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Somos Iguales...Pero No Tanto: Examining the Experience of Belonging among Undocumented Immigrant Latina/o Students

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Abstract

Using data collected from a larger ethnographic study that explored the educational experiences of three generational cohorts of undocumented immigrant Latino students in a public secondary school setting, this study provides undocumented students' perspective on barriers (perceived or real) to feeling or not feeling like a member of the school community. Qualitative interviews with twelve undocumented immigrant Latina/o students identified discriminatory factors that contributed to students' beliefs about their undocumented status among documented Latina/o peers. Findings indicate that feelings of belonging within-group variation (1.25, 1.5, and 1.75) of undocumented Latina/o students were challenged when issues of language, age of migration and the dominant American narrative projected by their Latina/o documented peers placed undocumented students' outside of the shared cultural group and society.

Introduction

Immigration has always played a significant role in the development of America's narrative on social and economic expansion. While economic reasons remain a significant reason for unauthorized migration, the desire for family unification has led to an increase in the number of women and children making the dangerous journey across the border (Biococchi, 2009). Once across the border, the process of creating a new designation of space that seeks to recreate their lost world begins (Ainslie, 1998). Those children and youth entering into the United States as undocumented minors find themselves in a legal tight spot with limited educational opportunities and privileges. Many of these same children will grow up in the only country they will ever know and become a generation of youth that will face unique social, political, and legal complications that will place them as "hostages in the immigration crisis" (Lopez, 2005, p. 1373).

Age of Migration and Generational Cohorts

The relation of age of immigration and length of residence in the United States has varying effects on identity, mental health, and behavioral outcomes for Latina/o youth (Alegría, Scribney, Woo, Torres, & Guarnaccia, 2007). According to Alegría et al. (2007), those "immigrating at an early age may have greater integration into U.S. culture and potentially weaker identification with Latino cultural values" because of larger societal forces (p. 3). Their socialization process into U.S. culture is far easier than those immigrating at a later age. Despite differences in age of migration and adaptive outcomes, undocumented children and youth confront unique challenges in navigating the legal and educational contradictions which may place them at greater risk for social, academic, and mental health problems.

The term *1.5 generation* is part of a much larger classification of immigrants who arrive as children and youth. It is the most commonly used term given by scholars who distinguish sub-generational cohorts within that group of undocumented children and youth. These classifications or distinct groups are based largely on their age at the time of migration formally

designating members of any ethnic group whose age of migration to the United States ranges from 6 to 12 years of age (Gonzales, 2007; Rumbaut, 2004; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988). Accordingly, differences in cultural adaptation require a more refined designation of those immigrants that came earlier than age 6 and those that came after age 12. Use of the terms 1.75 generational cohort and the 1.25 generational cohort helps explain differences in sub-groups of immigrants who migrated as children or youth. Table 1 summarizes Rumbaut's (2004) adaptive outcomes for each cohort based on age of migration.

Table 1. Generational Cohort, Age of Migration, and Adaptive Outcomes

Generational Cohort	Age of Migration	Adaptive Outcomes
1.75	0-5 years	Arrive in early childhood; experience is closer to that of U.S.-born second generation; are pre-school children with almost no memory of their birth country; were too young to attend school to learn to read or write in the parental language; and are almost entirely socialized here.
1.5	6-12 years	Arrive in middle childhood; are pre-adolescent, primary school age children who have learned to read and write in the parental language; and whose education is largely completed in the United States.
1.25	13-17 years	Arrive in their adolescent years; arrive with or without their families of origin; attend secondary schools after arrival; or enter the workforce directly after arriving; and are much closer to the first generation of immigrant adults in terms of developmental life stages.

Students' Sense of Belonging: Factors that Motivate Educational Aspirations

The concepts of belonging and school membership comprise a body of literature that addresses the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school social environment (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Perry, 1999). A number of studies highlight the problems resulting from adolescents not feeling like they are a part of their school (Battistich & Hom, 1997; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Finn, 1989; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004b). If the need to belong is not satisfied, the predicted outcomes include diminished motivation, poor performance, impaired development, alienation, and feelings of disconnectedness (Osterman, 2000). The construct of belonging is defined by Osterman (2000) as “‘relatedness,’ ‘support,’ ‘acceptance,’ ‘membership,’ or ‘sense of community’” (p. 326).

Studies have found a correlation between the role of peers in schooling and the academic performance and aspirations among U.S.-born and immigrant high school aged youth (Gándara, O’Hara, & Gutierrez, 2004; Gibson, Bejinez, Hidalgo, & Rolon, 2004; Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004b; Raley, 2004; Stanton-Salazar, 2004), especially of Mexican descent (Gibson et al., 2004). For the Latina/o student, a network of social support/peer influence (relations) may serve as critical components in their educational aspirations, academic/ social success, school performance, and overall achievement.

Social-capital or *peer social capital* “connects the student to peers and peer networks that provide resources and other non-tangible forms of support such as pro-academic norms and identities to the Latino student” (Gibson et al., 2004, p. 130). Such capital can lead the student to the knowledge and resources needed to “decode the system” and “participate in power” (Delpit, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). As a result, peer experiences and social networks can provide a variety of experiences (positive or negative). These experiences are converted into “capital” when they serve to promote academic or post academic success.

Those students who lack the peer social capital necessary to decode an institution’s system will fall further behind. Latina/o students, like other ethnic groups, tend to select their peers from within, resulting in a lack of contact with peers from other ethnic groups (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Gibson et al., 2004). The result of such socialization is limited contact with those who may be more socially advantaged. These students who aspire to high achievement are, at times, accused by their lower-performing peers (in this case the same ethnic group) of “acting white” or like a “schoolboy” (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). A pervasive perception among ethnic-minority adolescents equates school with assimilation into the dominant culture along with a rejection of their own language and culture (Gándara, O’Hara, & Gutiérrez, 2004). The result is low achievement because the thought of assimilation (or any form of engagement with the dominant culture) is met with resistance.

While Latina/o students may report an overall sense of belonging in school, Gibson et al. (2004) found that these same students are “highly uncomfortable in those school settings and situations that bring them into direct contact with peers who they feel neither accept nor respect them” (p. 130). This peer social capital from non-Latino peers may serve as a support system that guides, informs, and even models aspects of schooling absent from their own environments. “Academic segregation,” on the other hand, is capable of preventing such relations from evolving (Gándara, 1995). For minority youth, the experience of school membership or bonds with peers and staff serve as the pre-condition to accessing these and other school resources.

Latina/o Critical Theory as a Guiding Framework

A Latina/o Critical Theory framework was used to guide the study. More specifically, key fundamental themes of the theory were used to conceptualize and operationalize the study. The first theme guiding this study is that while race may be critical or even central, it is not experienced in isolation nor is it sufficient as an explanatory factor. An interjection of information provides the critical race theorist with a perspective to examine the interplay between power and authority within minority movements and communities (Montoya, 1994).

This study examines within-group differences among documented and undocumented Latina/o students.

A second guiding theme is to challenge traditional claims of the educational system: meritocracy, equal opportunity, color-blindness, and objectivity (Austin, 2000; Montoya, 1994; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). As a result, this study draws on the lived experiences of students using story-telling (“cuentos”) or consejos” (wisdom sayings) as a means of reconciling the culture of home with the dominant American culture. A third theme, drawing on the lived experiences of group members, addresses the need for a centrality of experiential knowledge using stories as a powerful way to name a type of discrimination.

Overview of Sample and Procedures

Data analyzed come from a larger ethnographic study that explored the educational experiences of three generational cohorts of undocumented immigrant Latina/o students in a public secondary school setting by addressing the following questions:

1. What are the educational, social, and emotional experiences of the undocumented immigrant Latino student in a high school setting?
2. What are students’ beliefs about their undocumented status in school?
3. What do undocumented students perceive as barriers to their schooling experience?

In this paper, I use interview data from the larger study to focus on the identification of discriminatory factors that contributed to students’ beliefs about their undocumented status and any barriers (perceived or real) to students’ sense of school belonging.

Although Plyler (1982) held that undocumented children are entitled to a free and public education, there are unique challenges to selecting students that belong to a clandestine population. As an insider with a shared language and culture, researcher trust was established with several organizations committed to issues that affect the immigrant Latina/o community in order to solicit possible leads and resources to assist with the study. Eventually, a lead to the Head Counselor in a public high school in Los Angeles emerged. Under the guidance of the researcher, the Head Counselor, alone, became responsible for identifying participants that fulfilled the sample characteristic assigned by the researcher.

Participants were selected from Leonardo Gutierrez High School (pseudonym) in Los Angeles, California. Purposeful sampling was used because the individuals who fit the study’s criteria were capable of forming an understanding of the research problem by virtue of the shared experience of being undocumented and Latino (Creswell, 2007). Because of the sensitivity in working with this student group, the Head Counselor was required by the university’s Internal Review Board to complete its Online Education Module on the Protection of Human Subjects as a means to ensure confidentiality.

The study was designed to contain a sample of six males and six females (two from each category below) so that there might be a balanced variation of gender, age of migration, and college-ready status.

1. Undocumented Student Less than Twelve Years in U.S./Non-College Ready
2. Undocumented Student Less than Twelve Years in U.S./College Ready
3. Undocumented Student More than Twelve Years in U.S./Non-College Ready
4. Undocumented Student More than Twelve Years in U.S./College Ready

Information on the student was not accurate or fully revealed until the interviews began, which provided for an unbalanced sample (Table 2). The 12- year boundary ensured that at least some of the students would fall under one of the three cohorts.

Table 2. Participant Characteristics (N = 12)

Participant Name	Gender/Age	Age of Migration/Cohort	College Ready Status
Juana	F/17	10/1.5	College Ready
Guillermo	M/18	8/1.5	College Ready
AJ	M/18	6/1.5	College Ready
Daisy	F/17	12/1.5	College Ready
FV	M/18	12/1.5	Non-College Ready
Carolina	F/17	16/1.25	Non-College Ready
Carla	F/18	13/1.25	Non-College Ready
Jessica	F/18	14/1.25	Non-College Ready
Erica	F/17	14/1.25	College Ready
Alicia	F/18	15/1.25	College Ready
Carlos	F/17	3/1.75	College Ready
James	F/17	9 months/1.75	College Ready

College Ready and Non-College Ready Status

The characteristics that determined college-ready status or non-college ready status was determined by a 3.0 grade point average, which determines college eligibility, based on the statewide general A-G course requirement and any advanced placement courses. Those classified as non-college ready had a grade point average below a 3.0, had not completed or were not near completing the A-G requirements, and / or had not fulfilled the AB-540 requirements of having attended a California high school for three or more years. The status of “college-ready / non-college ready” as a criterion for participant selection is a limitation because the terms were used to designate only those students who met the graduation criteria for eligible entry into the California State University (CSU) or the University of California (UC) system even though statewide requirements vary for entry into California’s community colleges and some private colleges and universities.

In addition to the criteria described above, all participants were:

1. Undocumented;
2. Latina/o from Mexico or Central America because these groups account for roughly 80 percent of the U.S. undocumented population (Passel, 2005); and
3. Students in their third or fourth year of public high school education because it is here that, for many, the issue of legal status is confronted as they begin the process of applying for college or work.

Only those students that the counselor knew were comfortable discussing their legal status openly were selected. His knowledge of such students came from his contact with these students and information provided to him by other counselors on his staff. As Head Counselor, he had the authority to access their academic progress and overall achievement patterns prior to compiling a pool of potential participants. To protect the identity of the participants, several steps were taken to ensure confidentiality.

Interviews

All student interviews were conducted by the researcher in the Head Counselor's office, which provided a safe, non-threatening environment. Interviews were conducted in Spanish if requested by the student. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted approximately 40-60 minutes, with handwritten notes taken during the interview and used to supplement any discrepancies or clarifications in the audio.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a paid transcription service and two graduate assistants. Each interview was verified by the researcher. Using Latina/o Critical Theory as a lens, significant statements emerged which formed the themes from which exemplars were used to support and illustrate the findings and interpretations of each section. From these categories, four key themes emerged to communicate the findings with the participants' quotes from the transcriptions to, in their own words, support the findings.

Results

The four themes addressed in the larger ethnographic study were: 1) the experiences of displacement, rejection and care for the family; 2) an undocumented immigrant youth subculture; 3) feelings of belonging in the educational setting; and 4) a conceptual model of a shared immigrant narrative. This paper addresses part of the larger narrative on the educational experiences of undocumented immigrant Latina/o students in a public secondary school setting. Undocumented youth in this study were faced with negotiating how and where they fit in within their own ethnic group. How he or she integrated into the school community was complicated by a set of factors that challenged their place in the educational and social setting. The central findings addressed in this paper that emerge as sub-sections to the theme of feelings of belonging in the educational setting include language as a form of discriminatory treatment and the concept of *somos iguales* (we are all the same).

Language as a Form of Discriminatory Treatment

According to Valenzuela (1999), "immigrants experience more overt discrimination; including at the hands of many insensitive Mexican American youth—than any other group" (p.24). While it may be important to create a community where students are free to be "themselves and where their Mexican identity is valued and supported" (Gibson et al., 2004, p. 140), some participants in the study, especially the recent immigrants, could not understand why someone from their own ethnic group would tease them about where they came from and how they spoke. Such feelings of marginalization were heightened when issues related to language were involved.

Siento que ellos cuando lo miran Latino como que empiezan a decir cosas de nosotros. Siento que empiezan a decir cosas de mí porque soy Latina o piensan. No sé... porque a veces estoy escuchando música en español y como que se quedan viendo a uno como, "¿Quién es esa que está escuchando música?" Sí me siento a veces como que diferente mas ahorita como cambiamos las clases (Carla, 1.25 / Non-College Ready).

(I feel that when they see one as Latino, they begin to say things about us. I feel that they are saying things about me because I am Latina or they think so. I don't know... because sometimes I listen to music in Spanish and it's like they are watching me thinking, "what is she listening to?" I feel different especially now that we switched classes [semester changes].)

Like other 1.25ers and some 1.5ers, language (not speaking English well or at all) served as a trigger to initiate being treated differently. This form of discrimination (linguicism) formed the basis for making some members of the 1.5 cohort and all members of the 1.25 cohort feel separated from their Latina/o peers.

FV defined this sort of discriminatory treatment as a form of racism. When asked if the racism came from individuals who were not from Mexico or from others who were also Latino, FV replied:

El “racismo” viene de los dos. Yo pienso que hay aquí personas que llegaron de México y llegaron chicos y han crecido aquí y a por que tú llegas de México más grande y ellos ya hablan el idioma, yo pienso que quieren hacer diferencias entre él y tú. Cuando un idioma o algún color de piel no hace la diferencia en una persona (FV, 1.25 / Non-College Ready).

(The racism comes from both. I believe there are people here who arrived from Mexico as small children and grew up here and now just because you come from Mexico older and they already spoke the language [English], I think they want to show the differences between them and us when a language or skin color makes no difference in the person.)

AJ and FV remained closest with those whose age of migration was similar to their own. Speaking Spanish openly made them and others in the same generational cohort a target for teasing. Carolina, a 1.25 member, jokingly commented that although she felt very comfortable speaking Spanish on campus with her girlfriends, she admitted to feeling embarrassed when her group of friends became too loud and when even her own friends (some of whom were born here) had trouble following even Carolina’s Spanish.

Porque cuando voy con una bola [de amigas] y vamos hablando español, digo, “Esos paisas que no saben inglés.” Yo pienso que así piensan. Yo por eso no hablo tan recio (Carolina, 1.25 / Non-College Ready).

(When I go with a group (of friends) and we’re speaking Spanish, I say to myself, “They’re probably thinking, ‘those paisas that do not know how to speak English.’” At least that is what I think they are thinking. That is why I do not speak (Spanish) so loudly.)

For FV and Carolina, language appeared as a key indicator of discriminatory treatment between those Latinas/os born in the United States and members of the 1.25 and 1.5 generational cohorts even though differences in achievement between them and their 1.25 and 1.5 peers were not striking. The only differences, according to the Head Counselor, were where each student fell in completing the statewide A-G requirements for UC/CSU transfer.

Framing the achievement patterns for the Latino student within a larger historical and social context (burdens of poverty, economic exploitation, segregation, and discrimination) is one way to understand the disproportionate pattern of educational achievement and attainment among Latino youth. These larger issues not only affect the Latina/o student outside of the school setting, but they are likely to have a significant impact on their experiences in school.

The School Setting as Más Igual (“More Equal”)

Gándara and Contreras (2009) describe the educational setting as the “first response system for any kind of social, medical, or psychological problem or disability” and the one most lacking in resources (p. 86). Observational data gathered from the campus visits offered a glimpse into the students’ world and its surrounding communities. Participants felt safe in the school despite a history of violence in the surrounding neighborhoods. The climate of the campus, a large multi-story complex with bungalows on the periphery of the grounds, was a hive of controlled energy. The hallways were wide and clean with culturally relevant student artwork displayed on both sides of the hallway walls. The principal and other adult supervisors/teachers were regularly observed engaging the students in conversations. Several teachers wore t-shirts with the phrase: “CAHSSEE: SI PUEDES” (CAHSSEE: YES YOU CAN). It was an encouraging (and constant) reminder that every student could pass the California High School Senior Exit Exam creating for a culture of “high expectations” among the teachers.

Carolina expressed feelings of comfort while in school—a sentiment shared by all participants. According to the Head Counselor, the school served as “a safe-haven for these kids” (personal communication, February

2010). When participants were asked if they believed they had access to all the resources possible to succeed in their education, they all believed they had. For Carolina, the campus was the one place where the school was more equal than other settings despite having experienced some negative feelings towards her treatment.

La escuela es como más igual. Es más igual para todos. Pero a veces como afuera, creo que no como no tengo papeles. Agarro mi lonche gratis, me prestan libros, voy aquí a la enfermería. Todo lo tengo. Puedo ir al gym que está aquí. Todo. (Carolina, 1.25 / Non-College Ready).

(The school is more equal. It's equal for everyone, but at times, like outside, I think it is not the same for everyone because I do not have papers. I get my lunch free, they let me borrow books, I can go to the infirmary (clinic) that is available on campus. I can also go to the gym here. I have everything here.)

According to Carolina, she had access to the same resources others had regardless of status. An essential sameness prevailed and was a dominant theme for the 1.25 members.

For the 1.25 members, life on the campus was *igual* (the same) because of access to resources, *pero no tanto* (but not that much) because of treatment by members of their own ethnic group, language, and the full rights and privileges afforded only to documented students (e.g. financial aid, job permits, and possible internships). Students like Carolina and Jessica (1.25 generation) appropriated a discourse on equality constructing the space of the school as a “microcosm of the nation” or at least an idealized nation (Levinson, Douglas, & Holland, 1996).

In his study of a secondary school in Mexico, Levinson et al. (1996) established that class and ethnic differences *within* school were often ignored or downplayed while the educational differences *beyond* the school became more salient (p. 212). He found that a “discourse of essential sameness (“*todos somos iguales*,” “we are all equal”) was used to distinguish the schooled from the unschooled. Carolina and Jessica believed that access to the same resources for the same students created a sense of equality among the school community. Yet, they also believed that this same equality should be extended to every person beyond the school, making a subtle case for access to higher education, jobs, and possible citizenship.

Conclusions

Issues of language, age of migration, and its intersection with citizen Latina/o English speakers served to identify discriminatory treatment experienced among members of the 1.25 and 1.5 generational cohorts and their documented Latina/o peers. Language, however, remained the form of “linguistically related racism” for undocumented youth in both the 1.25 and 1.5 generations of this study (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1992). Linguicism is “prejudice multiplied by power used by members of dominant language groups against nondominant language groups” (Chen-Hayes, Chen, & Athar, 1999, p. 20). For the 1.25ers and 1.5ers, language was the only difference separating them from their documented peers. Because of their age of migration, 1.25ers remained especially vulnerable to this discriminatory practice.

As one indicator of discrimination, the emotional and social experiences of undocumented Latino youth posed the question of how subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) was taking place not at the institutional level, but at the hands of other Latina/o youth as 1.25 and 1.5 members begin the integration process into the dominant culture. The method of the framework shifted from a critical perspective of the Latina/o looking outside of his or her ethnic group as a means to pull back the layers of oppression and racist attitudes to the Latina/o looking inward at his or her own ethnic group as participants in the dominant narrative.

Yet, the Latina/o students remained bound by a common culture, language and story. They maintained a strong cultural identity even when faced by the dominant American narrative projected by their Latina/o documented peers. Challenging the dominant ideology was Carolina’s statement: *todos*

somos iguales pero no tanto (we are all the same, but not that much). While the school provided the necessary means to succeed academically, the real life resources (affordable access to higher education, jobs, a feeling of safety and security because of undocumented status) were not provided no matter how hard they worked. Her storytelling, like that of the others, opened a door into an ignored or alternative reality by providing a snapshot of the recovered memory and story of the undocumented experience.

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