting Children. The media shared the realities of what was occurring around the world to Latino children and families and fear became a norm, which transferred to the children (Im & Noé-Bustamante, 2025). As parents navigated this political climate, they remembered that their primary reason for being here in the United States was to support their children and to get a better education. Many of the parents encountered hardships and challenges, but they kept their children's success at the forefront of their minds. For instance, Patricia clearly remembers supporting her children through consejos. She stated,

> I tell my children, "I want them to study. I don't want to see them in a restaurant. I don't want to see them in a dead-end job, working nine or 10 hours for a minimum wage (Participant 5).

She continued by describing her children crying and refusing to go to school during periods of heightened political rhetoric. The fear of them returning home to an empty house was overwhelming for the children. She shared,

> And when all this raiding started and with all this, I was afraid and even my children felt it because they don't want to go to school anymore. 'And we're not going to go anymore and if we have to leave, we're going to leave and nothing will happen,' my youngest son said. And we saw the policeman. They began to panic and say, 'Here comes the policeman, there comes the policeman.' I told them as we get into the car, 'Relax, sit down, buckle yourselves up, let's go.' They said, 'Mommy, but you're not a criminal.' (Participant 5).

One of the main reasons parents immigrated to the United States is for the opportunity of a good education. In Roxas and Gabriel's (2017) article, they shared that one of the themes that emerged from their research is that the parent participants' immigrant experiences greatly influenced the importance of their children's education. Parents in this research believed strongly that the public school systems would provide their children with greater opportunities to succeed and excel than their native country could have (Roxas & Gabriel, 2017).

Communication. Parents used their words to communicate persistence, encouragement, motivation, and belonging. Latino parents relied on consejos to help their children overcome educational and personal challenges (Marrun, 2018). They mustered their strength and courage and shared with their children the truth, but how to overcome these realities. Christina shared her thoughts about the political climate and how Latinos feel, in general:

> We Latinos don't really feel safe right now. Yes, and we have talked to our children about the fact that they have toa be prepared; they have to be prepared because you don't know if you are going to pick them up from school again. If not, we don't know how they (ICE agents) are going to get in these coming months (Participant 1).

Preparation. Though the political climate was heavy and saddened many Latino children and families in their community, they found strength and compassion as a community to prepare for the inevitable. Families began to discuss deportation plans and what would happen to their children if they were deported. They designed plans to keep each other safe. For example, Christina shared how she and her extended family have a plan if anything happened to any of them. She said, "What I tell my sisters, my family, is that if something were to happen to them, then I will help them with their children. I would not hesitate because it would be a time to help and support each other" (Participant 1).

Challenges of the Political Climate

Undocumented Status. Parents and children feared for their lives and lacked trusting in our justice and legal departments as our president did not adhere to their rights. For instance, Jessica discussed that she was terrified for her husband and the impact that deportation would have on her children. She did not like to talk about it and took it day by day because she felt like she was overwhelming her children and raising their anxiety. They limited their experiences outside of their own neighborhood, as she feared that there would be ICE agents present in the surrounding communities. She shared, "Like, sometimes when we do go to another town, I'm the only one going because, like, we don't know" (Participant 2, Line 282).

The political climate upset Velma because she felt like President Donald Trump was attacking her character. She shared:

> I felt attacked because I have lived 13 years in the United States. I've never had a traffic stop; I don't owe a ticket. I do my taxes, go to the store, and pay taxes, like anyone else. In other words, it is not that because I am undocumented, I am going to pay less. I mean,

> it's not because I'm undocumented and I'm not going to pay these taxes that they're giving me at Walmart ((Participant 2) 488 - 492).

In this study, the five participants shared how the recent political climate invoked fear and anxiety in their daily lives. These racist "immigration debates" brought about big "challenges faced by marginalized groups" (Huber et al., 2021, p. 7). The narratives of the Latino parents focused on the culture that Donald Trump incited and encouraged once he became the 45th President of the United States on January 20, 2017 (National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.). He served four years in office and then ran for a second term in 2024 and took office in 2025. While on his first campaign, his message was clear about criminalizing and racializing Mexican immigrants (Ye Hee Lee, 2015, n.p.). In Lee's (2015) article, he shared words from Donald Trump:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists (Ye Hee Lee, 2015, n.p.).

Even though he wasn't the first president to run on an agenda like this, he was unique in that he centralized his message around racists remarks, but also "aligned them with racist and nativist camps" (Newkirk, 2018).

Chapter Summary

Throughout the narratives in this chapter, Latino parents shared lived experiences that constructed the themes: a) Navigating Childhood into Adolescence; b) Navigating Immigration; c) Education as the Center of Family Life; and, d) Navigating the Current Political Climate. Their words brought out major concepts that Latino parents encounter, embody, and overcome. Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands Theory (1987) speaks to the navigation between two borders that

these Latino parents embraced and overcame. Many of the Latino parents immigrated to the United States for a better future and to live in a safe country, where they wouldn't have to fear for them or their children's lives (Olayo Méndez, 2006). They understood that this decision was not going to be easy, but it would be worth their children's future successes (Roxas & Gabriel, 2017). Yet, after living in the United States, embracing the culture, and assimilating to it, their safety was met with resistance due to the political culture that ensued.

A major idea that was constructed through the Latino parents' narratives was about cultural capital and how Latino parents model and teach mannerisms and expectations in their household through a collective society (Bourdieu, 2021). Embodied cultural capital embraces the habits of the mind and dispositions that are learned in familial contexts and are used to navigate institutional and social environments (Bourdieu, 1986). The parents of Latinos shared their experiences in their own personal educational journey, the obstacles and challenges they encountered, but what they learned through it all and how it empowered them to use this knowledge to advocate and support their own children. This is the capital they can provide their children navigating educational spaces that are unfamiliar with and may not have any background knowledge to navigate.

In addition, the Latino parents used the knowledge they understood and knew to help elevate their children in these public school settings. They established partnerships with their children's teachers and understood that this was going to provide their children the connection to opportunities and engagement in this educational environment (Durand, 2011). Through the lens of LatCrit, we understand how actual institutional policies and practices limit access and opportunity, so they wanted to break these obstacles before they defined their children (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Their own experiences taught them to advocate and support their children to

ensure they receive the educational opportunities they immigrated to the United States to engage in (Olayo Méndez, 2006).

Lastly, immigration became a focal topic of many political discussions since Donald Trump was first elected, as he promoted his famous slogan to "Make America Great Again!" (Sheposh, 2023) in all three of his campaigns. This slogan "encapsulates Trump's assertion that the United States was in decline and needed to be restored to its former glory" (Sheposh, 2023, n.p.). Locke & Gonzalez (2020) stated that the Trump era allowed for more violence and Americans began to see history was repeating itself as hate crimes were rising and zero-tolerance policy at the border for immigrants led to creating detention centers, where families were detained and grossly mistreated for being undocumented in the United States.

Therefore, the findings and discussions in this section extend the studies of Latino narratives in qualitative research. Many studies do not engage in dialogue about the political climate and how it impacts their study or the participants' lives. By being intentional to ask this question, I was able to understand how the realities of these Latinos initiate fear and confusion in the land of the free.

Chapter 6: Findings and Discussions from Latino Graduate Students

Lastly, this section answers the question: *What experiences do Latino college students encounter as they prepare for and navigate college?* These shared themes revealed that the participants' educational journeys were shaped by interconnected personal, cultural, institutional, and political forces. College readiness and persistence emerged not as individual traits, but as outcomes of family sacrifice, identity negotiation, structural barriers, and community support.

These findings provide a foundation for understanding how Latino students navigate education systems and inform the implications discussed in the following chapter. There are five major themes I identified for Latino graduate students: (a) Childhood experiences, (b) identity development in first-generation narratives, (c) educational empowerment and cultural identity development, (d) structural and resource challenges in education, and (e) political climate in the U.S., as noted in Table 6.

Table 6

*Latino Graduate Students Themes and Categorie*s

Themes	Sub-Themes	Categories	Categories	Categories
Childhood Experiences	Family Relationships and Influence	Family System		
	Aspirations and Meaning-Making			
Identity Development in First-Generation Narratives	Family Influence and Cultural Expectations	Influences		
	Navigating Social Structural Challenges	Challenges		

Educational Empowerment and Cultural Identity Development	Education as a Pathway to Success and Resilience	Success in Education	Persistence To Succeed	
	Cultural Identity, Representation, and Community Belonging	Cultural Empowerment		
Structural and Resource Challenges in Education	Constraints Students Face	Barriers	Social Factors	Underprepared
Political Climate in the U.S.	Negative Impacts	Mental Health	Immigrant Family Background	
	Overcoming	Latino Culture		

Theme 1: Childhood Experiences

All participants described ongoing negotiation of cultural identity, often marked by tension between their identity, language, culture, and disconnection. Each identified as Latinos, yet their relationship to cultural identity was complex. Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory (1987) helps illuminate how Latino students and families navigate dual cultural spaces, negotiating their cultural identities while adapting to dominant norms, such as in school. This constant crossing of borders can be both empowering and alienating, as students develop bicultural identities while contending with cultural invisibility or erasure in their communities or schools (Anzaldúa, 1987; Murphy, 2016). Without meaningful access to information or resources, many families feel excluded from full participation in society and its economy (Cabrera et al., 2024; Irizarry, 2011; Marrun, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Family Relationships and Influence

Family influence emerged as a foundational force across all participant narratives. Each participant described growing up in households shaped by economic hardship, immigration, or family instability, including single-parent households and extended family caregiving.

Family System. Many participants shared their narratives about how their family system was impacted by life situations. For instance, Carena recalled navigating her dual cultural heritage when her parents divorced, and she felt a loss of her Latina side. She shared, “I felt, like that part of me was kind of like a burden and like, not really worth anything" (Participant 1). She shared that her father was, “…full Mexican. So that's where I get my ethnicity from. My mom is all white" (Participant 6). Therefore, she felt like that side of her identity was lost.

Likewise, Stephanie faced similar challenges about her father when he was deported. Stephanie discussed that her mother was constantly putting ideas in her head about how bad a person her father was, and it made her feel isolated to not know that side of her family. She stated:

> I guess I kind of felt alone for a while, until I was probably pre-teen to teen years. I was able to get in contact again with my dad and his side of the family, and they embraced me back into their arms (Participant 6).

Similarly, Micah remembered that his mother stripped him of his father’s culture by changing his last name to her maiden name. He stated, “Yeah, that was the end. My mom took full custody. She changed our last name to her maiden name, so I used to have a different last name” (Participant 3). Therefore, he lost that cultural connection and was forced to embrace only her culture. He recalls being treated differently by his mom’s side of the family He said,

> There were things that I didn't understand until later, like, why I was treated differently by my family, like, by my extended family, or even people, people in high school and middle school. Because when I came from the west coast, there's a lot of people that looked Hispanic, a lot of people that looked like me. But when I came to the Midwest, I was the only person. I was the only Mexican there. And so there was a lot of, like, you know, lot of things that they would say to me that I didn't understand or I didn't really think a lot about things that weren't okay to say that I didn't think at the time was not okay. But now, of course, now looking back, I'm like, 'Wow, that really wasn't something that they should have said' ((Participant 2) 118 - 127).

All the participants spoke of losing their Spanish language during childhood and relearning it later or feeling disconnected from cultural practices due to assimilation pressures or geographic relocation (Von Robertson et al., 2014). In schools, a Latino's language has always been scrutinized and devalued, even though it is a major part of their identity (Anzaldúa, 2012).. The Spanish language is a critical cultural asset; but people continue to place judgment on how one speaks and thinks when they hear differences in dialect and syntax, and believe that they are uneducated, poor, and barbaric (Bourdieu, 2021). Therefore, as children, they are told that the way they speak is wrong. Hearing this repeatedly makes them feel bad about themselves, and it keeps happening as they grow up (Anzaldúa, 2012). Latinos are required to speak English, and if they cannot, their language is viewed as a problem. In the United States, Language is racialized and serves as an indication that someone is a foreigner (Anzaldúa, 2012; Irizarry, 2011). Yet, their language is a part of their identity, and many of my participants indicated that it is a superpower and should be recognized as a valuable asset.

To illustrate, Micah talked about how he grew up speaking Spanish with his mother and father, until his mother separated from his father. Then, they stopped speaking Spanish at home. Hence, when he went to "…Central America for a few months in 2018, I learned Spanish again. So when I had that first phone call with my dad, I was able to talk to him in Spanish" (Participant 3)

Consequently, Carena expressed her sadness about losing her Spanish language when her father divorced her mother. Now, she was trying to reclaim it and stated:

> I've been trying to learn it so that I can speak to my dad in Spanish, because that's his native language, Spanish. And he would like for me to be able to speak with him in Spanish. So, yeah, I can kind of speak Spanish, and just not fully like through it, you know? Yeah, I'm still getting there (Participant 1).

Aspirations and Meaning-Making

Despite experiences of exclusion, all participants identified moments of belonging created through community and mentorship. Coaches, teachers, advisors, and professors who offered individualized support played critical roles in participants' persistence. Latino peers formed informal safety networks, providing shared understanding and cultural affirmation.

To illustrate, Marcela began advocating for Latino organizations to come to her high school and continued her advocacy through her college years. Many of the Latino organizations did not come to her high school because they were unaware of the Latino population they served. Marcela shared,

> Like, the people in charge of these organizations at the college level were not coming to my town because, like, there's no students there. Like, you know what I mean? Like, there's nobody there that we can cater to so, like, a lot of them were just diverted to the

> city, which fair, yeah, I understand why, yeah. But it's like, don't overlook those schools where there is this community, like, there are people who need to know these resources ((Participant 2) 97 - 101).

In addition, Micah had a best friend whose mother was a teacher at his high school. She was very kind and embraced him as a mentor. She became one to provide support about college pathways and answer his questions as she had experience navigating a four-year university. He felt fortunate to have this mentor, as his mother had not completed a traditional four-year college degree and couldn't guide him. He shared:

> But my English teacher, she had a Harvard degree, so she knew everything about going to school. She was familiar with the admission process and the applications and, you know, everything that we needed to know as high school students to be able to be successful in college. She was like our go-to and so it was really helpful to have her, because without her, I would have had to figure it all out on my own, since my mom wasn't super familiar with that process (Participant 3).

As well, Stephanie had a professor in college who served as a mentor and, eventually, became a friend to look up to. She shared:

> And even to this day, even though my advisor from the time is not within that community because he was laid off. He still works at the university I attended in another organization, and I'm actually meeting with him today to go over my grad school applications (Participant 6).

Those connections stayed strong, and he continued to help her navigate her educational goals.

Mentors served as connectors that opened the door to support and assist the Latino graduate students to enter and navigate these unknown spaces in higher education (Von

Robertson et al., 2014). When available, Latino resource centers and first-generation support offices served as transformative spaces. Institutions who understand the importance of providing support, resources, and services specific to first-generation college students have greater success and higher graduation rates (EAB, n.d.). According to the Education Advisory Board (EAB), "33% of first-gen students drop out within three years, compared to just 14% of continuing-generation students" (n.p.). These environments offered more than academic guidance; they provided validation, advocacy, and a sense of being seen.

For example, Stephanie mentioned that she appreciated the resources and services that her first generation program provided her with. This allowed her to feel like she could navigate this space successfully because she realized she did not know what she was doing (Participant 6,). She shared:

> However, with the organization that was for first generation students or those with disabilities or those from low income households, they had advisors within their organization that were able to provide just the same resources and services as your academic advisor (Participant 6).

Likewise, Carena had a similar experience when she was invited to a student success program meeting at her college. She was happy to have someone that could help her. She stated, "I have, like, there's this one lady that if I ever have a question, I just need to send a quick email to her, and she always responds back. She's like a student advocate position (Participant 6). For example, she had a problem with her bursar account and when she realized that she had selected the wrong plan, she did not know what to do. She reached out to her mentor and she was able to help her (Participant 6).

Across narratives, belonging was not granted by institutions, but it was actively created through relationships, cultural community, and intentional support. This community of support was key to assist in helping the Latino graduate students plan and prepare for their higher education pathways (Gonzalez, 2015). Guevara-Cruz (2018) stated that one of the critical factors for success in Latinos was to have access to resources and support. For example, Carena shared that her siblings provided great support and community as she began preparing for her first year of college. She stated:

> I received a lot of mental help from my siblings when I was like applying to colleges. I know they helped me with my essay. I had them, like, reread it and edit it, and kind of tell me what would look better. So they were helping me mentally (Participant 6).

She also understood that she benefitted from having siblings who attended college prior to her and she gleaned great information and experience from being around them during that time. She said:

> I feel like I got kind of, like a bit of experience, because I helped my siblings move in, and I kind of knew, like, how they were navigating it. And, so I kind of knew what to expect for the most part, and I knew how to prepare myself. Yeah, so I didn't really get shocked by anything. I'm pretty sure I was, like, prepared for most things (Participant 6).

Furthermore, Natalia had several challenging times that she felt like she did not belong at this educational institution and that she needed to drop out of the university. She stated"

> I was taking a class with Doctor T., and I was about to tell her, like, 'Hey, you aren't going to see me again, just because I'm gonna drop out.' And I couldn't do it. I literally could not do it. I sat on that call and we chatted for like, an hour, and I was like, I literally, like, I was ready to, like, let everyone else down, but I was like, 'I can't.' And

she was just really kind and very, like, encouraging. And even when I was like, deciding whether or not to go to the PhD program. She was like, 'As long as I'm here, like, I support you.' And Doctor B. has been great. Doctor H. has been great. So I don't know if it's like a smaller community at this university, like, in the department that I am in, but I did feel that support (Participant 4).

Moreover, Marcela grew up with her older cousin attending a 4-year university, and she was grateful for the support she gained through her experiences. She shared,

> They (the family) did get to be there for my cousin, when she got awards, like she was getting awards left and right. Like, we would all pull up and like, watch her cross that stage and cheer her on and go out to eat. And just like, I don't know, celebrate her and celebrate her accomplishments ((Participant 2) 558 - 565).

Correspondingly, Micah felt like he had strong community support. He was actively involved in a local church and belonged to the university band. His support networks contributed to his success and well-being. He shared:

> I had a good community with my church that I was a part of , and I would say the band does a really good job of making sure that their students are taken care of. My band director was very much, 'if you need anything, you come to me.' Like he's going to make sure we're taken care of. But I had a very good circle of friends with the band, of course, like we rehearse two hours a day, every day, and then we spent all day on Saturday together for game day. So those people, I spent a lot of time with" ((Participant 2) 391 - 396). He recalled a time where he got really sick during his freshman year in college. He didn't have a vehicle and didn't even know where the hospital was located, but he had a strong community in his church. He stated, "One of the adults that helped run the church,

> they took me to the hospital because I didn't know where it was, I had no way to get there. So I think between the band and the church, I had people that I could go to for support (Participant 3).

In addition, Norma had a strong community within her university, as she navigated college as a young mother. She had many professors who understood the inconsistencies that children could cause when it came to schedules and meeting their needs. She shared,

> I would say, my very first semester at the university, there were times when I did have to take my son to school. And there was one teacher or one professor that I had, and I would have to bring him. And sometimes I wouldn't even be able to make it to the midterms, just because he would be sick, or we just didn't have anybody to watch him during my first semester. And so, she would say, 'Okay, like, come to my office at this time and I'll help you.' And she would watch him for a little bit, because she had a nephew and a niece that she would see around the same age. So she would help me with that (Participant 5).

Parents and grandparents worked long hours, often in labor-intensive or unstable jobs, to provide basic needs and future opportunities. These sacrifices were not abstract; they were visible, ongoing, and deeply felt. For instance, Marcela was so proud of her father because he began his college journey in his native country. This was a source of inspiration for many of the participants. For example, Marcela reminisced about her father:

> And he's (her dad) a very smart man. Like, the stuff that he knows, like, I wish I knew. Like, he just gets it. Like, he gets everything so quickly. Um, and so he went to college (in his native country) (Participant 2).

While he may not have completed college education, he was still one of the smartest people she knew.

Therefore, when Marcela's father found out that his wife was pregnant with her, they made the decision to leave Central America and immigrate to the United States to give Marcela a better life. She knew this was a big sacrifice for him, but that he wanted what was best for her. Marcela recounted her father's decision:

> My dad was in college back in Central America. He was studying to be a computer and systems engineer. So he was doing it. He was getting that college degree. Sadly, I came around. So it was kind of like, 'Oh, well, it's either,' you know, 'diapers or continue my education.' He had to make that tough choice, you know, helping me, I guess you could say, and providing for me and my mom. And so they both agreed to come to United States. They followed my mom's family, who was already here ((Participant 2) 24 - 29).

Likewise, Norma understood that there were not many opportunities for her family to attend school and achieve a college degree. College achievement became an expectation for her as they navigated their life. She stated:

> I kind of always knew that I wanted to go to college, just because it was something that my parents, like, I guess, implemented so young in us; And, like, going and pursuing, like, a higher education. And my grandma did too, because she didn't get that opportunity. So she kind of, like pushed us, like, go to college, like, get your degree (Participant 5).

Similarly, Carena shared that her mother sacrificed so much as she worked to better their life through education. She stands in awe of her mother, who achieved so much. She shared,

“And the fact that she's been able to finish school with four children, and she even fosters children" (Participant 6).

For all participants, family served as both motivation and responsibility. Norma’s family motivated her to pursue her college education and to continue it when she stopped. She stated:

> I would probably say my parents and my son, just because, before I had him, I knew I wanted to go to school, but I wasn't. It wasn't like, ‘Oh, like, let me go to school.’ Like, and then when I had him, I was like, ‘Okay, I need to go to school.’ My fiancé works, but, somebody also has to help carry the load, so I knew I had to go back and continue (Participant 1).

She felt a deep responsibility to complete her college education to better the life of her family and herself. She wanted to help her fiancé and ensure that she achieved her degree for her son.

In addition, Micah remembered that his mom continued to work on her degree after he left for college. He saw how she navigated her collegiate pathway and that she encountered many hardships, but persevered through them. He shared, “So she (his mom) has been a forever college student, because she's still taking, I mean, she's working on her doctorate right now" (Participant 3). Therefore, his mother showed him to continue to strive for excellence through his education.

In this section, the Latino graduate students shared great insights and discoveries made through reflecting on their childhood experiences and what they recall being pivotal moments in their lives. Some of the students remembered that mentors made a big difference in helping them prepare for college (Burgo, 2024). They relied on mentors who had attended college and understood the system to help them gain access to this knowledge. Also, many recalled how their parents made sacrifices to support their dreams of attending college and pursuing higher education experiences (Marrun, 2018). The participants continued to draw on their understanding

of the hardships their parents navigated of leaving their home country and leaning on the strength of their family to provide these opportunities (Roxas & Gabriel, 2017).

Theme 2: Identity Development in First-Generation Narratives

Across narratives, identity was not static. It was continuously negotiated in response to place, power, and belonging. These identity struggles were particularly pronounced in predominantly White educational spaces, where participants became acutely aware of differences.

Family Influence and Cultural Expectations

Influences. Participants shared that family and culture impacted their perspective on situations and how they navigated them. For example, Carena discussed how her mom's side of the family were racists towards her father and his side of the family. Her mother's side did not really like him, and she was pretty certain that they told her to divorce him. Therefore, she shared, "Growing up, I never really did like traditions or anything...like ever really went to many people's Quinceaneras" (Participant 1). She became disconnected with her Latina side because of the hate from her mother's side of the family.

Furthermore, Natalia remembered a time when she was in first grade, and her class was taking a reading test. She recalled knowing the word and what it was. Yet, she did not know it in English, only Spanish. She stated:

> Oh, that's a 'peine' (brush). And I will never forget the teacher. She was, like, 'Well, you know, you need to know how to say it in English.' And I was like, 'But I know what it is. I just don't know the word in English.' And so that was when it clicked that everybody was going to speak English, and I was expected to speak English, but not everyone was

expected to speak Spanish. And so I was like, 'Okay, well, I guess this is what it's going to be now' (Participant 3).

She felt like her language was wrong.

Marcela expressed her frustrations about always feeling like she had to be vocal about protecting her bicultural identity and others around her. She shared:

> Why do I always have to be that person? Like, why? Why does it always have to be me? Like, why can't somebody also step up and talk? You know what I mean?" And so I think I shared my frustration with her in that aspect, and she was just like, 'Sadly, like, that's just how it's gonna be. Sometimes, like, you're gonna be the only person in the room to speak up.' Because sometimes some people are not, they don't feel the need to, you know, or they've been in positions where, like, even if they did speak up, nothing was gonna change ((Participant 2) 477 - 482).

Additionally, Norma discussed that she was born in America, but that her "…welita and great grandparents were born in Central America" (Participant 1). She shared that she grew up with both her parents in a border city, which was "…predominantly like Latinos and people from Central America. I am Latina, so I grew up like, with that. Like, my mom would go to my grandma's house, and she would, like, make me move over and stuff like that" (Participant 5). She smiled as she thought about the cultural traditions she engaged in that people around her did not understand.

Yet, college often served as a turning point, where participants began reclaiming cultural identity through Latino peers, organizations, or language reconnection. For Stephanie, it was a time that she embraced her bicultural identity and saw her culture and language as a superpower. But others around her attempted to make her feel otherwise. She shared,

> And I am, unfortunately, well, I guess to other people, they think of it as a weakness, like 'She's a color or a woman of color, and her second language is English, whatever, whatever.' But to me, it's a strength. Because I'm bilingual, I'm able to support more patients in my day to day experience. I'm able to have more job opportunities. I'm able to get raises that other people cannot. I'm able to do a lot of other things, and now it's going to help me move forward, and I'm going to be doing more better than you' (Participant 6).

Stephanie's narrative reflected experiences of family disruption, geographic relocation, and cultural marginalization. She had to function in this society while making sense of how her two identities could survive (Thayer-Bacon et al., 2013). She was not going to allow the dominant culture to silence her. She had learned to navigate the worlds she entered and had "developed the agility to navigate and challenge monocultural and monolingual conceptions of social reality" (Anzaldúa Gloria, 2012, p. 6).

In particular, Marcela knew it was important to socialize and organize with like-minded people, so she began looking for opportunities that Latinos could gather. She learned about an organization in other schools that she thought her high school would benefit from. She stated:

> Hey, like, we have a pretty big Latino population, regardless of us, like, being in the shadows, I guess you could say. Like, we're still here. And, there's so many organizations that we could benefit from, like "Latinos Without Borders" ((Participant 2) 94 - 96).

Marcela's narrative centered on intergenerational sacrifice, bicultural navigation, and educational advocacy. Raised in an immigrant household where her parents' labor and limited educational access shaped family priorities, Marcela viewed education as a collective responsibility tied to honoring her parents' sacrifices.

Likewise, Carena was excited to share that she began reclaiming her identity through communicating with her sister and learning about her father's Latino side. She stated,

> And it wasn't until my sister really showed me, like, what I can do with that part of being like, what it means to be Latina. Like, all of the special things about like, my culture and things like that. She started showing me, like, stuff that people do in my culture. And she started showing me like how my dad used to live and stuff like that. And I just thought it was really cool, and it made me like, understand more of where I come from (Participant 1).

In addition, she found opportunities on her college campus to organize with Latinos. She shared:

> And there's this Latina club on campus, and I checked it out. I follow their Instagram. I've been to a few activities, and they're fun. I like some of the girls there, and it was nice to meet other girls who were like me (Participant 6).

Micah chose to reconnect with his father and stated:

> But then we started to talk pretty regularly, and he came to where I lived, or he came to the U.S., I think in 2020. I think that maybe a few months after our first phone call, in 2019. So maybe it was like late 2019, and he lived in the northwest U.S. since then, and I've gone to visit him a few times (Participant 3).

He smiled sharing this connection and that he was learning about his Latino side, now, as a college student and embracing that side of his identity.

Through their narratives, they shared how challenging it could be to bring their authentic identity into new contexts and navigate how it is accepted or not (Salas et al., 2018). This occurs in many spaces for Latinos, but primarily in educational environments. Nieto (1998) stated that

public schools in the United States have always been a place to assimilate children by stripping them of their native cultural identity in order for them to blend in with the majority culture. He went on to share that in order to get ahead in society, education, or career, "one must sacrifice one's identity" (Nieto, 1998, p. 143). Through his research, one significant correlation that he has identified is that there was a "correlation between ethnic identity and positive self-esteem" (Nieto, 1998, p. 148). Hence, listening to the Latino graduate students' stories, I am reminded to acknowledge and affirm their identities through their cultural lens and through their lived experiences.

Navigating Social and Structural Challenges

Challenges. Likewise, Stephanie shared what a shock it was to her when she moved to the Midwest to find that people did not look like her. Then, she found out that many did not understand her Latina culture and what they did know was derogatory and negative towards her identity. Consequently, she felt excluded and like she was not accepted by her white peers. She said,

> In my home state, I looked like every other young child. We all looked the same, and everything was very rooted in our culture, so we all shared that aspect, and it was nice. But moving to the Midwest was a lot different. No one looked like me and I was the only one who had an accent, who had dark skin, dark hair, and I received a lot of racism for that, especially in high school and middle school (Participant 6).

Another participant, Marcela, discussed how she did not even realize that she was different than her Latino peers at school or in her community. She stated:

> I don't think it was until I got into like, sixth grade, when, you know, like, I started to find out about my status and, like, about stuff that, like me wanting to, like, travel to places.

> Like, I would have cousins come from Central America and be like, ‘Well, why can't we go? Like, why aren't we able to go?’ (referring to her family) type of thing" ((Participant 2) 70 - 73).

Marcela discovered that due to her immigration status, she was limited in opportunities that she wanted to embark on. She shared that it was difficult to accept her status because it limited her mobility. She was starting to grapple with the limitations this could have on her life. She said, "And I was like, ‘Okay, well, like, as a sixth grader, like, that's still kind of like something hard to like, take into consideration’" ((Participant 2) 75 - 76).

Overall, cultural pride did not emerge as fully formed but developed gradually, shaped by reflection, affirmation, support, and community. Many of the students encountered situations where their language was silenced and they were not permitted to speak the language that defines them. LatCrit (1995) highlights issues of language and the impact on a person’s cultural identity when societal norms privilege whiteness while marginalizing Latinos. In addition, Anzaldúa (2012) identifies how constant critiques of one’s native language diminishes self-worth and creates a sense of exclusion in their communities.

Latinos are motivated and driven by their family and culture to understand how to navigate systems they are engaged in. For example, in educational systems, schools have often operated through a deficit lens, particularly when dealing with students of low-income families. Velazquez (2022) argues that schools use education as a tool to surveil and legitimize "brown bodies," reinforcing the idea that they don't belong. Therefore, Cultural Deficit Models frame Latino students and their families through negative stereotypes, blaming their culture and background for their lack of success (Marrun, 2018). Hence, the outcome leads to discriminatory practices that provide unequal access to resources, services, and high-quality educational

experiences. Consequently, the Latino graduate students had to be an advocate to stand up for their ethnicity and their identities. They found ways to organize around other Latinos to belong and be around people who understood them and in where they could reclaim their identities.

Theme 3: Educational Empowerment and Cultural Identity

Despite varied life circumstances, all participants shared a strong college-going identity shaped by early family messaging. Parents consistently emphasized education as the primary pathway to stability, mobility, and respect.

Education as a Pathway to Success and Resilience

Success in Education. From a young age, participants internalized the belief that success was tied to earning a college degree, even when families lacked knowledge of the educational system. For instance, Micah shared that he was introduced to college readiness at an early age in first grade. His teacher exposed him to university names around the region of his state to begin thinking about college or universities as he grew older. He said, “I distinctly remember in first grade, my teacher had table names for each table, and they were universities in the west coast, the region I lived in. And so, I would sit at these specific tables with university names" (Participant 3).

Equally important, Stephanie remembered that her mom motivated her by pushing college onto her. She shared that her mother said, “If we weren't to go to a college, we would not have a successful life" (Participant 6). This messaging created both motivation and pressure. College symbolized opportunity, but also the weight of expectations as first-generation students.

Further, Carena was motivated to attend college from a young age. She stated:

> I'm gonna go to college. I'm gonna go get my degree and do something great’, you know, ‘change the world.’ I've always wanted to, like, do some research study and make, like,

an amazing discovery. I'm really interested in research and like statistics. I like statistics. I like being able to, like, put math into my research (Participant 1).

Yet, she shared that she was overwhelmed by the need to achieve something valuable through her college degree. She said, “I like to be working on something that could potentially be worth, something" (Participant 1). This pressure can be difficult to navigate as she engaged in her college journey. Carena’s educational journey was characterized by early independence, evolving cultural awareness, and a strong orientation toward academic achievement.

Correspondingly, Stephanie owed her interest in college to her older brother. She talked about him being her inspiration because she "…always looked up to him and I wanted to go to the school that he went to" (Participant 6).

Also, Natalia was saddened by the fact that Latinos don’t pursue a higher education degree. She shared, “I don't know why that happens. Like a lot of Latinos don't pursue higher ed. We are like unicorns, and then once we're there, it's really hard. It's really hard to be there. I can’t lie to you" (Participant 4).

The participants also defined achieving a college degree as critical to their future, and that it could determine their success. For instance, Marcela discussed familial pressure from the value of education. Her parents expressed that success is determined by the career you achieve. She stated, "I think for them as being immigrants, I think they always saw your career as how successful you are" (Participant 2).

Likewise, Stephanie shared that success could be defined by having freedom. So, achieving your college degree could provide that freedom in “…like financial aspects or educational aspects or intellectual however that might be. I feel like you are successful…well, if you feel free" (Participant 6). She also said that earning her education and becoming more

confident in who she was as an educated woman was liberating to her and defined success (Participant 6).

In addition, Micah shared that success could be defined uniquely to every person, as it is based on their interests, passions, and desires of what motivates them to be their best self. For him, he shared:

> I think for me, success is…it can be defined differently by every individual . I think for me, success was earning a degree…two degrees. I wanted to have my master's degree, and so I would say I have achieved that because I just finished my master's degree, and I want to do something with my degree . And so I think for me, being successful is just achieving the small goals that I put for myself. Like at first, it was getting to college, then it was graduating from college, then it was getting a job at a place that I like, and I think I've been successful in that (Participant 3).

Education became a means of upward mobility not only for the individual, but for the family as a whole. Participants described pursuing college not solely for personal fulfillment, but as a collective achievement tied to family legacy and future security.

Persistence to Succeed. Education was the outlet to help the children create successful futures and to honor their parents' sacrifices. This has been evident since the early days of many of the students' lives. For example, Marcela's parents showed a value for education and when they immigrated, understood that enrolling her in school would allow their daughter to learn the English language and receive what she needed to be a part of their new community. Marcela stated:

> They put me in Head Start. And I think that's where like they strived for, like providing me with a better education came in. We know Head Start. We know the positives that it

> comes with, and we know just how much kids can grow with early child education. I started right, like, really young, and they started me off, like, I'm pretty sure I went there like, when I was three, and so I developed that English language pretty quickly (Participant 2) 35 - 39).

This was also a way for social mobility as Carena's mom navigated her educational journey while they were children into their adulthood. She stated, "She's (her mom) been really determined to get through her schooling. I remember ever since I was little, she was working on her master's" (Participant 6). Carena's mom wanted to elevate their social status by achieving a higher educational degree and to provide for her family's needs, as a single mother.

College attendance was not positioned as optional, but as an expectation tied to family pride, survival, and intergenerational mobility. In this way, family functioned as the primary engine of aspiration, shaping participants' educational goals long before they understood the mechanics of how to achieve them.

For instance, Stephanie recalled how college was an expectation. She stated:

> And I think that's kind of a common thought, especially for being a first generation student in college and a first generation Mexican American, your parents want what's best for you and what they weren't able to do. So both my parents always pushed me to go to college. They didn't really give me the opportunity to think of anything else (Participant 6).

Also, Micah remembered how his mother would constantly talk about his education and making sure that he achieved great heights through his education. At times, he felt overwhelmed by his mother continuously talking about college attainment. He stated, ""Yes, it was all the time, all the time she would talk about that (attending college)" (Participant 3).

Resilience was constructed as a defining characteristic across all narratives, rooted in early responsibility, instability, and self-reliance. Participants described learning to “figure it out” independently, advocating for themselves, and persisting through emotional and structural challenges. For example, Micah talked about how he had to find his own strength and ambition to motivate him to succeed. He stated:

> That's when I decided that I was making the right choice, that this is the place for me, that I was going to... I was going to find my home here and figure out how to, how to make it work (Participant 3).

Not to mention, Carena discussed developing resilience through being hard on herself. She always wanted 100% in all she does (Participant 6). As a child, she encountered great hardships as her mother moved her around quite frequently, and she was sorting out her own life. She recalled living with her grandmother for about 10 months and learning to stay strong through these transitions and challenges (Participant 6)

Furthermore, Norma shared that she would encourage Latinos and people of color to stay with their course and to find ways to find support to reach their goals. "I guess I would say to other people, don't be scared, like you said, like we are infiltrating, like it only takes one of us. Yeah, I think just don't be scared and keep going" (Participant 5). It took courage to stick with it, but she reminded us that when you remembered your reason, you fought to achieve it.

Additionally, Marcela communicated that it was important for young people to see Latinas as professionals in educational spaces because that representation could serve as a motivator to other Latinos to achieve more than what they see Latinos doing around them. She shared, “It was a motivator. I think it was, like, more of a motivation to keep going, and it’s like, you see, she’s a Para, but she's still, like, working, like she's doing something that is not cleaning

houses" (Participant 2). She had never seen Latinos in a professional role and it encouraged her to think beyond what she knew. She said:

> And so, like, it was that first introduction to me of, like, we can do something more. More than what people like make us do, you know, like people say that we do. And so, like, it was the first time that I saw somebody that looked like me in a higher, I guess you could say, like, higher area, higher job, higher paying field (Participant 4).

She continued by discussing to push ahead and to fight for their future by understanding that their hardships or circumstances could also serve as motivators. She stated:

> I think that also just kind of made us strive, you know. That kind of pushed us forward to keep going to be in a field where you don't see people like you. You want to be that person, you know. Like, it makes you want to, like, be that person. Be like, 'Okay, I don't see people like me. Let me be that person' (Participant 4).

Lastly, Micah wanted to inspire, empower, and advocate for his students in the elementary school he worked at. He started a partnership with his alma mater to bring university representatives into the school building so that his students and the university students could form positive relationships and trust. Through this, students could begin thinking about college and asking questions to navigate their understanding in preparing for it. He stated,

> I think don't think that those things are available to them (college preparation). That's kind of how I felt. ..is that I didn't feel like when I started at a state university that this is something that I should be doing, like that this wasn't my place in society . But I want my kids to know that it is for them, and that there are supports for them, and that's what the partnership with for, is that they can see that the students, some of them probably came from a place just like that, just like my kids do. Or, you know, they can be interested in

music and do that in band, and that can help. Or they can do that in college, and that can help them pay for it, too (Participant 3).

Participants' stories illustrate that resilience was practiced daily through asking questions, seeking resources, continuing despite doubt, and adapting to unfamiliar systems. Growth occurred through adversity, not in its absence. Yet, the hidden curriculum, though invisible, was deeply felt and shaped participants' early college experiences.

Cultural Identity, Representation, and Community Belonging

Cultural Empowerment. The Latino culture centers around family and supporting one another in all they do. They encourage, support, challenge, and embrace the obstacles that they encounter. One of the most sacred and valuable opportunities for Latinos is to engage in their education. Marcela shared, "…my parents have always instilled education is something that people cannot take away from you." (Participant 2).

Specifically, Marcela had family members that inspired her to pursue her collegiate pathway and to continue when times became challenging. She discussed her cousin's support by sharing:

> Like she did it all by herself, um, and thankfully, like I had her. She passed down, like, what she knew, what she did, she passed it down to me, like she was the one. When I was a freshman in high school, she was a senior ((Participant 2) 335 - 337).

In addition, Norma had support from her parents, who had attended college and could provide guidance in her preparation. This was a set expectation, as they raised her in that culture. She spoke

> It definitely helped me a lot, because they were first gens, so they knew, like, I guess, like, how to navigate it, and they really supported me and like, getting me there. I know

there's some people who, like, don't have that support, so I'm really grateful to even have that (Participant 5).

Additionally, Natalia discussed that her parents were more involved with her younger siblings in their educational journey. She shared,

> My parents are in a different position than they were, like, what, many, many years ago. And so, like, they've also been more active in his (brother's) educational journey. Like, if he has an activity at 11:03, on a Tuesday, they can go. That also makes a world of difference. So, I'm always like, 'Yeah, you should go take the time' and all that stuff, and they do it, and they're happy to be able to do that for him (Participant 4).

She also talked about how she is proud and happy to be a supportive mentor to her younger siblings. She has big plans to support their successful futures. She stated,

> With the little one, it's been really fun, because he was born the year I graduated high school. So, I would take him to campus, and like, take him to do like, adult things with me, because I do adult things. And so he actually went to my thesis defense, and I only brought him because I was nervous, and I brought him, and I was just like, 'I want you to see what you're going to do one day. You're also going to defend a thesis in something.' And every day I'm just like, 'Hey, like, you're going to have to, you know, you have to do a sport, you have to learn how to play an instrument, because these things are going to help you.' Like, everything I tell him, is in preparation for the future. He's like, 'Yeah, I don't know if I want to go to this college or that one. Like, I just don't know yet.' And I was just like, 'You know what? You have time to decide.' And his speech revolves around, you know…he already knows that this is the thing that he's going to do, and when the time comes, I hope to be able to help him (Participant 3).

Many of the Latino graduates shared that their parents made great sacrifices to provide them with the opportunity to achieve their dreams and goals. They knew that graduating was a way to repay their family. When they graduated and walked the stage to accept their diploma, it was not just a celebration for themselves, but mostly for those who made this path possible. This is evident in Boden's (2011) article, "Perceived Academic Preparedness of First-Generation Latino College Students," about why it was important to do well and how it impacts the family. Boden stated, "All students discussed the importance of obtaining careers to support themselves, as well as their family. For students to financially support themselves meant to no longer burdening their parents but rather shifting the responsibility to themselves" (Boden, 2011, p. 100). The sacrifice parents made is a motivation for students to do their best to, in turn, support them.

For instance, Marcela showed gratitude for their sacrifices, and she tried to give them a piece of her college experience that they helped make possible. She stated:

> But one of, like, the things that I'll always remember and always cherish was my last year at her University and I got to take them to a football game. I was like, I had saved up enough money. And I was like, 'I'm gonna take the family, like, I'm gonna take the family to a football game. It's my last year, I want them to go.' And I took them for a homecoming game, and we were playing against another great team. We're losing, but I was like, watching him, like, 'Oh my God, my family was living the time of their life.' Like, my mom was just like, 'Oh my gosh,' she was like, 'Look at the mascots' (Participant 4).

As noted in Marcela's smile as she shared opportunities that she was able to enjoy with her parents during her college days. For example, she shared:

> I was proud of myself, of course, but just like getting them to see it, you know, like watching their face as we're walking down the South Oval, like was just so like breathtaking and like something that I'll always remember. But then, like, something that always gets me is, like, my dad will always share that post on social media every single year of when I graduated ((Participant 2) 575 - 578).

While college attendance was expected, navigating the processes required to access higher education proved challenging for all participants. Each described significant barriers related to the hidden curriculum of college; such as, unspoken rules, procedures, and expectations that were unfamiliar and overwhelming (Bernal, 2002). FAFSA completion, admissions applications, scholarship searches, and academic planning were described as confusing and unsupported processes (Gonzalez, 2015). Latino families persisted through their challenges and obstacles by finding their strength and motivation to achieve success. The literature states that when Latino children encountered an obstacle while in college, they communicated with their family because they are a reminder of why they strive for success (Marrun, 2018). They recalled the sacrifices that their families made to provide this opportunity through an education (Marrun, 2018). Family ties play a huge role in a Latino's support to do their best in college. Therefore, there needs to be a focus on how to support and guide Latino families in conversations about choosing careers and how to set goals to achieve them, beginning in the early childhood years. Then, ultimately, throughout college as universities retain them so they can excel and graduate (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012).

Theme 4: Structural and Resource Challenges in Education

Constraints Students Face

Barriers. Many of the participants faced multiple barriers that challenged their success in an education setting. Some of these barriers include lack of experience in this new educational setting, lack of resources, stress, and family structure (Gonzalez, 2015). For instance, Marcela sought the advice and guidance from her parents and family members as she began exploring her college options. Her parents provided moral support driven by their sacrifices and immigration experiences. They did not want their daughter to suffer or have challenges affording her lifestyle when she graduated, so they encouraged her to pick a degree that would pay off in the end. She started in that major and was unsuccessful and ready to quit her college journey. Eventually, she talked with her parents and shared that she really wanted to pursue becoming an educator. She shared:

> And so them knowing where education stands, how education is treated. I think they were like, 'Yes, you can be successful, but you are going to go through so many obstacles in order to achieve that success.' And I think they wanted me to take, like, the easier way out (Participant 2).

Thus, they wanted to support their daughter, but struggled because they knew that being a teacher did not pay well and may not afford her the life she deserved.

Additionally, Natalia attended a charter school where students were predominantly wealthy and had parents who could help them navigate the hidden curriculum of higher education. Hence, her school did not see the need to teach students and families about this. She shared, "And so that's where I feel like there was a gap, because I genuinely didn't know. I genuinely didn't know (how to start applying for college or even preparing for it)" (Participant

3). Natalia struggled with charting her own course to attend college and she realized the lack of information she had and the challenges she encountered because of it. She said:

> And my parents didn't know, so, like, OP, I didn't get that. I didn't know what a FAFSA was. I didn't know that you had to start studying for the ACT, like, a good year in advance. And I did...there was just so many like, things I didn't know that you could apply to, like, leadership scholarships. Like, I just didn't know what the options were. And that was really frustrating, because I was the first person in my family who had gone to college (Participant 4).

Financial precarity shaped every participant's educational journey. All described growing up with economic instability and continuing to experience financial strain during college. Participants worked while enrolled, relied on scholarships, grants, and work-study programs, and expressed fear related to tuition costs and student debt.

Furthermore, Micah had his hopes set on returning back to the West Coast and attending a university her remembered learning about in first grade. He was so excited to go home and be back in a state that had greater Latino representation. Yet, he was hit with the hard truth when he began exploring the cost and finances of attending college. He said,

> My mom, of course, was a single mom, and she had just started teaching by the time that I graduated. So there, wasn't really any...there was no college fund for me. I had to fund my schooling myself, and so the West Coast university was kind of out of the question, because it's a private school. So I went with the state university (in my new state) (Participant 3).

This was a hard reality that Micah faced as he realized what it took to attend a university.

In addition, Norma encountered hardships when she began preparing for college. She stated,

> It was like, I said, like, we were like, taught like, 'Oh, you gotta go to school. You gotta go to school.' It wasn't, we didn't really learn a lot. Like, financially, my mom would say, like, 'Oh, you gotta pay for college. Like, on your own, we can't support you.' She would say that. So, my mom didn't support us, like we had to do it all on our own. So I kind of had that mentality, like, I need to figure out how I'm gonna go to school, whether it be like sports or academics, like I knew I had to do something (Participant 5).

Likewise, Stephanie found preparing for college difficult. She shared, "So I navigated...all, everything, at the university was just really difficult, and I had no idea what kind of scholarships or other assistance was there" (Participant 6).

Consequently, Marcela did not have the social capital to get into college, so her cousin advised her to build strong connections with those around her that could help her. Hence, she was guided to join as many clubs as she could in high school to build her service resume and to create those connections necessary to prepare for a college pathway. She mentioned:

> Like, join almost every single club that I could in school, in high school. Like, try to be as involved as I could be. I ran for class office. I was in StuCo, National Honor Society. I started my own club ((Participant 2) 92 - 94).

She, also, faced many challenges when she was trying to fund her college pathway. She wanted to stay encouraged, but she shared some deep concerns about how this impacted her future. She said,

> I guess it's just the luck of the draw. Like, some people are lucky enough to be born here and to get those opportunities, that citizens get, you know. Although, like, I basically,

> technically, I guess you could say I wasn't born here, but I did grow up here. Yeah, I wish I had gotten that opportunity. I wish that those types of aids didn't, weren't based off of, like, if you were born here, they should be based on, like, what they talk about need that is needed. So it's hard. It was hard (Participant 4).

Financial stress influenced course loads, employment choices, health, and overall well-being. College persistence required not only academic effort, but constant financial calculation. For these participants, economic survival and academic success were inseparable.

Once enrolled in college, participants encountered additional challenges related to time management, academic norms, and large lecture environments. Feelings of being unprepared were common, particularly during the first years of college. These barriers were not due to lack of motivation or ability, but to limited access to institutional knowledge.

For instance, Marcela experienced challenges when she started to prepare for college. She was advised to take the hard AP classes as a way to begin getting college credit, but was not told about the test she had to pass to receive this credit. She needed further guidance, because she knew that her citizenship status would not allow her to receive financial aid. So, she tried to find a different way to fund her college journey. She stated, "I was still taking those hard classes, like, I was still trying to achieve academically, because I knew, like, I knew I wasn't going to qualify for “OP’s” ((Participant 2) 86 - 88).

For example, Natalia did her best to be prepared for college, but she lacked pertinent information about acceptance scores and deadlines. She stated,

> I will never forget I actually didn't get into the college of my choice when I applied as a senior because my ACT score was too low, and I was devastated. I was like, ‘I can't believe this. I'm so sad.’ And, yeah, I didn't get in. And so I ended up trying to go to

> another university not too far from my home. But I was like, 'Oh no, this really is not my vibe.' And so I was able to go to one closer to my home. And going to that university was...it was great. I loved it. I did both of my Bachelor's there, and I had a really great time. And I'm really and so I'm just really, like, happy that that experience panned out like that (Participant 4).

Social Factors. Many social factors impacted the participant's ability to belong and be valued. These students had to learn to navigate through the social factors that impacted them, like racism, microaggressions, and being profiled. For instance, Stephanie's first week at the university she attended, she encountered racism. She was disappointed and hurt because it was by a "university employee" (Participant 5). She had been so excited to attend a larger university, where she felt that she would finally be around diverse people. Yet, as she navigated her collegiate experience and entered the workforce, she realized that it will always be a fight she will have to engage in. She stated:

> I was really looking forward to finally being able to feel like I wasn't the only person who was different. And yeah, that was the biggest shock, is knowing especially, going to a PWI...will it ever change? Now, working at a corporate organization, it never changes. It never leaves. Unfortunately (Participant 6).

For Marcela, being othered started at a young age. She stated, "And so starting in elementary school, we know it's a predominantly white public school system, like district. And so, I was one of the very few kids to go into there that was, like, Hispanic or Mexican" (Participant 2). As she navigated her collegiate pathway, she felt like she had to continue defending her actions or her position in the classes she enrolled in. She shared:

> I was 1 of 4 people of color in the education program. Me and this other girl were the only Latinas in our cohort. And I think, out of like the group of, what, 25 of us. It was four of us that were, like people of color in general, and so I think it was always really hard in that aspect (Participant 4).

She was a minority in this cohort and that made it hard to be understood.

Additionally, Micah experienced feeling like an imposter attempting to navigate this environment. He felt like the ball was going to drop at any moment and he would be awakened to find out it was a dream. He shared:

> And I, of course, I was very nervous, because I was like, 'This doesn't feel like something that's right. Like, nobody in my family had college degrees, nobody had done this before. This didn't feel like something I should be able to do, I guess.' And so while I was at the University, in the back of my head, there's always like, 'there's going to be a catch,' like, 'something's going to stop me from being able to do this,' you know? (Participant 3).

Participants described being the only Latino student in classrooms, being excluded from group work, or experiencing assumptions based on race, accent, or immigration status. Some recounted being asked whether their parents were "legal," while others described accent-based discrimination or subtle questioning of their belonging. For example, Norma recalled a time in her university course where she felt excluded because of her Latina background and not looking like her peers. She struggled with developing friendships at a predominantly white institution and shared some of her background experiences on this situation. She said:

> Maybe for some people, it's easy, but making friends, I guess just because I grew up in a predominantly Hispanic city, that too. I was more drawn to and even then, it kind of just felt like I wasn't very welcomed by like, white people. Like, I really hate to say it, but

> that's who. Like, yeah, they would just, like, look at me. Or like, there was even an example of a time in class me and my friend, she's black, and the rest of the table was white. We had to discuss with the group, like whatever the teacher would talk about. And the white girls would talk together, and it would just be me and my friend, like they would never include us in the conversations, or we would just get dirty looks (Participant 5).

She continued her conversation by informing me that she tried to get them both involved in the conversations, but that it was clear they were not invited. She stated:

> Well, yeah, we would sit in a circle, and so I would like sit where I could talk to everybody. We would look at each other, but nobody would talk to us. There's been other times where, like other girls, like other Hispanic girls, have said, like, 'Oh yeah. This girl asked me if my parents were immigrants and legal.' Or, like, they'll make comments, like, 'Wow, like, how did you get to this university, like, how can you afford it? Like, stuff like that (Participant 1).

These microaggressions made attending classes uncomfortable.

Lastly, Norma shared that she had a wonderful experience with a program at her university that provided a fantastic advisor and other support. She loved that she felt seen and valued through this program and received great guidance to thrive in this environment. Yet, she was saddened when the university chose to reallocate money and closed the program. This institutional neglect cut funding and took away one of the supports that Norma had to feel like she belonged at this university. She mentioned, "During my time at the university, they actually cut back their resources and services. They moved a lot of funding around, and they had to lay off a lot of people" (Participant 5).

In addition, students advocated for others to learn from their experiences and help them learn from their perspective to create a culture of belonging, not exclusion. For instance, Marcela shared that she remembered being a voice to advocate for those who were excluded from the table. She shared,

> I think there was one time a classmate wanted to do an 'Around the World' type of activity, and she wanted to give kids passports. And I brought up, like, 'Hey, some kids don't have passports. Like, for some this is actually…it could be triggering for them. Like, knowing their situation, knowing that their parents might not be able to obtain one. Like, I think maybe instead of doing a passport, you should do a checklist, or, you know, something different that doesn't require a passport, you know, something like that (Participant 2).

She brought insight into this activity, as she had navigated a world where she couldn't obtain a passport and travel, freely, to visit her family. She wanted other students to learn from her lived experiences and wanted her peers to keep these children and families in mind when planning their curriculum or activities in an educational context. She continued by stating, "And I feel like I always brought that insight into education. And so my classes, like, I always try to, like, look out for ways that we could better the way that we treated our diverse group of kiddos" (Participant 4).

Also, she discussed that people became uncomfortable during these conversations as she advocated for inclusion and visibility of people of color in educational spaces. She stated:

> You could tell that some people in the room were uncomfortable to have those conversations. But it was like, 'Yes, be uncomfortable. Because, like, at the end of the

day, this is what kids are going through. Like, this is education, and this is how it's been year after year after year' (Participant 4).

Moreover, Stephanie shared similar sentiments about being a voice to advocate for those whose voices were missing in the conversation. She shared, "I've always had a lot of ambition. My parents know that about me. I've always been very loud. They know whatever I want, I'm gonna get it. I don't let anything stop me" (Participant 6).

All participants expressed a desire for greater Latino representation among faculty, staff, and institutional leadership. One of the strongest recruitment and retention strategies for Latinos in higher education is through developing an inclusive campus environment where they truly belong (Burgo, 2024). This can begin with having more Latino representation on campus to support Latino students in advisement appointments, mentoring, and empowering them through understanding their culture. Therefore, for the Latino graduate students, seeing educators who "looked like them" was described as affirming and motivating, while the absence of representation contributed to feelings of invisibility. Representation was framed not as symbolic inclusion, but as transformative. Latino mentors and leaders provided cultural understanding, advocacy, and proof of possibility (Burgo, 2024). Their presence reshaped participants' perceptions of belonging and potential within academic spaces.

For example, Marcela recalled growing up, there were not many educators or administrators that looked like her. She said that seeing people that looked like her or represent diversity made her feel seen in educational spaces. She shared:

I think education really taught me to stand out and to be that spokesperson for kiddos who don't have that. And I feel like I didn't have that growing up. I didn't have teachers that looked like me, and if and if I did, sometimes they were Paras ((Participant 2).

Yet, seeing those paras made her feel secure and comfortable. She stated that those "…people who I felt like were home, like they were the few people, right, that reminded me of my mom. They were like the few people that I could confide in" ((Participant 2).

In addition, during her college years, she appreciated that some of her professors would intentionally bring up articles in class that helped people think outside of their world-view and think about other perspectives. She shared:

> Like when we would read, like, certain documents about education and the way that students of color were treated, she was like, 'Let's discuss this. Like, let's talk about it.' And like, she was like, open to having a discussion and like, doing and talking (Participant 2).

This helped her be seen in the course and allow her the space for visibility.

These experiences that the six Latino students shared contributed to feelings of isolation and self-doubt, reinforcing the sense that they were outsiders within academic spaces. According to Perez (2018), "Racialized space gives whites privileged access to opportunities for social inclusion and upward mobility. At the same time, it imposes unfair and unjust forms of exploitation and exclusion on aggrieved communities of color" (p. 53). Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) value white privilege and grant opportunities for those who are of that race.

Bourdieu's Capital Theory implies that schools are a social system that creates power and capital (Bourdieu, 2021). Once a child enters a school community, their existence, background, and culture all become surveilled, and their identities are scrutinized. In addition, the LatCrit theory plays a critical role in examining the experiences of Latinos through the oppression that they encounter from the majority group in society (Von Robertson et al., 2014). The participants highlighted institutional and academic barriers facing Latino families. They shared that in

academic settings, systemic inequality, language, race, and immigration shape educational trajectories, which limit their potential outcomes. Therefore, through LatCrit, I learned how white supremacy gives unfair advantages to white people, treats non-white people unfairly, sees white culture as normal, and leaves Latinas/os out in schools (Von Robertson et al., 2014). Within the field of education, this framework critically interrogates how institutional practices contribute to exclusion while also recognizing the agency and resilience of Latino students and families. Their narratives guide critical examination of school practices and educator perspectives.

Many of the Latino Graduate students stated that they felt this way in their college courses and combated this by speaking up against injustices, having professors who represented their culture and ethnicity, and by receiving advice and support from their families at home (Von Robertson et al., 2014). Navigating whiteness became an additional layer of emotional labor, requiring participants to constantly assess safety, legitimacy, and acceptance while continuing to pursue their education. Through finding Latino organizations, first-generation resources, and building resiliency, they were able to exist in this space as themselves.

Experiences of racism and microaggressions were present across all narratives, particularly within predominantly White institutions (Solorzano et al., 2000). Attaining an education is central to many Latinos' hopes and dreams. However, when they enter educational spaces, they are continually met with misconceptions and misunderstandings about their culture and expectations. The history of the United States with countries like Central America have shown that they are discriminated against and do not belong because their language, culture, traditions, and backgrounds are not the norm. Latino communities have long resisted systemic oppression (Solorzano et al., 2000). While the efforts of Latino activists have led to some

advancements, many Latino students continue to attend underperforming schools that fail to provide adequate college preparation (Irizarry, 2011). Nevertheless, Latinos persisted with their families' support in helping them reach their goals and explore their interests. Further, findings indicated that academic identity, career aspirations, and college awareness begins forming early in childhood and are deeply influenced by their interests, exposure, social relationships, family encouragement, and opportunities for exploration. This established that having early childhood teachers who can design developmentally appropriate classrooms and activities who are culturally sensitive to the customs, traditions, and expectations of Latino families is of utmost importance.

Unprepared. Students realized once they entered the higher education environment that they were unprepared to face their new tasks. For example, Carena faced issues with time management and responsibilities. Once she began attending college, she found it difficult to plan meals and keep up with her responsibilities. She reflected on what she currently did and what she could work on. She shared,

> More like, I don't eat, like, I don't eat at all during lunch because I have classes, so most times I won't eat until dinner. So I could do better with that. I could do better with my responsibilities (Participant 6).

Similarly, Stephanie shared similar struggles with Carena. She talked about working on time management and her writing skills. She stated, "I guess really time management, I would say, because you need to be able to have a detailed-like structure around your classes, but also your studies" (Participant 6).

Lastly, Micah felt the same about his time management skills. He felt he had to figure out how to manage his time and get his responsibilities complete. He shared, "So I had to figure out

how to adjust my lifestyle, I guess, to accommodate my homework time. And that took a little bit, honestly, all of my freshman year was my adjustment period" (Participant 3).

Throughout the narratives, the Latino graduate students encountered many challenges in their educational endeavors. Students of color face additional challenges in the college transition. In addition to comparatively limited institutional, familial, and financial support, students of color can encounter overt and subtle forms of exclusion in college that tend to hinder their development of a sense of belonging to university communities (Nuñez, 2009). In addition, according to Murillo et al. (2009), Latinos have shared stories and research to highlight the challenges they face in schools, where their identities, languages, and traditions are often dismissed or devalued. As LatCrit (1995) reminds us, we must understand these lived experiences to shift the narrative and address systemic failures.

Theme 5: Political Climate in the United States

Participants described heightened fear, discomfort, and vigilance within schools and public institutions. The political climate functioned not as a background context, but as a lived and ongoing presence influencing educational experiences.

Negative Impacts

Mental Health. Several mental health concerns arose throughout the narratives as we began discussing the current political climate. Labels such as anxiety, fearful, unsafe, and unsupportive came up in our conversations and it allowed them to process some of the situations they had encountered. For instance, Natalia communicated working for a school district that served a population of around 58% Latino students. She is dumbfounded that in her district, there are not any Latinos in leadership. She shared, “We don't have an executive director. We don't

have a chief. We don't have a senior executive director. No one of Latino background that actually sits in those rooms and makes these decisions for our students" (Participant 4).

Families made the sacrifice to leave their native lands for a better life and in today's society, they are being treated like criminals and outcasts due to the United States President's stance. This is causing greater anxiety and fear in many families around the state, and at the school that Marcela teaches, as well. Unfortunately, Marcela has lived with this constant fear and anxiety due to her parents and her status. Marcela feared losing her parents due to the political climate targeting undocumented families. She stated:

> I feel like things are different, and I think they're more scary. There's this time around. Ever since I was young, I've always had that anxiety of, 'What am I gonna do if my parents get pulled over? What am I gonna do if, God forbid, something happens to them?' What like…what do I do? I'm the oldest. I'm gonna be the one in charge of calling a lawyer, of figuring out what I can do to help my parents in that situation. And so that anxiety has ridden me since I was young, and it's an anxiety that I've always had to live with, and I'm still living to this day, even right now. And we're seeing ICE raids in my state that we have never seen before. We have seen it across the country, but never like this before, especially to this extent. And every day, every single night, I pray. I'm like, 'Yo listen, like, please take care of them,' like, 'Please take care of them on their way home, on their way to work, on their way home when they're running errands.' It is always something that I pray about, and it is always something that is always in the back of my head (Participant 2).

Likewise, Carena explained that she lived in fear of her father's side of the family encountering challenges during this political climate. She shared:

> I feel like I'm more scared for like, my dad's side of the family, and like it worries me about what's going on. I know earlier this year when the election happened, I was a little worried about what would happen, because my dad is on the East Coast, now. He's not supposed to be, so I was a little worried about the stuff going on (Participant 6).

Moreover, Stephanie explained that her family had major anxiety about something happening to her Latino side of the family. She has shared that her community has a lack of understanding of what is truly occurring. She said:

> I've noticed that people are more inclined to share their thoughts that should not be shared and are not beneficial to be spoken out loud to anyone. And they're more okay with the idea of people who don't look like them, or people who look like them being taken because the fact of people being kidnapped or ripped from their families is not seen as gruesome as it truly is (Participant 6).

The political climate has impacted Micah's family, too, because his father fears being departed so that has limited his engagement with social events and family. For example, Micah shared:

> My dad is in constant fear of being deported. He didn't, he wouldn't even go to my half-brother's graduation because he was afraid, He's just afraid of public events at all. And so he had to miss the graduation because he was just afraid that somebody would see him and they would ask for his ID or something. And, so he was, he just constantly lives in fear. And that has been really hard, because he would come to my state, sometimes, or even when we went out there. Like, he went and did all of the things in the northwest with my family and I. He went to do all the fun stuff, but this last time that I went, he didn't want to go anywhere, and so it's just been hard, because I can't imagine what it's

like for him to not feel like he can go and do life. Like, you're just constantly in fear of what could possibly happen. And I know that there's some kids here (at my school) that feel the same way (Participant 3).

Similarly, Natalia expressed great concern that our political climate has impacted the family engagement events that her school district puts on. She understands the fear that her children and families live with, as she recalled her mother achieving residency when she was in fourth grade. She shared:

> At what cost is this going to come for? Because it is a lot, um, because I'm very thankful, like my parents have legal status, but my mom didn't become a resident till I was in fourth grade. So, you know, I know what it's like do that. What does this mean? And so, yeah, I really do think that the political climate has impacted what we do. How many people actually come to what we plan and have for them? And I can tell that families don't trust us, and it makes sense we have not done anything to win their trust as a district (Participant 4).

Immigrant Family Background. Due to the political climate, students were face with challenging situations that exasperated being profiled or discriminated against.

Many of the participants discussed having to navigate their advocacy in a different manner, as to not draw attention to themselves or their families. For example, Marcela shared how she loved advocating and helping people. Yet, she felt limited in what she was allowed to defend, now, with this political climate. She explained, "So I do try to be more careful now with what I say and like, with how I advocate, because I also I want to be careful for myself" (Participant 2).

Latinos learned to survive this climate. They found strength and courage amongst the negativity and chose to persist. For example, Stephanie shared that she was a strong advocate for herself and her community. She found this to be one of her strengths. But, with this political climate, she stated, “I think one of my strongest strengths is that I advocate for others pretty strongly, and so sometimes it gets me into trouble. Not trouble, but into more problems that I have to deal with" (Participant 6).

The narratives showed that mental health concerns were a reality in these students’ lives. They lived with fear that one day they would return home to an empty house or to a parent that was relocated due to their citizenship status. The political climate truly impacted their well-being. According to Moreno (2017), Latinos are an ethnicity that have always faced mental health issues. Yet, the political climate has ignited more mental health concerns amongst Latinos. Roche et al. (2024) shared that after the 2016 election, “federal actions and policies restricting rights and benefits for the US Latinx residents” (n.p.) were put in place. Yet, the Latino graduate students learned to navigate it and find people who could support their confusion or questions.

Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter, five major themes were constructed from Latino graduate students. They are: (a) childhood experiences, (b) identity development in first-generation narratives, (c) educational empowerment and cultural identity development, (d) structural and resource challenges in education, and (e) political climate in the U.S. Throughout these themes, the Latino graduate students shared how they navigated predominantly white institutions to achieve their goals and to overcome systemic barriers that were placed before them.

During their childhood experiences, they encountered losing their Spanish language due to school policies or to family dynamics. This impacted their identity in a major way because

their language is a part of their identity and schools need to recognize the importance of providing the opportunity to use their native tongue (Anzaldúa, 2012). Oboler (1995) stated that this situation stemmed from historical context between the United States and Mexico, where the land Latinos once knew and the people they valued and cherished were becoming extinct by the new settlers who had their ideas and wanted to create their society. This racism continued to occur and marginalize Latinos through denying them to speak their native language because it was seen as a threat (Stritikus, 2010).

Therefore, as first – generation Latino college students navigated these PWI's, they continued to be challenged to assimilate and become like the majority (Oboler, 1995). Irizarry (2011) shared how students stated they carried a strong commitment to their families or the Mexican communities from which they came, a commitment that translated into a desire to give back and help others. Anzaldúa (2012) stated that "being Mexican is a state of soul – not one of the mind, not one of citizenship" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 84). Her Mexican identity encompasses all she is to the core of her body. She carries her Mexican traditions, culture, experiences, and background with her as she forges new paths in a territory that has forgotten about her.

In addition, Latino families bring "optimism and a strong ethnic identity" to school, "which are positively related to their children's developmental outcomes" (Cabrera et al., 2024, p. 3). This positive outlook on life helps them strive for success and stay motivated through the challenges they encounter. In addition, schools need to become familiar with the assets that Latino children and families bring to their classrooms, daily (Irizarry, 2011; Marun, 2018). By getting to know the family and learning about the educational experiences that children bring, schools can continue to support them in their learning and behavior goals (Velázquez, 2022).

Lastly, the Latino graduate students encountered great turmoil through the political climate because it was having a big impact on their family's lives. President Donald Trump racialized and criminalized Latino immigrants and was aligned with racist camps (Newkirk, 2018).

Their narratives were full of resilience, advocacy, strength, and courage to overcome the systemic barriers that stemmed from the Latino's history with the United States. Hence, the findings in this study contribute to the literature because the Latino graduate students experienced many of the situations that have been identified through the literature. The way their words extends this study is that they showed how important it is to have support for Latino first-generation college students and to acknowledge their cultural capital as an asset in these educational spaces.

Chapter 7: Cross-Case Analysis from Latino Children, Latino Parents, and Latino Graduate Students

The next section focuses on the individual group and integrated findings and discussions of the stories shared by Latino children, their parents, and Latino college graduate students paired with current literature. The 20 participants' narratives revealed many themes, patterns, and codes that provided great insight into their lived experiences to share how children and Latino graduate students viewed education and college and how parents navigated their children's educational settings. Through their stories, we learn ways we can support their educational journey while honoring their culture, traditions, and perspectives. I will share the key findings from this study with the literature reviewed and discuss how these findings emphasize the need for reform in educational systems.

Across the three groups of participants, a unified story emerged that centered on educational aspirations. This was created through scarcity of resources, the role of family's expectations, and the multi-generational pursuit of success through education. Their overlapping themes revealed a shared cultural logic around perseverance, sacrifice, and belonging. Across all three participant groups, I constructed six themes and they are (a) resilience built out of necessity, (b) family as the emotional center of support. Love, and sacrifice, (c) education as a pathway to success, (d) identity formation through their struggles as persistence, (e) culture values served as a resource, and (e) navigating the political climate.

Table 7

Cross-Case Analysis Findings from All Three Participant Groups

Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5	Theme 6

Resilience Built out of Necessity	Family as the Emotional Center of Support, Love, and Sacrifice	Education as a Pathway to Success	Identity Formation Through Their Struggles as Persistence	Culture Values Served as a Resource	Navigating the Political Climate

Theme 1: Resilience Built out of Necessity

A common thread in all three participants' interviews was having to build resiliency out of necessity. Each group shared that they encountered various challenges throughout their childhood, which shaped their outlook on planning for their future. It was clear that many obstacles or challenges arose at various points of their lives due to lacking economic, cultural, or social capital.

Capital can be a tool for social mobility or oppression, depending on who possesses it and what is valued by the majority group in power (Bourdieu, 2021). Bourdieu claimed that capital gives the power needed to maneuver situations or achieve beyond what they were born into. For example, Latinos rely on their social and cultural knowledge and skills to create their new community and social support networks; they establish a safe place that honors their culture, while sharing resources and abilities that empower and strengthen one another (Cabrera et al., 2024; Newcomer, 2018). These interviews showed that families want to create a community of support that provides them access to this information from the school, which supports college preparation becoming a part of their children's identity. Their narratives helped analyze how students leveraged or lacked economic, social, or cultural resources and how these impacted preparation, persistence, and success.

The challenge of lacking capital appeared throughout the Latino parent interviews in references to childhood disruptions in their learning and enrollment in school, adolescent hardships when immigrating and leaving their community behind, and adulthood challenges in

accessibility to information for their children. Their words resonated with me about how this is a form of capital that they lacked since the beginning of their own childhoods to present-time. The parents voiced that they were able to navigate through those situations as children and adolescents, but that they needed more information to assist and support their children in their future educational success. They lacked the capital to understand how to prepare and guide their children for collegiate pathways because they did not have access to the information necessary to do so.

One parent shared that because of their childhood experiences, they wanted to make their lives even better for their own children. Yet, they were not privy to information that would enable their children to engage in further opportunities. They stated,

> Support them, first, at home to be their best... then to learn, to learn. The most important thing, then, is to read and to write and also to learn the culture of this country, which is what will give them new opportunities. Learn more about college. I haven't had the opportunity to receive any kind of information because, well, the girls are here in elementary school and my oldest son is just starting Middle School, but I haven't been informed about any such program at the University, yet (Participant 4).

Bourdieu's Capital Theory provides a lens through which to explore the role of various forms of capital (cultural, social, economic, and symbolic) in shaping individuals' ability to navigate institutional structures, such as education (Bourdieu, 1986). The parent interviews showed how families' educational experiences, socioeconomic background, and access to resources (like programs or school information) shaped their ability to support their children's education and college preparation. Many of the parents felt that they had a positive relationship with their children's teachers and could communicate concerns if needed. Yet, the parents did

not know what to ask or how to engage in their children's education. Therefore, they relied on their children's school community to impart information. This helped me understand that families depended on support from their community because they lacked forms of institutional capital.

The children's interviews mirrored these narratives as they shared their aspirations for their future, but with limited knowledge and restricted access to opportunities because of the inaccessibility of information or language barrier. One student shared that her mom wanted her to attend the local college, but that she was not excited about it. After some discussion, I realized she was afraid to have hope to attend college because she could not afford it, so she chose to say she did not want to go. She said, "Because it's kind of expensive and I didn't like want to go there" (Interview 9). I took some time to discuss options available to pay for college and her face lit up and she became excited. I acted as a capital broker by opening the door of information to financial aid, scholarships, and grants that could allow her the space to have hope to attend this university to reach her educational goals.

The graduate students recalled observing their parents working multiple blue-collar jobs and having to navigate college as first-generation students without academic or economic capital. Their parents supported them in all that was possible, but because their schools did not provide adequate support and resources in their native language or with educators who understood their cultural background, opportunities were limited and access to collegiate pathways became a struggle. Bourdieu's theory reminds us that institutions, like schools, play a role in transmitting cultural capital and reinforcing social structures (Bourdieu, 2021). Therefore, when schools continue to function through a deficit lens toward children of color and low-income backgrounds, unfair systems and power differences keep families of color from being truly

involved in their children's schools. Negative beliefs about these families also affect decisions made about their children's education (Marrun, 2018). They have often believed harmful ideas that blame families of color for not doing well. These negative views lead to unfair treatment and lower-quality education for Latino children (Marrun, 2018). For example, one graduate student shared about her parents coming to the United States to provide her with a better life, yet they did the best with what they had and knew. She stated,

> My mom and dad were still not super familiar with, like, the US education system, and, you know, just not really understanding what their role was as far as, like, parental engagement. So I would like get dropped off late. I would get picked up late. I wouldn't go to like activities and stuff like that, because my parents were in a place in their lives where they just had to, you know, there were just lot of little things" (Participant 3).

Hence, as she was growing up, her parents were also learning and navigating their new life in the United States through their cultural lens. When it was time to prepare for college, she knew her parents did not have the capital to guide her through her collegiate experiences and that she would need to figure out how to navigate this opportunity.

In all three participant groups, it was evident that their childhood experiences showed how schools were gatekeepers of knowledge and information. They shared opportunities and experiences with specific children and families. Some of these obstacles were due to language barriers, misunderstanding of the children's culture and familial expectations, and assumptions of Latino families' understanding of the American public school environment. This aligned with Pierre Bourdieu's Capital Theory, as it examined social inequities and showed that systems must maintain balance because disrupting these systems can cause societal instability. Hence, the

school held the power to determine what information was disseminated or what opportunities were provided to specific people.

In addition, it aligned with how LatCrit examined systemic racism, language discrimination, immigration policies, and other structural forces that uniquely impact these communities (Valdes, 1997). In these interviews, I examined how systemic issues, like immigration, racism, or exclusion from resources, affected family engagement and access to college pathways (Von Robertson et al., 2014). Their narratives informed a critique of institutional practices and advocacy for equity. This provided insight into how families resisted or responded to structural barriers. Their words informed recommendations for equity-focused interventions.

Consequently, across all three groups, they built resiliency out of the necessity to survive, and eventually, thrive in these spaces that were not built for them. This became the force that shaped their identity. Throughout the interviews, participants described learning to "do more with less" and developing independence out of necessity. Despite generational differences, the narrative remained consistent that their childhood began in spaces where resources were scarce, but determination and motivation were abundant.

Theme 2: Family as the Emotional Center of Support, Love, and Sacrifice

A powerful overlapping theme was the family as an anchor. The Latino parents deeply cared for their children and held high expectations for them to succeed, even though they could not provide academic support. Latino families are nurturing and loving towards their children and want the best for them. One way Latino parents helped their children was through the use of consejos.

One parent shared that her ultimate responsibility in life is to support and care for her children. She said,

> Well, at my son's school and at my daughters' school... My role is to support them so that they can every day put in the effort and that they want to get to the point of improving themselves and reaching university. That they can graduate. Every day I wake up and tell them, 'Son, give it your all.' Work with them so they can have that thought to say, 'Okay, I'm going to learn in school, I'm going to put in the effort.' All they have to do is sleep, eat, go to school and study (Participant 4).

Children were greatly motivated to meet these high expectations because of their parents' love and support. They understood this emotional support was a gift that kept them inspired, especially when the children knew the challenges their families faced to be present and available. One participant shared that, as an 8-year-old, when she went home after school, she always helped her mom keep the house clean and take good care of her little sister. She knew this would alleviate any stress that her mom encountered at work and could rest when she came home. She stated,

> He (her brother) tells me to 'clean all the house,' even the toilets in my mom's room and brothers room. So I do that, and me and L do that mostly. I tell L to watch the TV for she doesn't get tired, because I don't want her to be tired and I want her to play more. And I clean my room and all that stuff. And I still do that I wash the dishes and all that stuff (Participant 5).

The Graduate students frequently described their parents' sacrifices of immigration, working long hours, and giving up their own educational goals as central to their sense of purpose. One participant shared, "So my mom was always someone who pushed college onto us.

She told me and my siblings that if we weren't to go to a college, we would not have a successful life" (Participant 5). This participant knew of her mother's obstacles to reach her success and now understood that the expectation for her to attend college was nonnegotiable. College was the pathway for success in her mother's eyes.

Across all participants, family operated as both an inspiration and a responsibility. As Latino students faced challenges in higher education, they reached out to their family because calling home served as a constant reminder about the "many sacrifices that their families had made so they could obtain una buena educacion" (Marrun, 2018, p. 164). Participants carried this weight to succeed. This was not just for themselves, but as a repayment of their family's sacrifice (Matos, 2015). This commitment was repeated across all of the participants. It was clear that with love and sacrifice, they would overcome any challenges that came their way. In the Latino culture, graduating from college is one way to show your gratitude to your parents, who have, typically, sacrificed to great lengths. Yet, "finishing" isn't just about completing a college degree program. According to Matos (2015), " to 'finish' is to complete what their parents started by coming to the U.S. in search of a better life for their children. To 'finish' is to rectify all of the wrongs that their parents endured (pp. 447–448).

Theme 3: Education as a Pathway to Success

The participants shared the same perspective that Hill and Torres (2010) discussed in their article about how "immigrant families have long viewed public education as a pathway to opportunity, economic mobility, and a better life for future generations. Working with Latino children and families in an educational setting goes beyond academics. Latino families see *education* as teaching academics, communication, behavior, and much more (Auerbach, 2002;

Velázquez, 2017). They often hold high educational aspirations for their children and see education as a key to future opportunity and stability (Hill & Torres, 2010).

Through all the participants' narratives, education was framed as learning but also as a pathway to success because it provided them with social and economic mobility. For parents, education was described as the way out of their current situation and as hope for their futures. One parent shared that even through scarcity, their parents were always encouraging them and working hard to make their futures even better than their own. They stated, "They always said they were going to work hard to send us to school so we could keep studying. And we could move forward in a better future" (Participant 4).

Likewise, the children spoke about education as something that "opened doors," often repeating parental language about "a better future" or "not struggling as we did." One child delighted in sharing that her parents talk about a better future through attending college. She shared, "I know about college that they work very hard on the things, and they do hard things, and, like, you help people, and I know they do a lot of math, and it's very difficult to do that" (Participant 5). This child's parents communicated that college was no easy feat, but that they would support them as best as possible to plant that seed and to find ways to get them through it. Another child viewed his parent as the smartest person he knew. When asked who around him goes to college, he confidently said "My mom!" When I asked how he knew, he replied, "Yeah, because she's smart" (Participant 8).

Therefore, Latino families may lack access to dominant forms of capital valued by schools, such as English proficiency or familiarity with institutional norms, even though they possess rich cultural and familial capital (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012). These valuable assets often go unrecognized or are devalued in mainstream educational settings (Gallo & Link, 2016).

Through the interviews, the participants emphasized one of LatCrit's central ideas that a Latino's assets need to be acknowledged as fundamental to their learning. LatCrit emphasizes the importance of counter storytelling, elevating the narratives and lived experiences of those marginalized by dominant educational and legal systems, as a method of resistance and a means to promote equity (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Murillo et al. (2009) agree and state that Latino communities continue to resist marginalization through using storytelling and advocacy. These stories are used to impact societal narratives towards Latinos and to awaken people to understand their lived truths (Bernal, 2002).

Through the children's interviews, I learned how access to cultural and social capital came from parental knowledge, community networks, and school support. Parents worked hard to cultivate opportunities for their children, investing time, money, and labor to access resources that may help them thrive. Over time, these efforts contribute to intergenerational capital transfer, whereby children benefit from the social networks and knowledge their families have worked to build (Marrun, 2018).

In addition, the Graduate students overcame the challenges and obstacles they faced as first-generation Latino students to graduate and achieve their goals, while honoring their families' legacies. They understood higher education institutions as a place of power that they could navigate and overcome to create accessible spaces for themselves and future Latinos. But they also knew it took gaining social and academic capital to navigate this space and be successful. One student shared about the time he was exposed to information about college. It happened in his first grade classroom. He stated,

In elementary school, I know that for sure. I distinctly remember in first grade, my teacher had table names for each table, and they were universities in SC, the region I lived in. And so I would sit at these specific tables with university names" (Participant 2). His mother praised the teacher for providing this initial exposure and begin conversations about college pathways at such a young age. She knew this would give her child a strong introduction to attending college.

Across all three groups of participants, they articulated education as a way to honor the family's legacy and sacrifice, and to achieve success. Access to education and achieving higher education is the primary routes to changing one's life trajectory.

Theme 4: Identity Formation Through Their Struggles and Persistence

Another shared theme across the participants was the idea that their struggles and persistence became a part of shaping their identity. Anzaldúa's Borderland Theory helps illuminate how Latino students and families navigate dual cultural spaces, negotiating their cultural identities while adapting to dominant norms in school. This constant crossing of borders can be both empowering and alienating, as students develop dual cultural identities while contending with cultural invisibility or erasure in school curricula and pedagogy (Anzaldúa, 1987; Murphy, 2016). Without meaningful access to formal education, many families feel excluded from full participation in society and its economy (Cabrera et al., 2024; Irizarry, 2011; Marrun, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Many parents shared in their narratives that their identity was formed by cultural expectations in their childhood years as they scarified their own educational aspirations. Some had to leave their own educational ambitions to work and provide for their younger siblings. One

parent shared that she accepted this as her fate in order to provide the support and guidance her younger siblings needed to be successful. She stated,

> Well, fortunately, as in those times it was good (at home). But, in my country it's very... money is very scarce... there is a lot of poverty. Well, my siblings went to school, I couldn't go anymore because I was the oldest, I made it to the age of 14...fourth grade (Participant 3).

These sacrifices occurred in order to help raise their younger siblings and to provide for their future. They carried it as an honor to be able to see their siblings thrive.

Likewise, many of their children were able to share hopes and dreams for their future because these parents sacrificed for their siblings and had the strength and resilience to overcome any challenges they faced. They learned to navigate through scarcity and provide for, now, their own children more than they were given, as children themselves. Their children were given the opportunity in a new land to dream about their future aspirations. Hence, one child shared that she has a goal to become a police officer. She grew up in a country where she saw lots of violence and wanted to support women and children who faced that situation. She stated, "I want to help with the fear and violence when girls are taken away" (Discussed being a police officer) (Participant 6). Even though she is in a space where she has freedom to dream, she carried with her experiences from her native land. Her identity was formed through her dual residency.

Anzaldúa's (1987) Borderland Theory was illuminated in the children's interviews because their narratives shared how children and families live between cultural and institutional "borderlands," negotiating identity and expectations from both Latino heritage and mainstream educational systems. Anzaldúa's (1987) Borderland Theory conceptualizes the lived experience of those who exist between cultures, languages, and identities. Particularly relevant to Latino students and families, this theory explores the tensions and negotiations inherent in living within

borderlands, both physical and metaphorical. Therefore, their narrative identified that they negotiated their two words to see themselves fitting into the educational system they were now a part of.

Finally, the graduate students revealed how, as children, they served as translators for parents and acted as linguistic brokers. Sometimes not only for their family members, but for those who worked in the school systems. One graduate student shared,

> I was always the kid that they would partner up when someone new that came and didn't speak English. They would sometimes take me out of class when I was, like, in those first couple of years, because I could speak Spanish, and I could also speak English, and I could interpret it pretty well (Participant 4).

They carried their first language as the bedrock of their identity. They supported Latinos who were new to the country and provided them with a resource they did not have when they arrived. These Graduate students navigated these spaces as young children who learned the language, culture, and climate of a United States school system. And, then in college, they had to handle college bureaucracy mostly on their own. This forced the graduate students to grow up quickly, as they had to assist others in adult-like situations. Yet, in college, it empowered them to ask questions, find resources, and to advocate for themselves, as they once had to as children for their family and others around them.

Gloria Anzaldúa's theory encompasses how power manifests within these binary spaces and how self-transformations can occur when facing the oppression one encounters (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1994). This power is structured through physical and metaphorical borders imposed by society. These borders begin with interactions that Latinos had with the dominant culture in society. All participant interviews centered on their lived experiences as bicultural individuals

navigating between home culture and American public school systems. Their words shared how they had to navigate unfamiliar spaces through their Latino identity and the Spanish language. This supported understanding of internal identity formation, cultural pride, and the tensions faced while navigating systems not built for them. These experiences produced several overlapping identity-related codes across the three datasets. The narrative is remarkably consistent in that participants made sense of themselves through the challenges they faced, developing identities built around perseverance, overcoming, and hard work.

Theme 5: Cultural Values Served as a Resource

All three of the participant groups contained references to cultural values that shaped their motivation and influenced success. First, hard work was a constant in all of the participants' childhoods. Many of them recalled watching their parents work two jobs or long hours to provide for their families. This sacrifice was difficult, as many were left to navigate things at home independently, but necessary for their long-term success. Parents view their children as beneficiaries of ancestral sacrifices, creating a sense of duty to excel not only for themselves, but for the family and ancestors who paved the way (Matos, 2015). Anzaldúa's (2012) reflections about food and familiar smells as intrinsic parts of her identity emphasize that identity is not limited to physical location or citizenship but is a state of the soul. Latinos carry their cultural heritage with them as a source of resilience and motivation to thrive in spaces that may overlook or marginalize them.

Second, there was a deep respect for elders, teachers, and the community throughout their lives. The parents spoke highly of their children's teachers being a great source of academic support, and that they built positive communication with each other. The children held their teachers in high regard as they saw the partnership their parents had with them and respected

their authority and expertise. Consequently, teachers and educational professionals must understand the level of respect and trust that Latino parents have toward them as they educate their children in a school setting. Latino parents entrust teachers to know what is best for their children in a learning context and how to help them achieve. Therefore, teachers are the keepers of new learning opportunities through the information they possess and their pedagogical skills (Rowe & Ortiz, 2009).

One parent shined with joy as she talked about the partnership she had with all her children's teachers. She shared,

> And even when I come to the meetings I tell the teachers, 'If my children are doing bad in school or with behavior, send them homework at home, or call me. I'm going to work with them at home because it's my responsibility to be with them. I am going to support them and encourage them by offering them what they want at the end of their completion' (Participant 2).

The graduate students carried these cultural values with them as they navigated their higher education institution, which served as an asset as they built a strong community to provide guidance, support, and care in this new environment. This support and love provided them the strength to overcome the hardships or obstacles they would face.

Third, family does not only include immediate family members, but also involves extended family members like cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc. (Marrun, 2018). As these members of their family create friendships and relationships with community members, they become a part of their family, as well. This aligned well with the LatCrit theory. LatCrit is known for "community building based on shared principles, ethics, practices, and aspirations. LatCrits work both to create scholarship and activism through community and to create

community through scholarship and activism" (Valdes et al., 2005, p. 148). I found this to be true through the parent interviews. The Latino culture centers around a collectivist orientation, viewing family, relationships, and deference to authority as integral components to success (Fortuna, 2024). They enjoy including their immediate and extended family in all their joys and sorrows. There is great importance in how immediate and extended family members, like abuelitos, tias y tios, y primos, are involved in family matters and beyond the academic school environment (Marrun, 2018).

LatCrit (1995) is evident in the narrative that Tito shared about becoming a soccer player. He said he was getting better and better by practicing with his family members because they want to help him be the best. This concept of family ensures that everybody has a community that provides love, care, and support for one another, while providing their basic needs.

Last, faith and gratitude were stabilizing forces. These values appeared across generations, suggesting that participants understood success as a collective effort grounded in cultural norms. This idea came out in many interviews as the participants shared that their success was only possible because of the sacrifices, support, love, and time that were dedicated and committed to them. Their opportunity to attend an American public school, a predominately white institution of higher education, or to walk across the stage at graduation was all possible because of their community around them. Therefore, when schools create a space where children and their families belong and are included, Latino families form an external support group with their teachers and others involved in their learning community. Feeling connected and accepted in their community can help people deal with challenges like learning a new culture, language barriers, and discrimination. It helps them stay strong and proud of who they are (Cabrera et al., 2024). They can reciprocate by teaching each other about their culture, traditions, and customs,

enabling them to become more aware and knowledgeable about similarities they may share and differences that make them unique.

One graduate student shared that her family was the best support in getting her across the finish line. She talked about how proud her immediate family was and that they wanted to share it with the world. Her dad was her biggest champ and she stated,

> He went as far as to like send out the live stream to, like, our family in Central America. So, like, our family in Central America was even watching me. Like, I remember them posting videos on Facebook, and they were like, 'Oh my gosh.' And just like that unity. Like, that's what we wanted, that's what we love to see. And so I always, I've always felt love, don't get me wrong, but the amount of love I felt that day was just it was a lot. That will be a core memory forever[1] (Participant 4).

This gratitude, in turn, would be paid forward to the next generation so that they would have the opportunity to be even better than what this generation could do.

Latino families often measure success collectively, valuing contributions to family and community over individual accomplishments. As Anzaldúa (2012) stated, "The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual" (p. 40). Therefore, a students' commitment to giving back to their families and communities demonstrates how success is intertwined with cultural values of reciprocity and collective advancement. The Latino parents use various ways, like storytelling, to keep their culture, tradition, and history alive. These stories serve as motivation to their children to pursue greatness (Auerbach, 2002).

Theme 6: Navigating the Political Climate

The history between the United States and Central America has always been challenging because they pushed agendas that would benefit them at the cost of hurting others. The United States was a symbol of wealth, power, and success. Consequently, people from other counties would seek refuge, asylum, or protection from the United States because of the violence or upheaval in their native country. Therefore, as people immigrated, they desired to live in a geographic region that affords their needs, and the color of their skin or the circumstances they faced, did not prevent them from achieving their goals or dreams. Nonetheless, "these organizations, and Whites who fear a loss of power and status, found a champion in Donald Trump, who appealed directly to their distress about wanting White dominance" (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021, p. 150).

For example, Donald Trump began his four-year term when he promised to "'Make America Great Again' by building a 'big, beautiful wall' along the U.S.-Mexican border to curtail supposed high levels of undocumented migration, crime, and drugs, and to instill the rule of law at our borders" (Canizales & Vallejo, 2021, p. 151). When Donald Trump took office for his second term, chaos ensued and he began to achieve his goal of "Make America Great" by targeting any person who looked Latino and holding them in a detention center until they could deport them back to their native country. Both the Latino parents and graduate students shared similar fears, sadness, and frustrations about what was happening all around them with their friends and their family members who looked Latino.

Through Christina's interview, she shared that she and her family had fear and instability linked to immigration policy. She described how this insecurity affected daily routines and family planning. But she knew that they needed a plan. So, she was proactive in having conversations with her children about preparing for the possibility of being separated and the

emotional toll the political climate placed on her family. Despite these challenges, Christina and many Latino family and friends discussed how they would all protect one another and support each other's family members if anything happened to them.

Nonetheless, Carena also shared how the broader sociopolitical context impacted her emotional instability. She was concerned about the current immigration policy and how it was creating unsafe situations for undocumented Latinos. She was especially scared for her father and their extended family. These anxieties, however, were mediated through strong sibling relationships and peer networks that offered reassurance and solidarity.

In addition, as she reflected on the political climate, Jessica's voice revealed another dimension of her lived story: the daily uncertainty surrounding her husband's safety. While she avoided burdening her children with these fears, they quietly shaped her family's choices in deciding who drives, where they go, and how they move through public spaces. This part of her story situated her family within a broader narrative of racialized vulnerability in the United States, demonstrating how educational dreams cannot be separated from sociopolitical realities. Through her storytelling, Jessica represented a mother, wife, and support staff who navigated various contexts to provide college exposure to her children and to help plant the seed of thinking beyond their current school environment.

When reflecting on the political climate, Patricia's story became heavier, revealing the emotional burden her family carried as they navigated fear, uncertainty, and legal vulnerability. The tears she shed during this part of the interview highlighted the embodied nature of her narrative and how stories of schooling cannot be separated from stories of safety, belonging, and survival.

Surry's story was filled with hope for the future, but with the current political climate, also embodied fear. She dreamed of her daughter attending college, which was something denied to her older daughter. Yet, she was aware of the cultural and political narratives surrounding Latinos in the United States. While her tone stayed neutral, she acknowledged societal judgments and emphasized the need for Latinos to act responsibly to be accepted. Her narrative revealed how she navigated belonging and exclusion while maintaining faith as a source of strength.

Velma spoke strongly and openly about her views on the political climate, and her children's persistent fear was shaped by it. As an undocumented parent, she described living under constant threat of family separation, a fear that has permeated her children's sense of safety. The media had portrayed many dangerous situations that undocumented people encountered with law enforcement. Through these media narratives, her children were learning about the instability of the federal government and how ICE agents were given free rein to detain undocumented people. This created an atmosphere of anxiety that directly affected her children's emotional well-being and engagement with their school. Yet, Velma expressed a strong sense of dignity and resistance, asserting her contributions as a worker, taxpayer, and parent. For Velma, education was both a shield and a form of resistance. It was a means of protecting her children's futures in an uncertain sociopolitical landscape.

As you can see, the broader sociopolitical climate, particularly anti-immigrant rhetoric and deportation fears, was woven throughout the 11 participant narratives. Deportation was not an abstract concept; it directly impacted family structure, safety, and identity.

Synthesis: A Multi-Generational Story of Achieving Success

This chapter shares the lived experiences of the 20 Latino participants and what their narratives demonstrate about how they navigate educational experiences in the United States.

Their stories provide a deeper look into what keeps them encouraged and motivated to pursue greater success and what obstacles and challenges they must navigate as Latinos in the United States.

The overlapping themes across the Latino parents, children, and graduate students shared how they experienced challenges and obstacles to provide their families with the best educational experiences possible to be successful. These experiences shaped their educational possibilities and provided greater outcomes. These sacrifices became central motivators for children to pursue greater educational attainment because education was viewed across generations as the pathway to mobility and success.

First, the nine Latino children made meaning of learning, work, and college in distinct yet overlapping ways. The findings highlighted the importance of early academic identity development and access to college-related experiences in shaping their future goals.

Second, the collective narratives shared among five parents showed strength and resilience. They carried childhood histories marked by scarcity and educational denial. Through immigration, they transformed these experiences into intergenerational aspirations, devoting themselves to their children's school success. Yet they faced systemic barriers, like linguistic, institutional, and racialized barriers, that complicate their efforts. Despite these barriers, they persisted, drawing strength from cultural identity, resilience, and deep belief in the transformative power of education. These parents were not passive recipients of schooling; they were active agents navigating complex systems with limited support. Their narratives underscore the emotional and structural labor required to translate intergenerational dreams into educational futures.

Last, the six Latino Graduate students' narratives illustrated the diverse yet intersecting ways participants experienced public schooling, family influence, cultural identity, and college preparation. Together, these shared themes revealed that the participants' educational journeys were shaped by interconnected personal, cultural, institutional, and political forces. College readiness and persistence emerged not as individual traits, but as outcomes of family sacrifice, identity negotiation, structural barriers, and community support. These findings provided a foundation for understanding how Latino students navigate education systems.

All participants formed their identities through the struggles and responsibilities they encountered. These hardships and challenges provided the graduate students with a solid foundation to develop resilience from their cultural values, which provided stability and purpose as they navigated institutions not built for them. Therefore, while material conditions remained challenging, cultural strengths, family cohesion, sacrifice, resilience, and collective responsibility formed the foundation on which educational aspiration was built and sustained.

This chapter extends the current research because it encompasses a holistic approach between participants. My main interest was to engage the children and parents to learn about how they navigate school environments. I included the Latino graduate students to see the full circle of how a child begins to learn and develop their ideas of a collegiate pathway to how they navigate first-generation experiences in college. Finally, how they use their former experiences to guide, nurture, and protect their children showed their strength and power.

The following section addresses the implications of this study.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Throughout the narratives, the Latino parents worked tirelessly to provide them with a place to call home, a family who supported and loved them unconditionally, and an environment where they could succeed. Their immediate and extended families instilled in them "*ganas*, the drive and will to succeed; *empeños*, the dedication and commitment to the task or goal, and *estudios*; which is diligent study, effort, that will bring success" (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 105).

The students and families I worked with had one major goal: to gain an education to be successful in their careers and future lives, and to take care of their families in the United States and their home country. In this study, these parents were the individuals that volunteered to be interviewed to share their perspective.

The next section addresses the limitations and recommendations for future research.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

I established potential threats in the limitations of this study based on several factors: the sample size of my study; limited data because the study recruited from two specific elementary schools, but only one site participated; and, potential bias since I was a teacher in the building and had been a part of the culture for 21 years. These potential threats were minimized by recruiting for half a year at both sites to provide ample amount of opportunity to engage in the research. To further mitigate these limitations in the future, it would be important to include a second researcher who could be an unbiased person to recruit and perform the interviews.

While this study focused on Latino families within a specific context, future research should explore similar intergenerational dynamics across diverse Latino communities and geographic settings. Comparative studies may reveal both shared patterns and context-specific

variations in educational meaning-making. In addition, current research focuses on immigrant generations and the impact on their future outcomes. Studies have shown that the pathway to college varies across generations. I would extend my study to focus on this aspect of a Latino family and understand how the experiences of the different immigrant generations provide opportunities for upward mobility or challenges that deter their success.

Next, after I began receiving participant consent forms from one school site, I intentionally scheduled extra on-campus time with the second school site to talk with parents and recruit face-to-face. They returned their consent forms but checked that they were not interested in being a part of the study. In a qualitative narrative research study, it is important to understand that having a statistically representative sample is not the main goal because I do not want to generalize to a whole population. Instead, I want to ensure that there is transferability in the insights gained and can be applied, in this case, to another ethnic group. Yet, I also realized that I was only receiving permission from parents of the children, not any fathers. When I visited with both the mother and father, the father gave permission for the mother to participate, but he declined the offer. This is a cultural norm in the Latino culture. Fathers still play an important role in a child's learning and education, but it is primarily behind the scenes; oftentimes, mothers are the face of the family.

Future research should continue to center both child, parent, and Higher Education students' voices to better understand how educational meaning is negotiated across generations. I would extend my study by intentionally recruiting Latino fathers and understanding their part in a child's educational journey. Intergenerational qualitative designs offer rich insights into how values, aspirations, and challenges are transmitted and transformed over time.

In addition, to mitigate bias, I engaged in reflexivity and disclosed my biases, values, and experiences that I brought to the study. I engaged in stating and acknowledging my positionality in the research study. I explained how many aspects of myself could have influenced the way the participants responded or how I interpreted the data.

Lastly, I utilized a qualitative narrative analysis approach to guide my research. I used this methodology because it was important to me to honor the participants' voices and to share their narratives. Every approach has their strengths and weaknesses. I only used semi-structured interviews to gather data, which limited the perspectives of the participants. In the future, I could triangulate the data by using more than one source to gather data and gain more insights from various participants.

Next, I will address the limitations of this study and implications for educational practice and policies.

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

Recognizing Latino Cultural Capital Across Generations

Schools, higher education institutions, and community partnerships should intentionally recognize a person's cultural capital by validating families' educational hopes and positioning those aspirations as strengths upon which academic planning can be built. Practices such as goal-setting conferences, provide training in culturally responsive advising, and initiate early conversations about postsecondary pathways.

Bourdieu's Capital Theory (1986) identified that students who lack cultural capital are more likely not to attend college because they do not have the connections in the networks necessary to navigate this environment successfully. Yet, the findings indicated that Latino children, parents, and graduate students hold strong aspirations for educational attainment, even

when institutional knowledge is limited. Therefore, those who work with Latino children and families need to move away from deficit-based assumptions that equate unfamiliarity with college systems to a lack of value for education.

Expanding Family Engagement Beyond Academic Assistance

Schools, higher education institutions, and community partners can collaborate to establish best practices in family engagement, including emotional support, motivation, and presence. Educators should acknowledge these forms of involvement during conferences and communications, reinforcing that emotional investment is a meaningful and legitimate contribution to children's educational success.

Parents in this study consistently described providing emotional encouragement despite limited ability to assist with academic content. This finding challenged narrow definitions of parental involvement that prioritize homework help or school-based participation. Latino parents may display involvement in ways that differ from Euro-American norms. Educators often misinterpret these differences as disinterest or lack of involvement. Educators should recognize and value the cultural and familial knowledge Latino parents bring, while also providing guidance to navigate unfamiliar educational systems.

Supporting Navigational Knowledge Without Undermining Family Authority

Schools, higher education institutions, and community organizations play a critical role by offering workshops, family nights, and bilingual resources that demystify college admissions, financial aid, and degree pathways. The participants expressed uncertainty about college processes, highlighting the need for explicit instruction in navigational knowledge. Importantly, these supports should be framed as partnerships rather than corrective measures, ensuring that families' authority and cultural knowledge are respected rather than replaced.

Institutionalizing Intergenerational Approaches to College Readiness

More research at an earlier age must be done about engaging in the conversation of higher education, and how to appropriately integrate the topic of college in an elementary school to start creating the pathway to college. School leaders need to institutionalize intergenerational approaches by embedding family-oriented college awareness programming at the elementary and middle school levels. Such efforts may include campus visits, storytelling events featuring first-generation college students, and shared parent–child workshops that normalize questions and uncertainty. The symbolic role of college in all narratives suggested that college readiness efforts should begin earlier and involve families as collective units.

Much of the research done about Latinos in higher education focused on students in middle school and beyond. Therefore, it became too late for Latino children and families to develop the necessary skills or gather the appropriate documents needed to attend a higher education institution.

Professional Development in Culturally Responsive Practices

Constructing a comparative analysis about how education systems function in other countries, learning about them through discussion with the family and children, and teaching them about the American school systems will provide critical information to the families new to these systems and help them navigate them. The findings support the use of Culturally Responsive Practices to guide professional development for school district leadership, teachers, administrators, and college faculty and staff. Training professionals who work with diverse children and families to recognize aspirational, familial, and resistant forms of capital will help shift school cultures toward asset-based engagement with Latino families. This approach may

also reduce misinterpretations of parental involvement and improve relational trust between schools and communities.

Professionals who work with Latino children and families need to understand them as a close-knit society that is warm and inviting to all around them. Latinos measure success in a group and not through individualistic measures. For example, they stay with their family and succeed in elevating their circumstances. Anzaldúa (1987) shared how students stated they were strongly committed to their families or the Mexican communities from which they came, a commitment that translated into a desire to give back and help others. Their identity is tied to their family history and culture. Their identity consists of the foods they eat, the people they socialize with, the customs and traditions they create, and the experiences they encounter.

Research calls for culturally responsive programs that build on the strengths of Latino families, supporting language development, academic achievement, and positive bicultural identity formation. Strength-based models that recognize and incorporate familial knowledge, cultural heritage, and community ties are more likely to promote engagement and reduce disparities. Understanding the specific educational needs of Latino families is essential for reimagining equitable schooling.

Reframing Family Engagement Metrics

Educating policymakers about expanding definitions of family engagement to account for relational and motivational support, particularly within culturally diverse communities is critical to engage families. Family engagement is often measured through attendance at school events or participation in formal activities. The findings from this study suggest that such metrics may overlook meaningful forms of engagement occurring within homes and families.

Increasing Access to College Information and Resources

Developing policies that support equitable access to college counseling, bilingual advising, and early outreach are critical for families navigating higher education systems for the first time. Investment in school counselors, community-based partnerships, and culturally responsive informational materials can help reduce structural barriers while honoring families' aspirations. Many Universities and Colleges are considered Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and have systems created for those from wealth and power. Therefore, these institutions are doing away with programs that benefit Latinos and provide the extra guidance and support they need to be successful in this environment. Having power in society means having control over the opportunities people can access. It's important to be able to support our Latino populations and to understand their culture to incorporate this knowledge into our lessons and community.

Recruiting Latino Representation in Schools and Higher Education Institutions

It is important to increase the number of Spanish-speaking Latino teachers, support staff, faculty, and administrators to provide the services needed in schools to students and families. The Latino population has experienced growth over the past years in the United States. With the population change, school demographics represent an upward growth in Latino children and families. In addition, it is critical for Latino representation to occur throughout the learning environment so that children and families can see themselves in the curricula, the messages in the environment, their homework, and in the people around them.

Conclusion

Latino families are a collective society that should be viewed through an asset-based lens. Most regard education as their pathway to success. They actively seek ways to provide educational opportunities to their children and desire to construct hopeful futures within systems that were not designed for them. The Latino narratives share their lived realities and teach us that recognizing aspirational capital and honoring emotional forms of support can begin providing them with the access they need to enter educational spaces and be successful in them.

First, educational professionals need to establish ways to validate and honor the way Latino families view an education. By engaging in discussions with the families, they can learn about educational systems and how they function in other countries and how it compares to the Unites States. These conversations might provide a different perspective or insight into the transitions students and their families have encountered and how that impacts them.

Secondly, schools should establish community partnerships to provide training opportunities and resources for Latino families to engage in understanding collegiate pathways, starting at a younger age than middle school. These partnerships can help establish safe spaces for parents to learn without preparing their children for their future educational endeavors. These spaces allow the opportunity for children to seek appropriate

Lastly, policymakers need to establish equitable access to collegiate resources that promote success. This is necessary to provide opportunities to Latino students that may elevate their social, academic, and economic capital. This capital can provide them access into new spaces.

Bourdieu's (1986) Capital Theory is evident in these three action items because they all provide the opportunities for the children, parents, and Latino students to use their cultural capital to enhance their lives and prepare for success. Theses call to action recommendations

establish the space for Latinos to be seen for the intangible assets they bring to their learning environments. In addition, Anzaldúa's (1987) Borderland Theory connects to these because it establishes that as we begin to change the dialogue about Latinos in public schools, their identities will be valued and respected. Also, through the LatCrit (1995) lens, by taking these steps, the assets of Latinos will be acknowledged and their voice will be heard.

Therefore, the focus for future research will concentrate on continuing to learn through the narratives of Latinos. I will explore diverse Latino communities and their geographic settings. Consequently, I will intentionally recruit Latino fathers to understand their perspective on education systems and to learn about their upbringing. I would, also, recruit teachers, administrators, and faculty members to share their perspectives on working with Latino children to collaborate and create partnerships to support our diverse learners.

Finally, I will use the findings from this study to create workshops and trainings for educators, administrators, and faculty members to illuminate the participants' lived experiences and share from their perspective about how we can support, empower, and create a space for Latinos to exist and be present in educational settings.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Latino Children (English)

This is the Child Interview for Latino Families' Narratives About Experiences in an American Public School. The researcher asked children to answer these questions.

I am researching to learn about helping children learn about college and how to work toward what they want to be when they grow up.

I asked your parents if you could participate in the research. They said it would be fine if you were interested. If you let me know that you want to be in the research, I'll ask you to draw what you want to be when you grow up, and then I will ask you questions about what topics excite you and some questions about college. I might use what you share and take pictures of your drawings. I would also like to record what you say to me today so I can remember your words and include them in my story about the research project.

These things might happen during the research: I may accidentally say your name during our audio recording, but I will not use your real name and will try to use your pseudonym.

If you decide to be in my research and then change your mind, just tell me. We can stop at any time, and I will not get upset with you. If you feel angry, upset, or unhappy while you talk to me, we can stop for a moment. Then you can decide if you want to start again. If you are upset, I would ask your parents to help you until you feel better.

You do not have to do this if you do not want to. No one will be mad or upset with you if you do not want to be in my research. If you do not want to be in the research or choose for me not to use your drawings or words, tell me that now. If you have questions, please ask them now. (Have students sign the Child Assent form if they agree and continue with the interview)

Questions:

1. What kind of things do you like to learn about or do you like to do?
2. What do you want to be when you grow up?
    a. What do people think when you tell them you want to be that?
    b. What can you do to be better at becoming that?
3. Do you need to go to college to become that? (If "yes," continue with the following questions. If not, continue to question #4).
    a. If so, what do you know about college?
    b. Do you know people who have gone to college?

    c. Have you thought about what college you would like to attend?
4. What training or program do you need to reach your goal of becoming that?
    a. If so, what do you know about these trainings or programs?
    b. Do you know people who have done these trainings or programs?
    c. Have you thought about what training or program you would like to attend?

Draw what you want to be when you grow up.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Latino Parents (English)

This document shows the Latino parent interview questions for the Latino Families' Narratives About Experiences in an American Public School research. The researcher asked Latino parents to answer these questions.

Thank you very much for participating in this study. The purpose of this interview is to understand more about your initial understanding of school and college systems, what you perceive your role to be in an educational environment, and what you aspire for your children to attain. We will ask you to share your narrative and background so that we may understand the knowledge that you bring to the school. There will be two interviews. The first one will last about 45 minutes and the second one will be about 30 minutes.

I would like to make sure that you completed and signed the consent form that states what you are being asked to do, what your rights are, how privacy and confidentiality will be secured, and that contact information is available if you have any questions, comments, or concerns after the interviews.

I would like to make sure that you completed and signed the consent form that states what you are being asked to do, what your rights are, how privacy and confidentiality will be secured, and that contact information is available if you have any questions, comments, or concerns after the interviews.

1. Please share some information about your upbringing and your family.

2. How was school viewed by your parents or your family members?

3. What experiences did you have when you were a child in school?

4. Did you attend school in the United States or in another country? Where was your elementary school located? What are some memories you remember about your education?

5. What do you perceive as your role in the educational system that your child is enrolled in?

6. What role does the school play in your child's life?

7. What information have you been given or received about college or career preparation for your young child?

8. Do you have family members who graduated from college or a university, or attended training or a program for a job, and if so, what was their experience like?
    - What prepared them for college, training, or a program?
9. Have you begun thinking about the benefits or challenges your child will have when preparing for a college or career pathway?
10. Are there programs in the community that you partner with or your family is involved with that are guiding or helping your child learn about college, training, or programs, and begin the process of preparing for their pathway?
11. What is one way you would suggest that someone could help you and your child begin preparing for college or career pathways?
12. How do you feel about the current political climate in the United States?
13. How does this impact you, your friends, or your family?

Appendix C

Entrevista para Padres Latinos (Spanish)

This document shows the Latino parent interview questions for the Latino Families' Narratives About Experiences in an American Public School research. The researcher asked Latino parents to answer these questions.

Muchas gracias por participar en este estudio. El objetivo de esta entrevista es comprender mejor su comprensión inicial de los sistemas escolares y universitarios, su percepción de su rol en el entorno educativo y las aspiraciones que sus hijos alcanzan. Le pediremos que comparta su experiencia y trayectoria para que podamos comprender los conocimientos que aporta a la escuela. Se realizarán dos entrevistas: la primera durará aproximadamente 45 minutos y la segunda, aproximadamente 30 minutos.

Me gustaría asegurarme de que haya completado y firmado el formulario de consentimiento que indica lo que se le solicita hacer, cuáles son sus derechos, cómo se garantizará la privacidad y la confidencialidad, y que la información de contacto esté disponible si tiene alguna pregunta, comentario o inquietud después de las entrevistas.

Me gustaría asegurarme de que haya completado y firmado el formulario de consentimiento que indica lo que se le solicita hacer, cuáles son sus derechos, cómo se garantizará la privacidad y la confidencialidad, y que la información de contacto esté disponible si tiene alguna pregunta, comentario o inquietud después de las entrevistas.

1. Por favor, comparte alguna información sobre tu crianza y tu familia.
2. • ¿Cómo veían la escuela tus padres o miembros de tu familia?
3. ¿Qué experiencias tuviste cuando estabas en la escuela?
4. ¿Asistió a la escuela en los Estados Unidos o en su país de origen? ¿Dónde estaba ubicada su escuela primaria? ¿Cuáles son algunos recuerdos que recuerdas de tu educación?
5. ¿Cuál cree que es su papel (rol) en el sistema educativo en el que está inscrito su hijo/a?
6. ¿Qué papel (rol) juega la escuela en la vida de tu hijo?
7. ¿Qué información le han dado o recibido sobre la preparación universitaria o profesional para su hijo durante los años formativos?
8. ¿Tiene usted familiares que se graduaron de una universidad o que hayan asistido a una capacitación o a un programa para conseguir trabajo y, si es así, cómo fue la experiencia de su familiares? y ¿Qué los preparó para la universidad, la capacitación, o un programa?
9. ¿Ha comenzado a pensar en los beneficios o desafíos que tendrá su hijo/a cuando se prepare para la universidad o una carrera profesional?

10. ¿Existen programas en la comunidad con los que usted colabora o en los que su familia está involucrada que estén guiando o ayudando a su hijo a aprender sobre la universidad, la capacitación o los programas, y a comenzar el proceso de preparación para su camino?
11. ¿De qué manera sugeriría que alguien podría ayudarlo a usted y a su hijo a comenzar a prepararse para la universidad o su carrera profesional?
12. ¿Qué opina sobre el clima político actual en los Estados Unidos?
13. ¿Cómo afecta esto a usted, a sus amigos o a su familia?

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Appendix D

Interview Protocol for College-Aged Graduate Latino Students

This document shows the Latino-graduated student interview questions for the Latino Families' Narratives About Experiences in an American Public School research. The researcher asked Latino-graduate students to answer these questions.

The purpose of this research is to tell the life histories of Latino families and their experiences in the American public education system. I want to better understand how their experiences led them or prepared them for college and career pathways.

You will be asked to delve deep into the history of how you were raised and the exposure you received for college and career preparedness. You will be asked to permit me to use your name or provide me with a pseudonym for the research.

There will be two interviews scheduled. The first interview will take 45 minutes to complete. The second one will take 30 minutes.

I would like to make sure that you completed and signed the consent form that states what you are being asked to do, what your rights are, how privacy and confidentiality will be secured, and that contact information is available if you have any questions, comments, or concerns after the interviews.

1) What was your childhood like growing up?
2) When did you first begin to think about going to college?
3) Did you receive support growing up to prepare for college?
4) Do you have family members or close friends who went to college?
    a. What impact did it have on you to know someone who went to college, and did that support you in your college preparation?
5) What (or who) motivated you the most to attend college?
6) Why did you decide to pursue a college degree?
7) What steps did you take to prepare yourself for college?
8) As a Latino, do you believe that you were prepared for college?
9) Did you have anybody who served as a mentor for you while you navigated through college? If so, could you share your experience with the person who helped and guided you through the college preparation process?
10) What classes, skills, or talents do you think are important for today's students to be prepared for college?
11) Did you experience any challenges while at college? If so, how?
12) Did you experience any support while at college? Please elaborate more about this.
13) Were there any surprises when you came to college? If so, what are those?
14) How do you define success?
15) How do you feel about the current political climate in the United States?

16) How does this impact you, your friends, or your family?

Appendix E

Latino Narratives Follow-Up Interview Questions for Transcript Checking

These are the interview questions for Latino Families' Narratives About Experiences in an American Public School. The researcher asked the parents of Latino children and Latino-graduate students to answer these questions.

Thank you for returning for your second interview and allowing me the opportunity to reflect on the transcription of your interview.

I have provided you with a copy of your transcript via email. Were you able to read your transcription, or would you like some time to read through it now?

If you are ready to begin, I would like to ask a few questions

- Does this transcription reflect your words and meaning accurately?
- Are there parts of your narrative that you think need to be clarified? If so, please explain.
- When I summarized or interpreted your story as reflecting the themes in your transcript, does that interpretation fit how you see your experience? Would you describe it differently?

Appendix F: Recruitment Protocol

This is the recruitment letter that was sent out to potential participants.

Dear interested participant,

I am a dissertation student conducting a research study to explore the common educational and collegiate experiences of Latino children and families as they navigate the American education system and Universities, including the perspectives of Latino college graduates.

1. **One Individual semi-structured interview with children, ages 4 – 9, from a Latino background (6-10 children)**

   Eligibility: **Any Latino child ages 4 – 9 from a Latino background at a mid-western public school**
   Parents will receive information in a consent form that explains the interview protocols, and will be asked to sign before we can approach the child about signing an assent form to begin the interview process. In the child interview, I will provide a prompt for students to draw about their interests and dream profession so I can better understand their initial knowledge and understanding of college and careers, and what his/her desires are for learning or attaining an education or a career. The child interview will take 30 - 45 minutes in person at their school site in the school conference room for privacy and confidentiality.

2. **Two Individual semi-structured interviews with parents of the children, ages 4 – 9, from a Latino background (6-10 parents)**

   Eligibility: Any Latino parent of children ages 4 – 9 from a Latino background at mid-western public school
   Parents will receive a consent form that explains the interview protocols and will be asked to sign and agree to the terms before we begin the interview process. For the parent interviews, the focus will be to gather insight into the children's upbringing and customs or traditions that the children engage in at home. I will ask about your definition of success and hopes, and dreams for your children. You will be asked to complete a set of five questions and participate in two interviews. The questions will take around 30 minutes. The first interview will take 30 - 60 minutes, and the second interview will take about 30 minutes. Each interview will be in person at your child's school site in the school conference room for privacy and confidentiality. The questions may be sent home after I receive the consent form.

3. **Two Interviews for University Latino students or Latino College Graduates from Universities (6-10 University students)**

   Eligibility: Any Latino university student in a mid-western University or a Latino college graduate from a mid-western University

Latino students will receive a consent form that explains the interview protocols and will be asked to sign and agree to the terms before we begin the interview process. For the college graduates' interviews, I will focus on gathering data that delves deep into the history of how you were raised and the exposure you received for college and career preparedness. You will be asked to participate in two interviews. The first interview will take 30 - 60 minutes, and the second interview will take about 30 minutes. You may determine if you would like to complete the interviews in person or on Zoom.

If you have any question, please contact Dr. Kyong-Ah Kwon, Principal Investigator and Faculty Mentor, at kkwon@ou.edu. or Francisca Martinez Jensen, Student Principal Investigator, at fjensen2021@ou.edu. Thank you!

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Appendix G: Signed Consent to Participate in Research

Child Assent to Participate in Research
(Under 12 Years Old)

This is the consent form used for the children who became participants after their parents gave permission for them to participate.

I am researching to learn about helping children learn about college and how to work toward what they want to be when they grow up.

I asked your parents if you could participate in the research. They said it would be fine if you were interested. If you let me know that you want to be in the research, I'll ask you to draw what you want to be when you grow up, and then I will ask you questions about what topics excite you and some questions about college. I might use what you share and take pictures of your drawings. I would also like to record what you say to me today so I can remember your words and include them in my story about the research project.

These things might happen during the research: I may accidentally say your name during our audio recording, but I will not use your real name unless you and your parents agree.

If you decide to be in my research and then change your mind, just tell me. We can stop at any time, and I will not get upset with you. If you feel angry, upset, or unhappy while you talk to me, we can stop for a moment. Then you can decide if you want to start again. If you are upset, I would ask your parents to help you until you feel better.

You do not have to do this if you do not want to. No one will be mad or upset with you if you do not want to be in my research. If you do not want to be in the research or choose for me not to use your drawings or words, tell me that now. If you have questions, please ask them now.

I agree to be in this research.

_____	_____
Name of Child	Signature of Child
_____	_____
Name of Parent Providing Permission	Date

Signature of Person Conducting Assent Discussion

I have explained the research to _____ (*child's name*) in a language s/he can understand, and s/he has agreed to be in the research.

I asked if s/he would permit me to use their real name. Agreed Did not agree

Pseudonym provided for me to use in the research _____

Name of Researcher conducting Assent discussion _____

_____ _____

Researcher Signature Date

Appendix H: Signed Consent to Participate in Research

Consent to Participate in College Graduate Interviews

This form was used to inform the College Graduate students about the research and for them to consent to participate.

Would you like to be involved in research at mid-western University?

I am Francisca Martinez Jensen and I invite you to participate in a research project entitled "Latino Families' Narratives About Experiences in American Public Schools and Universities." This research is being conducted at a mid-western University. You are contacted because you are eligible to participate. You must have attended an elementary school in the United States, be between the ages of 22 and 30, and be a college student or college graduate from any rural, suburban, or urban mid-western college or university that is classified as a PWI (Predominantly White Institution).

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions that you may have BEFORE agreeing to take part in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? The purpose of this research is to tell the life histories of Latino families and their experiences in the American public education system. I want to understand better how their experiences led them or prepared them for college and career pathways.

How many participants will be in this research? Six to ten participants in each category: Latino children, ages 4 to 9; parents of the Latino children participating; and Latino college graduates.

What will I be asked to do? Participants will be asked to participate in two interviews with the researcher. You will be asked to delve deep into the history of how you were raised and the exposure you received for college and career preparedness. You will provide the researcher with a pseudonym for the research.

How long will this take? There will be two interviews scheduled. The first interview will take 30 - 45 minutes to complete. The second one will take 30 minutes.

What are the risks and/or benefits if I participate? Participating in this research involves minor risks. One such risk may be the potential for deductive re-identification based on the answers you provide in the survey, particularly for demographic questions. There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team.

If you agree to participate via Zoom, I will send you a consent form prior to the interview to complete and send back to me. I will ask your permission to record your Zoom interview and to

directly quote your words stated in the interview. Please know that this interview will be conducted via an online platform not hosted by OU, which has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. Please note that no assurance can be made as to the use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

To minimize these risks, the researcher will transfer data to and store your data on a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office. We will ask participants to use their pseudonyms instead of their actual names. No benefits from being in this research.

Will I be compensated for participating? There is no compensation for your participation.

Who will see my information? In research reports, there will be no information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records. In addition, Public Schools will have access to the research without identifiable demographic information because we are working with their students and families. Data are collected via an online platform not hosted by OU (e.g., Zoom) that has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. Please note that no assurance can be made as to the use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you do not have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? You will provide me with a pseudonym, instead of your name, during your interviews for confidentiality. You will be asked for your permission to be recorded before the interviews start. You can opt out if you do not agree to video recording. Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses <u>unless you specifically agree</u> to be identified.

Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree to participate: _____ on Zoom _____ in person.

I agree to be quoted directly. ___ Yes ___ No

I agree to be audio-recorded. ___ Yes ___ No

I agree to provide a pseudonym for the research. ___ Yes ___ No

I am providing this name for my pseudonym: _____

I agree for the researcher to use my de-identified data in future studies. ___Yes ___ No

What will happen to my data in the future? We will not share your data or use it in future research projects (unless you specifically agree to this above). You will not be identified in any data files shared with other researchers. The auto-transcription function on Zoom and an Artificial Intelligence (AI) transcription program will be used for transcribing the interviews. After the conclusion of the study, de-identified data will be analyzed and discarded after 1 year.

Will I be contacted again? The researcher might like to contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future. ___Yes ___No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns or complaints? If you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research, contact Francisca Martinez Jensen at (405) 651-4676 or (fjensen2021@ou.edu) or my committee chair, Dr. Kyong-Ah Kwon at 770-905-9506 or (kkwon@ou.edu).

You can also contact the University Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

You will be given a copy of this document for your records. By providing information to the researcher(s), I am agreeing to participate in this research.

Participant Signature	Print Name	Date
Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent	Print Name	Date
Signature of Witness (if applicable)	Print Name	Date

Appendix I: Signed Consent to Participate in Research

Consent to Participate in Parent & Children Interviews (English)

This is the consent form in English for parents and children to participate in interviews.

Would you like to be involved in research at a mid-western University?

I am Francisca Martinez Jensen and I invite you to participate in a research project entitled "Latino Families' Narratives About Experiences in American Public Schools and Universities." This research is being conducted at a mid-western University. You are contacted because you are eligible to participate. You must be at least 18 years of age and be a parent of a Latino child/children between the ages of 4 to 9.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions that you may have BEFORE agreeing to take part in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? The purpose of this research is to tell the life histories of Latino families and their experiences in the American public education system. I want to understand better how their experiences led them or prepared them for college and career pathways.

How many participants will be in this research? Six to ten participants in each category: Latino children, ages 4 to 9; parents of the Latino children participating; and Latino college graduates.

What will I be asked to do? The purpose of the interviews is to understand more about your initial understanding of school and college systems, what you perceive your role to be in an educational environment, and what you aspire for your children to attain. You will be asked to share your narrative and background so that I may understand the knowledge that you bring to the school. You will be asked to permit me to use your name or provide me with a pseudonym for the research.

How long will this take? There will be two interviews scheduled. The first interview will take 30-45 minutes to complete. The second one will take 30 minutes.

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What are the risks and/or benefits if I participate? Participating in this research involves minor risks. One such risk may be the potential for deductive re-identification based on the answers you provide in the survey, particularly for demographic questions. There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and the statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to and store your data on a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office. We will ask

participants to use their pseudonyms instead of their actual names. No benefits from being in this research.

Will I be compensated for participating? There is no compensation for your participation.

Who will see my information? In research reports, there will be no information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records. In addition, Public Schools will have access to the research without identified demographic information because we are working with their students and families. Data are collected via an online platform not hosted by OU (e.g., Zoom) that has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. Please note that no assurance can be made as to the use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you do not have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? You will provide me with a pseudonym, instead of your name, during your interviews for confidentiality. You will be asked for your permission to be recorded before the interviews start. You can opt out if you do not agree to video recording. Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses.

Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree to be quoted directly. ___ Yes ___ No

I agree to be audio-recorded. ___ Yes ___ No

I agree to provide a pseudonym for the research. ___ Yes ___ No

This is the pseudonym I am providing: _____

I agree for the researcher to use my de-identifiable data in future studies. ___Yes ___ No

What will happen to my data in the future? We will not share your data or use it in future research projects (unless you specifically agree to this above). You will not be identified in any data files shared with other researchers. The auto-transcription function on Zoom and an Artificial Intelligence (AI) transcription program will be used for transcribing the interviews. After the conclusion of the study, de-identified data will be analyzed and discarded after 1 year.

Will I be contacted again? The researcher might like to contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future. ___Yes ___No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns or complaints? If you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research, contact Francisca Martinez Jensen at (405) 651-4676 or (fjensen2021@ou.edu) or my committee chair, Dr. Kyong-Ah Kwon at 770-905-9506 or (kkwon@ou.edu).

You can also contact the University Campus Institutional Review Board (NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

You will be given a copy of this document for your records. By providing information to the researcher(s), I am agreeing to participate in this research.

Participant Signature	Print Name	Date
Signature of Researcher Obtaining Consent	Print Name	Date
Signature of Witness (if applicable)	Print Name	Date

Appendix J: Signed Consent to Participate in Research

Consent to Participate in Parent & Children Interviews (Spanish)

Consentimiento y permiso de los padres para que tanto el padre como el niño participen en la investigación

This is the consent form in Spanish for parents and children to participate in interviews.

¿Le gustaría participar en una investigación?

Soy Francisca Martínez Jensen y los invitó a participar en un proyecto de investigación titulado "Narrativas de familias latinas sobre sus experiencias en las escuelas públicas y universidades estadounidenses". Nos comunicamos con ustedes porque cumplen los requisitos para participar, al igual que su hijo/a. Los padres deben tener al menos 18 años y ser padres de un niño/a latino/a de entre 4 y 9 años, y los niños deben ser latinos/as de primaria, de entre 4 y 9 años.

Por favor lea este documento y póngase en contacto conmigo para hacer cualquier pregunta que pueda tener ANTES de aceptar participar en mi investigación.

¿Cuál es el propósito de esta investigación?El propósito de esta investigación es compartir las historias de vida de las familias latinas y sus experiencias en el sistema educativo público estadounidense. Quiero comprender mejor cómo sus experiencias ayudaron o prepararon a sus hijos para la universidad o la carrera profesional. En el caso de los niños, me gustaría comprender cómo ayudarlos a aprender sobre la universidad o la carrera profesional y cómo trabajar para alcanzar lo que desean ser cuando sean adultos.

¿Cuántos participantes habrá en esta investigación?De seis a diez participantes en cada categoría: niños latinos, de 4 a 9 años; padres de los niños latinos participantes; y graduados universitarios latinos.

¿Qué me pedirán que haga?El propósito de las entrevistas es comprender más sobre su comprensión inicial de los sistemas escolares y universitarios, lo que percibe que es su papel en un entorno educativo y lo que aspira que sus hijos logren..Se le pedirá que comparta su narrativa y antecedentes para que pueda comprender el conocimiento que aporta a la escuela.Se le pedirá que me proporcione un seudónimo tanto para usted como para su hijo para la investigación.

Si usted y su hijo/a aceptan participar, responderán algunas preguntas sobre usted y su familia, que podrían durar hasta 30 minutos. También los invitaré a participar en una entrevista inicial que podría durar entre 30 y 60 minutos, y en una segunda entrevista, que podría durar hasta 30 minutos, para revisar la transcripción de su entrevista.

Y, con su permiso, pasaré entre 30 y 45 minutos con su hijo en la escuela para descubrir qué quiere ser de mayor. También le pediré que haga un dibujo de lo que hará de adulto.

¿Cuánto tiempo tomará esto? Las respuestas de la encuesta para padres tomarán hasta 30 minutos. La primera entrevista tomará entre 30 y 60 minutos. La segunda, 30 minutos. Las entrevistas para niños tomarán entre 30 y 45 minutos.

¿Cuáles son los riesgos y/o beneficios si participo? Participar en mi investigación no ofrece ningún beneficio. Su participación y la de su hijo/a son voluntarias. Si no desea participar en mi investigación, su hijo/a puede participar en las entrevistas.

Participar en esta investigación implica riesgos menores. Uno de ellos podría ser la posibilidad de una reidentificación deductiva basada en las respuestas que proporcione en la encuesta, especialmente en las preguntas demográficas. Existe el riesgo de divulgación accidental de datos si recopilamos sus datos mediante grabaciones. En tal caso, su identidad y las declaraciones que realizó podrían ser conocidas por personas ajenas al equipo de investigación. Para minimizar este riesgo, los investigadores transferirán y almacenarán sus datos en una plataforma segura aprobada por la Oficina de Tecnología de la Información de la Universidad. Pediremos a los participantes que utilicen seudónimos en lugar de sus nombres reales.

Además, las Escuelas Públicas tendrán acceso a los datos de la investigación sin ningún identificador porque estamos trabajando con sus estudiantes y familias.

Como investigador, si veo o escucho cualquier sugerencia de que su hijo ha sido herido o está en peligro, tendré que informar a las autoridades de la escuela de su hijo.

¿Recibiré alguna compensación por participar? No hay ninguna compensación por su participación.

¿Quién verá mi información? En los informes de investigación, no habrá información que permita identificarlo. Los registros de investigación se almacenarán de forma segura y solo los investigadores autorizados y la Junta de Revisión Institucional de la OU tendrán acceso a ellos. Además, las Escuelas Públicas tendrán acceso a los datos de investigación anónimos, ya que estamos trabajando con sus estudiantes y familias. *Los datos se recopilan a través de una plataforma en línea no alojada por la OU (Zoom), que cuenta con sus propias políticas de privacidad y seguridad para mantener la confidencialidad de su información. Tenga en cuenta que no se garantiza el uso de los datos que proporcione para fines distintos a los de esta investigación.*

A continuación, encontrará algunas preguntas para saber cómo desea que informe sobre sus ideas y las de su hijo/a. Puede rechazar las que no le guste sin que esto afecte la actividad escolar.

¿Estás de acuerdo?***a tu hijo***¿Participar en la investigación? ___Sí ____ No

Hacer ***tú***¿Consentimiento para participar en la investigación? ___Sí ____ No

¿Está de acuerdo con que mis registros de investigación incluyan información identificable sobre usted y/o su hijo? ___Sí ___ No

¿Está usted de acuerdo en que utilice las palabras pronunciadas por usted o su hijo, sin utilizar sus nombres? ___ Sí ___ No

¿Está de acuerdo en proporcionar un seudónimo para usted y su hijo para que pueda referirme a él durante mi transcripción y análisis de datos?

___Sí ___ No

El seudónimo para usted y su hijo son: _____

_____

¿Da usted su consentimiento para la grabación de audio? ___ Sí___ No

Incluso si decide participar ahora, puede dejar de participar en cualquier momento y por cualquier motivo.

Si tiene preguntas sobre esta investigación, comuníquese con:
Francisca Martínez Jensen al (405) 651-4676 o (fjensen2021@ou.edu) o mi patrocinadora de la facultad, la Dra. Kyong-Ah Kwon al 770-905-9506 o (kkwon@ou.edu). También puede comunicarse con la Junta de Revisión Institucional del Campus al 405-325-8110 oirb@ou.educon preguntas, inquietudes o quejas sobre sus derechos como participante de una investigación o si no puede comunicarse con el investigador.

Firma del padre/madre	Nombre impreso	Fecha
Firma del investigador que obtiene el consentimiento	Nombre impreso	Fecha
Nombre(s) de los niños		

DOCUMENTACIÓN DEL CONSENTIMIENTO:
¿Está usted de acuerdo en participar en esta investigación? ___Sí ___ No

¿Desea una copia impresa o electrónica de la información que acabo de leerle?
_____ (anote la respuesta)

Dirección postal o de correo electrónico para copia electrónica del consentimiento:
_____

Fecha del proceso de consentimiento: _____

Nombre del entrevistado: _____

Nombre del investigador: _____

Firma del Investigador: _____

Appendix K: Participant Log

This is the Participant Log that was used to log information about the participants who engaged with my research.

PARTICIPANT ENROLLMENT LOG

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
1	Participant Code/Pseudonym Name	Meets Eligibility Criteria Y/N	Date Consented	Copy of Consent Given Y/N	Person Conducting Consent	Debriefing Date	Person Conducting Debriefing	Data Withdrawn Y/N	HIPAA Form Date	Parental Consent Obtained Y/N	Audio Permission Y/N	Quoting Permission Y/N
2												
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IRB NUMBER: 18752
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 07/28/2025

Appendix L: Attestation Letter

This is the attestation for translated document that shows the steps that I took to ensure my English translations were the same as my Spanish documents.

September 6, 2025

Re: Attestation for translated documents

I have translated four documents based on the current English version of the aforementioned: Assent to Participate in Research (Children under 12), Consent and Parental Permission for Parents and Children to Participate in Research, Questions for Parents Participating in Latino Narrative Research, and Interview Protocol for Latino Parents.

I am a native-Spanish speaker and have translated many documents in Spanish as I have worked with Spanish-speaking families since 2004. I, also, checked my translation with two programs: Google Translate and Apple Translate.

By signing this letter, I attest to the best of my knowledge that the Spanish version of each document represents an accurate reflection of the English version.

Sincerely,

Francisca Martinez Jensen

Francisca Martinez Jensen

Fjensen2021@ou.edu

(405) 651 - 4676

Appendix M: IRB Approval Letter

This is the email from the university's Institutional Review Board that shows t approval to conduct my research.

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Expedited Review – AP01

Date: July 28, 2025 **IRB#:** 18752

Principal Investigator: Francisca Jensen
Approval Date: 07/28/2025
Status Report Due: 6/30/2026
Study Title: Latino Students' and Families' Narratives About Experiences in American Public Schools and Universities
Expedited Category: 6 & 7
Collection/Use of PHI: No

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed and granted expedited approval of the above-referenced research study. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

Requirements under the Common Rule have changed. The above-referenced research meets one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. However, as Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit an annual status report to the IRB.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Obtain informed consent and research privacy authorization using the currently approved, stamped forms and retain all original, signed forms, if applicable.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications.
- Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- **Submit an annual status report to the IRB to provide the study/recruitment status and report all harms and deviations that may have occurred.**
- **Submit a final closure report at the completion of the project.**

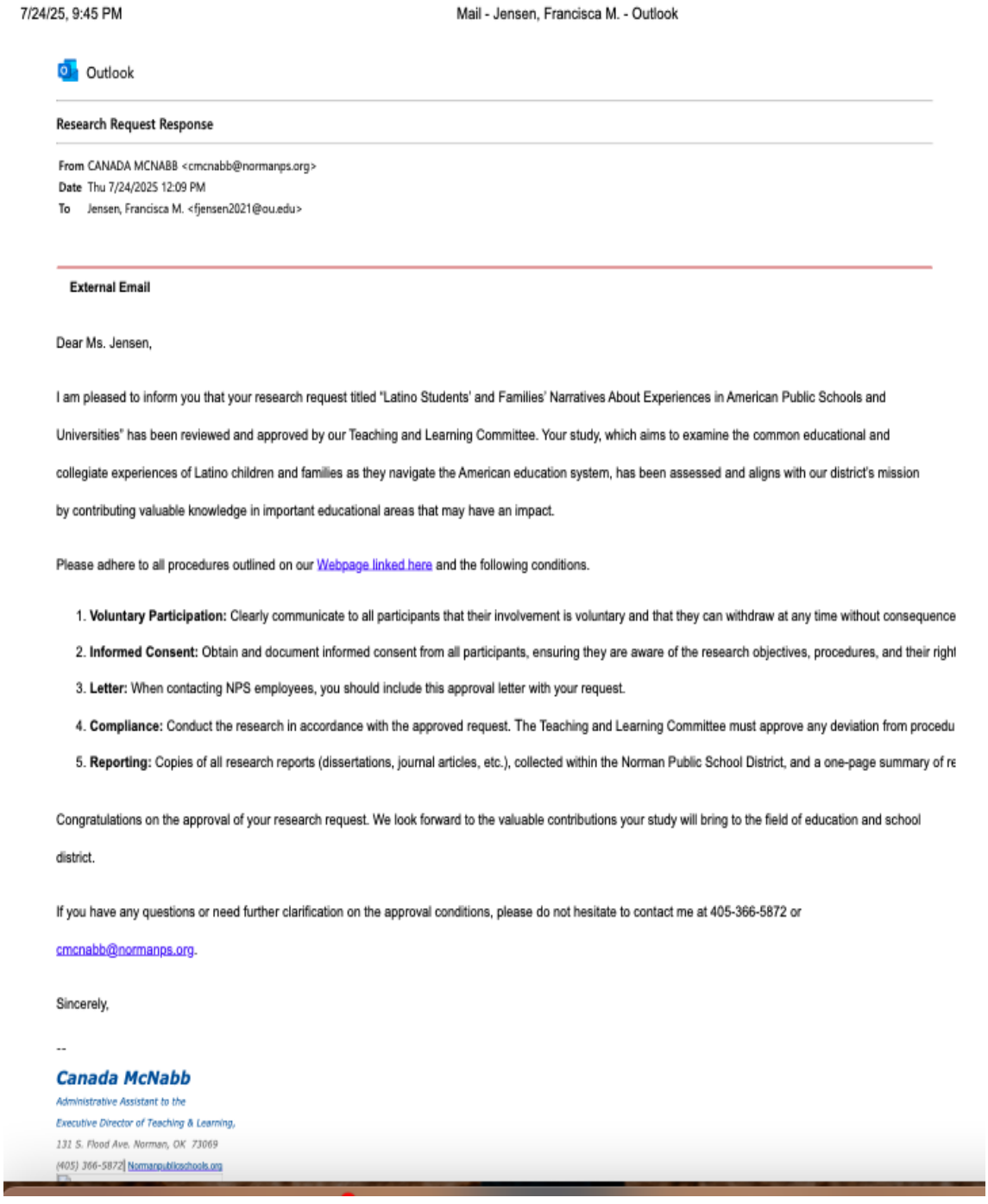
If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Sara Mayeux

Appendix N: Public Schools Approval Email

This is the email sent by the school district to show approval of working with their students in their buildings.



7/24/25, 9:45 PM Mail - Jensen, Francisca M. - Outlook

Outlook

Research Request Response

From CANADA MCNABB <cmcnabb@normanps.org>
Date Thu 7/24/2025 12:09 PM
To Jensen, Francisca M. <fjensen2021@ou.edu>

External Email

Dear Ms. Jensen,

I am pleased to inform you that your research request titled "Latino Students' and Families' Narratives About Experiences in American Public Schools and Universities" has been reviewed and approved by our Teaching and Learning Committee. Your study, which aims to examine the common educational and collegiate experiences of Latino children and families as they navigate the American education system, has been assessed and aligns with our district's mission by contributing valuable knowledge in important educational areas that may have an impact.

Please adhere to all procedures outlined on our Webpage linked here and the following conditions.

1. **Voluntary Participation:** Clearly communicate to all participants that their involvement is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time without consequence
2. **Informed Consent:** Obtain and document informed consent from all participants, ensuring they are aware of the research objectives, procedures, and their right
3. **Letter:** When contacting NPS employees, you should include this approval letter with your request.
4. **Compliance:** Conduct the research in accordance with the approved request. The Teaching and Learning Committee must approve any deviation from procedu
5. **Reporting:** Copies of all research reports (dissertations, journal articles, etc.), collected within the Norman Public School District, and a one-page summary of re

Congratulations on the approval of your research request. We look forward to the valuable contributions your study will bring to the field of education and school district.

If you have any questions or need further clarification on the approval conditions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 405-366-5872 or cmcnabb@normanps.org.

Sincerely,

--

Canada McNabb
Administrative Assistant to the
Executive Director of Teaching & Learning,
131 S. Flood Ave. Norman, OK 73069
(405) 366-5872 Normanpublicschools.org

Appendix O: Latino Children's Code Book

First Cycle Coding

This is the chart that shows the first cycle of coding.

THEME	CATEGORIES	CODES
Early Academic and Career Aspiration	**Academic**	Researcher
	Sports Professionals	Gymnastics Coach Soccer Player
	Service Professionals	Police Teacher
	Science Professional	Astronaut
	Medical Professional	Nurse Dentist Veterinarian
Understanding of Learning, Preparation, and College	**Motivation for Learning**	**Family Supported** Intrinsically Extrinsically
	Preparing for their career	**Future Preparation** **Current State Preparation**
	Reason for pursuing this career	**Future Focused** **Limited Current Focused**
Exposure to College and Educational Social Capital	**Knows about College**	**Social Capital** **Lacking Social Capital**
	Awareness of a Local University	**Direct and Indirect Exposure** **Lack of Exposure**
	Future College Goal	**Certain about Future College** **Uncertain about Future College**

Appendix P: Latino Children's Code Book

Second Cycle Coding

This is the chart that shows the second cycle of coding.

THEME	CATEGORIES	CODES	Supporting Quotes from the Interviews
Early Academic and Career Aspiration	**Academic**	Researcher	"I was good at researching. I was in first grade" (line 64).
	Sports Professionals	Gymnastics Coach Soccer Player	"I want to be a (gymnastic and exercise) coach" (line 34).
	Service Professionals	Police Teacher	"I want to be a teacher, I can show kids how to sing, because I sing very good" (lines 23 - 24)
	Science Professional	Astronaut	"I want to be an astronaut" (line 33).
	Medical Professional	Nurse Dentist Veterinarian	"I would like to be a dentist" (line 26).
Understanding of Learning, Preparation, and College	**Motivation for Learning**	**Family Supported** Intrinsically Extrinsically	"I want to help with the fear and violence when girls are taken away" (line 37).
	Preparing for their career	**Future Preparation** **Current State Preparation**	"Maybe they would want to work with me and help me with all that stuff and be a babysitter for my baby" (line 50) "Push, slide tackle and take the ball" (line 135)
	Reason for pursuing this career	**Future Focused** **Current Focused**	"Yeah, because if I do all those works, I can get more money and do more stuff for the baby, pay bills, and all that" (lines 63 - 64). "I have to make good grades, so that means I have to study, and I have to learn everything I can. And if I don't know something, I can ask for help" (lines 160 - 161).

Exposure to College and Educational Social Capital	**Knows about College**	**Social Capital** **Lacking Social Capital**	"I have been into one because my brother was just visiting there to go see it and to go do some stuff there" (line 103); "There's hard stuff to learn" (line 121). "Yeah, I don't know what you have to do research and go to college" (line 203).
	Awareness of a Local University	**Direct and Indirect Exposure** **Lack of Exposure**	"I went on a field trip to OU with Miss M., and I went to an OU camp. Then I went to this OU shop" (lines 137 - 138) "I only, I only saw the flag. I. It has an “O" on it" (line 207).
	Future College Goal	**Certain about Future College** **Uncertain about Future College**	"Yeah, my mom wants me to and I will like to go to college too" "No, I do not know where I really want to go. I need to find one that would have my type of stuff that I would like. I also like art" (lines 129 - 130).

Appendix Q: Latino Parents Code Book

First Cycle Coding

This is the chart that shows the first cycle of coding.

THEME	CATEGORIES	CODES
Navigating Childhood into Adolescence	**Expectations**	**Familial Expectations** Supporting Siblings (home and school) Obligations Responsibilities Independence Mom – provider **Cultural Expectations** Religious Social Expectations Gender Expectations
	Challenges	**Lack of Family Support and Presence** Unsupportive parents Unavailable Parent **Educational Barriers and Inequities** Children's Lack of Educational Opportunities Parent's Lack of Educational Opportunities Social problems Lack of Money
	Educational Persistence	**Family Tensions** Persistence in continue going to school Attending College Responsible for school work
Navigating Immigration	**Immigrating Due to Structural Barriers**	**Scarcity** Lack of Resources at school and at home Lack of Opportunities at school and at home
	Parent's Emotional Strains and Psychological Weight Carried	**Former Tensions** Emotions about leaving behind their lives Impulsive making decisions

		hastily Worried and sad about the future, leaving their country and family **Current Tensions** Aging Family Sick Family members Family members dying
Education as the Center of Family Life	**Education Benefits**	**Cultural Capital** College College Preparation Social mobility Educational Opportunity Professional Career Parent Visibility at School School Engagement Special Education Supports **Moral Framework** Accepted Hope Persistence Childhood
	Intergenerational Sacrifice and Aspiration	**Expectations From Parents** Responsibilities Work From School Personal Goals Academic Goals Education Valuable College Educated Adult Success Respect for Teachers Education is Central Support Children Family Mentorship/Role Model
	Navigating College Opportunities Through Deficits	**Barriers** Financial English/Language Immigration Lacks Information about College
Navigating the Current Political Climate	**Supporting Each Other Through the Political Climate**	**Supporting Children** Children as our Responsibilities Accountability for work from

		school Excellence in School Athletics Resources to become a Citizen/Establish Residency **Communication** Motivation Persistence Belonging Engaged Work ethic High Expectations Encouragement **Preparation** Deportation plan Immigration Documentation to be Safe
	Challenges of the Political Climate	**Undocumented - Status** Fear Deportation Separation Being Unsafe Worry Sadness Financial Stress Scarcity in Resources

Appendix R: Latino Parents Code Book

Second Cycle Coding

This is the chart that shows the second cycle of coding.

THEME	Sub-Themes	CATEGORIES	CODES	Supporting Quotes from Narratives
Navigating Childhood into Adolescence	**Expectations**	**Familial Expectations**	Supporting Siblings (home and school) Obligations Responsibilities Independence Mom – provider	"I didn't have the opportunity to decide whether or not I wanted to do this or wanted to accept it. But when I got older, my mom told me, "Look, it's both of us. We have to support each other. You help me do your homework and I'll check on you when I get home" (Interview 2, Lines 58 - 60).
		Cultural Expectations	Religious Social Expectations Gender Expectations	"I grew up in the Christian belief, always wearing my long clothes. I think that was a belief that as a pastor he said that the clothing of the pants was for men and we had to always walk with a skirt and a cover" (Participant 3, Lines 29 - 31).
	Challenges	**Lack of Family Support and Presence**	Unsupportive parents Unavailable Parent	"They really weren't big on it, but me and my older sister did graduate high school. My little sister didn't. She dropped out because the bullying, and then nobody went to college. So I tried, but just I feel like the parents weren't there to help you through it. Yeah, to
		Educational Barriers and Inequities		

				motivate you" (Participant 1, lines 22 - 25).
			Children's Lack of Educational Opportunities Parent's Lack of Educational Opportunities Social problems Lack of Money	"Well, fortunately, as in those times it was good (at home). But, in my country it's very... money is very scarce... there is a lot of poverty. Well, my siblings went to school, I couldn't go anymore because I was the oldest, I made it to the age of 14...fourth grade" (Participant 3, Lines 49 - 51).
	Educational Persistence	**Family Tensions**	Persistence in continue going to school Attending College Responsible for school work	"She always instilled in us since I was a little girl that she was not going to be there but we already knew our obligations" (Participant 2, Lines 43 - 44).
Navigating Immigration	**Immigrating Due to Structural Barriers**	**Scarcity**	Lack of Resources at school and at home Lack of Opportunities at school and at home	"I grew up in my country, in a country with very low resources, in a very poor country and there are not the same opportunities that this country has" (Participant 4, Lines 27 - 29).
	Parent's Emotional Strains and Psychological Weight Carried	**Former Tensions**	Emotions about leaving behind their lives Impulsive making decisions hastily Worried and sad about the future, leaving their country and family	"I started having a lot of problems with my mom. My mom was, at a time in her life, I think having difficult times. So for me, the best option was (and I was very impulsive at that time) then (that is, what I did) was I left (I didn't tell anyone)...I came secretly. In other words, one at that age does not look at the consequences of one's actions. So I let go of my opportunity in Central

				America of what I always hoped for and what I always wanted because of an issue with my mom that made me angry. But I was going through a phase" (Interview 2, Lines 432 - 437).
		Current Tensions	Aging Family Sick Family members Family members dying	"I just got angry with my mom and said, 'Oh, I'm going to go see what comes about and I left.' Yes, I left. And then I'm here (U.S.). Yes, I like it, but I also miss my home, my roots. I like this one but I also say, 'My mom is older. My family is dying…because I have an aunt who died three months ago.' So I say, 'My family is leaving and I am far from my family' (Interview 2, Lines 126 - 129).
Education as the Center of Family Life	**Education Benefits**	**Cultural Capital**	College College Preparation Social mobility Educational Opportunity Professional Career Parent Visibility at School School Engagement Special Education Supports	"Education is the fundamental thing in the life of a child, of an adolescent. It is the most fundamental thing" (Participant 3, Lines 65 - 66).
		Moral Framework	Accepted Hope Persistence Childhood	"I tell my kids, "If you don't go to college, you're going to be just like me as a cook and in a kitchen." "Look, one is burnt," I showed him my hand.

				And, if something goes wrong, you have to go back and redo it. Some children close their minds and they don't want to study anymore. There is no going back if you do that…it's very complicated... yes, if he can work and study, let him do it. Yes, I am going to support him as much as I can" (Participant 5, Lines 138 - 142).
	Intergenerational Sacrifice and Aspiration	**Expectations From Parents**	Responsibilities Work From School Personal Goals Academic Goals Education Valuable College Educated Adult Success Respect for Teachers Education is Central Support Children Family	"When I came here, I said, 'Wow, my son is using a computer.' Why? Because there are no computers there, there is no computer in the school. You have to pay separately for the children to use a computer. Or, a private school only gives them English lessons. But it is the most basic thing. If you can teach a child the most basics, then when I arrived in this country I said when I saw 100% in education in this country it is much better" (Participant 4, Lines 202 - 206).
			Mentorship/Role Model	"And I don't speak English, so I am learning more with A. because he's helping. He is the teacher in the house. Yes, he does not have patience, but you have to have patience. A is the older brother and it gets very complicated" (Participant 5, Lines 89 - 91).

	Navigating College Opportunities Through Deficits	**Barriers**	Financial English/Language Immigration Lacks Information about College	“Because well, at least my oldest son enters high school next year and I understand that in high school he can enroll in advance classes for college. I don't know, I don't understand much of it but I say, Okay, when the child starts, I'm going to get help to find out about it" (Participant 4, Lines 244 - 247).
Navigating the Current Political Climate	**Supporting Each Other Through the Political Climate**	**Supporting Children**	Children as our Responsibilities Accountability for work from school Excellence in School Athletics Resources to become a Citizen/Establish Residency	"No, because children also need to be encouraged by parents. I tell my children, "I want them to study. I don't want to see them in a restaurant. I don't want to see them in a dead-end job, working nine or 10 hours for a minimum wage. You come in, work more, the more money you will earn" (Participant 2, Lines 297 - 300).
		Communication	Motivation Persistence Belonging Engaged Work ethic High Expectations Encouragement	"Well, I always tell my children that it doesn't matter to them if one day you had a bad day, that day will happen. You don't say no, I don't want to go to this school anymore or you don't feel that way because you had a bad day with a classmate. Keep going. Mom and dad are not going to be there one day, but you are going to be a person who is going to excel in this country, you are going to be someone with a future" (Participant

		Preparation	Deportation plan Immigration Documentation to be Safe	3, Lines 66 - 70). "What I tell my sisters, my family is that if something were to happen to them, then I will help them with the children. I would not hesitate because it would not be a time to help and support each other" (Participant 4, Lines 311 - 312).
	Challenges of the Political Climate	**Undocumented - Status**	Fear Deportation Separation Being Unsafe Worry Sadness Financial Stress Scarcity in Resources	"In this country, I'm paying for a lawyer... paying the lawyer for my two children. It scares me a lot because in my country it's a country full of violence, full of... all bad. So my worst fear is that at any moment because as you say, Latinos, they take us away from this country and we are sorry that the children are suffering" (Participant 5, Lines 181 - 184).

Appendix S: Latino Graduate Students Code Book

First Cycle Coding

This is the chart that shows the first cycle of coding.

THEME	CATEGORIES	CODES
Childhood Experiences	**Family Relationships and Influence**	**Family System** Single-parent household Divorce Separation Two-parent households Immigration Disconnection to father Reconnection to father Roles Sacrifices
	Aspirations and Meaning-Making	Hopes and dreams Community Support
Identity Development in First-Generation Narratives	**Family Influence and Cultural Expectations**	**Influences** Immigrant family background Expectations to succeed and do better than their parents Persistence to achieve Acceptance Role Models
	Navigating Social and Structural Challenges	**Challenges** Freedoms Limitations (traveling) First generation experiences Hidden rules Family separation hardships Racism
Educational Empowerment and Cultural Identity Development	**Education as a Pathway to Success and Resilience**	**Success in Education** Success as a motivator Forming Resilience Educational aspiration College pathway as a form of success Mentorships Value of education Education as Empowerment Family Support Systems

		First Generation Programs Financial Aid – Scholarships, Work Study programs Community Different learning modalities **Persistence To Succeed** Organization Responsibilities Achievement Resilience
	Cultural Identity, Representation, and Community Belonging	**Cultural Empowerment** Latino family Representation in their Lives Belonging in their Community Bilingualism Advocacy Inclusion/Visibility Cultural Connection First Generation Surrounded by a Community Honoring Parents Giving Back to Others Celebrating Accomplishments and Successes Aspirations
Structural and Resource Challenges in Education	**Constraints Students Face**	**Barriers** Money Family Structure Lack of Experiences Student Knowledge Changed majors Lack of Resources Stress Lack of Opportunities Financial Stress **Social Factors** Racism Profiled Exclusion Microaggressions **Unprepared** Time to reflect Studying Time management
Political Climate in the U.S. (impact on family,	**Negative Impacts**	**Mental Health** Anxiety

friends)		Unsupportive Reserved Fear Unsafe **Immigrant family background** Discrimination Profiling Racism Misconceptions
	Overcoming	**Latino culture** Surviving this climate Advocate for themselves and others Family Support Bicultural identity

Appendix T: Latino Graduate Students Code Book

Second Cycle Coding

This is the chart that shows the second cycle of coding.

THEME	Sub-Themes	CATEGORIES	CODES	Supporting Quotes from Interviews
Childhood Experiences	**Family Relationships and Influence**	**Family System**	Single-parent household Divorce Separation Two-parent households Immigration Disconnection to father Reconnection to father Roles Sacrifices	"I think it's a simple fact that he didn't get to finish. I think that's something that he always wishes that he could have, like, gone back and at least finished his degree, because he was a year away from finishing. Like he was close to graduating" (Participant 4, Lines 297 - 299).
	Aspirations and Meaning-Making		Hopes and dreams Community Support	"And the fact that she's been able to finish school with four children, and she even fosters children" (Participant 6, Lines 170 - 171).
Identity Development in First-Generation Narratives	**Family Influence and Cultural Expectations**	**Influences**	Immigrant family background Expectations to succeed and do better than their parents Persistence to achieve Acceptance Role Models	"Like I knew that I didn't qualify for those big scholarships because of my status and so, like, I and my cousin, like she even told me, like, we have to work hard to get to college one day, like, we have to strive and work 10 times harder than our classmates, because that's just the system that we're in" (Participant 4, Lines 88 - 90).

	Navigating Social and Structural Challenges	**Challenges**	Freedoms Limitations (traveling) First generation experiences Hidden rules Family separation hardships Racism	"I wasn't able to cope with it very well, because I felt isolated within the school system, but also within my home. So I became depressed for a few years, and going to high school, I ended up making friends with the other Hispanic Americans there who, well...I went to a smaller High School and in a rural town, so most, most people were white American, and so our community was very small, But at least, the discrimination wasn't as serious and severe" (Participant 5, Lines 123 - 127).
Educational Empowerment and Cultural Identity Development	**Education as a Pathway to Success and Resilience**	**Success in Education**	Success as a motivator Forming Resilience Educational aspiration College pathway as a form of success Mentorships Value of education Education as Empowerment Family Support Systems First Generation Programs Financial Aid – Scholarships, Work Study programs Community Different learning	"And my parents have always instilled education is something that people cannot take away from you. And so, like, I want to go into this field" (Participant 4, Lines 121 - 123).

			modalities	
		Persistence To Succeed	Organization Responsibilities Achievement Resilience	"But yeah, being able to get my education and become more confident in who I am and that I am an educated woman" (Participant 5, Lines 353 - 354).
	Cultural Identity, Representation, and Community Belonging	**Cultural Empowerment**	Latino family Representation in their Lives Belonging in their Community Bilingualism Advocacy Inclusion/Visibility Cultural Connection First Generation Surrounded by a Community Honoring Parents Giving Back to Others Celebrating Accomplishments and Successes Aspirations	"And it was, it wasn't until my sister really showed me, like, what I can do with that part of being like, what it means to be Latina. Like, all of the special things about like, my culture and things like that. She started showing me, like, stuff that people do in my culture. And she started showing me like how my dad used to live and like stuff like that. And I just thought it was really cool, and it made me like, understand more of where I come from" (Participant 6, Lines105 - 110).
Structural and Resource Challenges in Education	**Constraints Students Face**	**Barriers**	Money Family Structure Lack of Experiences Student Knowledge Changed majors Lack of Resources Stress Lack of Opportunities Financial Stress	"I think I was overwhelmed a lot of times when you got that Bursar bill. You truly didn't know how you're gonna pay for it" (Participant 4, Lines 373 - 374).
		Social Factors	Racism Profiled	"I was really looking forward to finally being

			Exclusion Microaggressions	able to feel like I wasn't the only person who was different. And yeah, that was the biggest shock, is knowing especially, going to a PWI...will it ever change? Now, working at a corporate organization, it never changes. It never leaves. Unfortunately" (Participant 5, Lines 318 - 321).
		Unprepared	Time to reflect Studying Time management	"I felt completely unprepared, especially sitting in lecture halls where I was. I would walk in and I felt so unprepared, where people were constantly answering questions and like taking notes very fluently, and I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing" (Participant 5, Lines 239 - 241).
Political Climate in the U.S. (impact on family, friends)	**Negative Impacts**	**Mental Health**	Anxiety Unsupportive Reserved Fear Unsafe	"And that's really like, that's what people are going through. And so it's really hard to stay and resist and to do the work when so many barriers, like, it's already hard enough work, right? And then politically, and then leadership wise, it's very difficult to do that work" (Participant 3, Lines 578 - 580).
		Immigrant family background	Discrimination Profiling Racism	"They've been kind of desensitized to this whole picture, and it's

			Misconceptions	very disturbing to see people say things to you or to see things online about that" (Participant 5, Lines 388 - 390).
	Overcoming	**Latino culture**	Surviving this climate Advocate for themselves and others Family Support Bicultural identity	"Yeah, I advocate for myself. I think one of my strongest strengths is that I advocate for others pretty strongly, and so sometimes it gets me into trouble. Not trouble, but into more problems that I have to deal with" (Participant 5, Lines 332 - 334).