From High School to Post-Secondary Life--Exploring the College Transition Experiences of Bilingual Latinx Youth

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Abstract

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The current neoliberal education system often positions bilingual youth (whose first language is other than English) as deficient or lacking in skills. The discourse from some academic research paradigms tends to also take up this deficit orientation, focusing on the issues and needs of Latinx bilingual students, or the pedagogical strategies to "close achievement gaps." The NYC Department of Education has attempted to address gaps in achievement by offering increased access to college and career readiness programs, positioning access as synonymous to equity. However, access alone does not lead to equity when the systems and norms that prioritize assimilation to the dominant white culture are not being challenged; moreover, increased access will not lead to equity if the voices and experiences of marginalized youth experiencing the transition to college are not amplified. This project will add to the growing body of scholarly work that aims to subvert deficit discourse around bilingual students by inviting them to author their own stories about their experiences in the transition to college. These narratives bring up various aspects of the transition to college: how first-generation Latinx bilingual youth navigate cultural and linguistic expectations in college, how they navigate the white, western, and patriarchal institutional norms of the college going process, sources of support in their educational journeys, what factors influenced their college choices, and how they

have experienced college in the context of a global pandemic. This research recognizes bilingual students' experiences and knowledges as truths, positioning them as knowledge creators.

The purpose of this study is to document and explore how first-generation Latinx/ bilingual students experience the transition from high school to college, and how they navigate and question spaces in high school and college fraught with linguistic and cultural erasure. Employing Chicana Feminist epistemologies and post-positive realist perspectives of identity, this study will use pláticas to better understand the experiences of Latinx students as they transition to college, what educators can do to support their transition, and to think about how educators can work alongside Latinx students to fight erasure.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The current neoliberal education system often positions bilingual youth who are learning English as deficient or lacking in skills. The discourse from more positivist-oriented academic research also tends to take up this deficit orientation, focusing on the issues and needs of students who are learning English, and/or the pedagogical strategies to catch them up to the "mainstream." At the same time there is a growing body of scholarly work that attempts to subvert this deficit discourse, recognizing students' experiences and knowledges as truth claims, using methodologies such as *testimonios,* narrative inquiry, and YPAR. This project hopes to add to this growing body of work. The purpose of this dissertation study is to document and explore how first-generation Latinx bilingual youth experience the transition from high school to college and the ways in which they navigate cultural and linguistic expectations in the college transition.

For this qualitative dissertation study, I employ pláticas to understand the experiences of first-generation Latinx bilingual students in the college transition, with implications for how teachers and university faculty could better support them. This project aims to put bilingual youth and their experiences in conversation with the decisions that impact them. In recognizing their academic and lived experiences as knowledge claims, this project also pushes against deficit views of bilingual youth in education and education research, challenging "what can be said and thought...who can speak, when, and with what authority" (Ball, 2012, p.2).

Background to the Problem

I now underscore some of the issues in the current educational landscape to frame and situate this research.

Issues of access and equity

The NYC Department of Education's Office of Equity and Access attempts to "address the access and opportunity gaps which exist among historically underserved students," through initiatives such as "Advanced Placement for All" and "The College Access for All: Middle School Initiative" (Office of Equity and Access, 2012). These initiatives position college as a pathway to academic success, providing students with opportunities to prepare for college through rigorous college-level coursework, college planning and advisement on the college-going process. While the efforts put forth by the Department of Education to address "opportunity gaps" expands the access that students have to college and career readiness programs, there is still a significant gap in achievement between English Language Learners (ELLs) and non-ELLs, which can be seen in the graduation and dropout rates. The four-year graduation rate in NYC in 2019 for ELLs was 40.9%, while the graduation rate for all students was 77.3%, a 36.4% disparity. The 2019 dropout rate for ELLs in NYC was 25.6%; the dropout rate for all students was 7.8% (NYC DOE Graduation Results, 2021).

Even if these reform measures resulted in less of a disparity in measures of achievement between ELLs and non-ELLs, merely giving students "access" in an educational system that does not value other literacies or other forms of capital is problematic and does not lead to equity. The "College and Career readiness" initiatives of the NYC DOE, such as "AP for All," attempt to provide equitable opportunities for students but fail to recognize multiple forms of literacy and knowledge; they fail to broaden or question these conceptualizations of literate practices, thus maintaining traditional white, Western norms of literacy and white Eurocentric epistemologies. This discourse of "college and career readiness" and "equity and access," portrays college as *the* sure pathway, putting pressure on Multilingual Learners (MLLs) to enter

spaces that were not designed for them, that they have historically been excluded from, and where their literacies and knowledges have been marginalized. Moreover, it positions college as *the* pathway to success without attention to how these spaces might also perpetuate oppressions around race, immigration status, and language. The privileging of college also fails to acknowledge student debt and the financial burdens of attending college. Access to programs, institutions, and systems that uphold white, western, and racist practices does not bring about equity or change if the inequitable and exclusionary structures and systems are not challenged.

Adding to the Myth of Educational Meritocracy

The rhetoric of "college and career readiness" is pervasive throughout NYC public schools. It can be seen in the NYC Department of Education's website (College and Career Planning, 2021), in the imagery of school spaces, in posters that decorate hallways, in school mission statements, and even in measures of school "effectiveness" (NYC Department of Education Quality Review, 2021). The messaging that going to college leads to success-- to personal, professional, and financial gain-- is fomented throughout a child's schooling, spreading the false notion of meritocracy prevalent in US schools. Meritocracy is encapsulated in the American Dream and is a fundamental national mythology (McNamee & Miller, 2009). The belief that everyone should have an equal opportunity to succeed, to attain upward mobility, through their individual hard work, talent, and ambition, regardless of social class, race, or gender is a well-documented myth of the US education system and of education reform efforts (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Ball, 2020). As has been documented, the "playing field" is not equal; there are perceivable differences in what is taught (Apple, 1971), how it is taught (Anyon, 1980) as well as disparities in resources geared towards college and career pathways.

While there are programs in NYC public schools, such as the College Advising Corps, that support first-generation students with applying to college through providing more individual conferencing time with counselors, the amount of time a student spends with a counselor especially in urban public schools is limited. This is common throughout the country--in the US the average college counselor works with more than 450 students a year and the average time a student has with a counselor one on one talking about college is less than 40 minutes (PBS.org, 2016). In NYC public high schools, the ratio of students to guidance counselors is recommended to be no more than 1 to 250 by the Board of Regents (EngageNY, 2015). Counselors and college advisors play a crucial role in the college going process and in navigating financial aid; the limited time first-generation students have with a college advisor makes learning about an unfamiliar process even more elusive. Nationwide, almost half of all Multilingual Learners (MLLs) do not attend postsecondary education (Kanno & Cromley, 2013, 2015). For many immigrant students and their families, education is seen as a tool of social mobility and a pathway to a "better life" for the economic benefits or career possibilities that a college degree may provide; however, those who do not 'succeed' in this educational system are often blamed and labeled lazy or incompetent and they may internalize these claims about themselves.

Inequities that Persist after High School Graduation

Furthermore, the rhetoric of college readiness also presupposes that as students leave high school, they exit one space and enter another "ready" for this next step of college and/or career. Students entering college do not leave behind the financial, socio-emotional, linguistic, and learning needs from high school. For example, some bilingual students who have had the label of ELL in high school may need continued support in English to meet the demands of

coursework. Some colleges have bridge programs that have students take remedial English courses in their first year that they must pass before starting freshman year.

Moreover, the notion of college readiness glosses over how the inequities students experience in high school persist into college. For example, inequitable access to technology extends into college. This has become even more salient in times of remote learning in the context of Covid-19, where digital disparities have hindered students' abilities to participate in class. A student struggling with reliable internet connection at home their senior year of high school will still not have a stable internet just 2 months after graduation when they enter college. Students may have unstable housing or be in doubled-up housing; this also became salient in the pandemic, as returning home for remote learning meant navigating tight living spaces and finding areas to study. First-generation students may also be working and/or have caregiving responsibilities outside of school throughout high school and college.

Alongside these inequities related to education, the kinds of racial, linguistic, and gender oppressions that students may experience in high school persist in college and students must continue to navigate these systems. As hooks (1994) says, "racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structure of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins" (p.84) First-generation Latinx students especially those who attend Predominantly White Institutions experience racist and linguistic microaggressions.

The Deficit Orientation Towards Bilingual Students

There are stereotypical and racialized ways that positions bilingual students as "in need," further contributing to their minoritization, where their knowledges, experiences, literacies, and languages are marginalized. We see a deficit positioning of students who receive a label of

English Language Learner (ELL) through various aspects of high school that then continues on into college (Valencia, 1997). In assessment saturated environments, bilingual students must take standardized exit exams to graduate high school (Au, 2013) and more linguistically and culturally biased exams, the SAT or ACT, to enter college. Although it is generally agreed upon in the research that it takes 5-7 years to attain the level of academic language comparable to native English-speaking test-takers (Thomas and Collier, 2002), a finding that has been reproduced in various studies on the effects of high stakes assessments (Alexander, 2017; Solorzano, 2008; Yee, 2015), many states still require emergent bilingual students to take exit exams as graduation requirements (Menken, 2006). The lower passing rate or scores on gatekeeping exams contributes to educators pointing the blame towards the student rather than the systemic inequities at play, what Ladson-Billings (2006) has referred to as an "educational debt" (p. 3).

Flores (2020) points out how emergent bilingual students are often positioned as lacking "academic language" which does not consider their linguistic strengths. He describes academic language, rather than a list of linguistic practices, as "a raciolinguistic ideology that frames the home language practices of racialized communities as inherently deficient" (p.25). In NYC public schools a recently arrived immigrant who speaks a language other than English will be placed in either dual language programs with 50 percent instruction in English and 50 percent in the native language, or a transitional bilingual program (TBE) with freestanding English as New Language classes (NYC Department of Education, 2020). The goal of a transitional bilingual program is for students to transition out of their home language and into mainstream English classes, which reifies subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999, 2018) and hierarchies of languages with English being a prioritized norm. According to Flores (2020) raciolinguistic

ideologies continue an agenda of white supremacy by "suggesting that the roots of racial inequalities lie in the linguistic deficiencies of racialized communities and that the solution to these racial inequalities is to modify their language practices" (p. 25). A student is deemed successful or proficient in academic language "by the white listening/reading subject whose perceptions have been shaped by histories of colonialism that continue to frame racialized speakers as coming from communities with linguistic deficiencies that need to be policed and corrected." (p. 25) The deficit discourse in schooling around bilingual students and the neoliberal educational context of high stakes standardized testing contributes to painting a "single story" (Adichie, 2009) of bilingual students as problems to solve or in need of catching up to the "mainstream" which disregards the variety of their lived experiences. The graduation and dropout rates mentioned before, when taken in isolation, can contribute to the narritization of bilingual students as "at risk" or falling behind. This deficit discourse overshadows the multiplicity of experiences, literacies, skills, and stories of bilingual students.

Statement of the Problem

High school aged bilingual students who have recently arrived to the country, having been conditioned in the "American Dream," enter an education system riddled with gatekeeping mechanisms such as standardized exam requirements for high school graduation and an elusive college going process. Bilingual students are already experiencing the transition between cultures and languages and navigating liminal spaces. The other often overlooked issue in the college-going process for Latinx bilingual students is immigration status, as some students must navigate being undocumented and finding ways to pay for college. Without insight into how first-generation Latinx students are experiencing these college readiness and support programs, and without hearing about the nuance of experiences in going to college, researchers and

educators are missing crucial information and run the risk of homogenizing experiences of Latinx first-generation college students.

Given these various aspects of the background of the problem presented here, the purpose of this study is to document and explore how first-generation Latinx/ bilingual students experience the transition from high school to college and how they navigate spaces that are often fraught with cultural and linguistic erasure in college and in high school.

Rationale and Significance of Study

This project addresses the aforementioned issues and the need for continued research that reflects the diverse thoughts, experiences, and perspectives of bilingual students in the transition to college and in their first years at college. By exploring the experiences of first-generation Latinx students transitioning to college, I argue that we can then make changes and improvements to college and career readiness programs and college-level supports that are more attuned to the variety of needs and experiences of first-generation bilingual youth. Centering the stories of Latinx bilingual students, this research shows the heterogeneity of Latinx experiences, stories of immigration, and educational journeys; in doing so it challenges the homogenization of Latinx bilingual youth and calls for supports for first-generation Latinx students that take into account this heterogeneity. As such, the findings from this project can be used contribute to creating more culturally responsive approaches for programs targeting first-generation college students. Rather than just making sure that first-generation Latinx students get accepted to colleges, the findings from this project highlight how high schools and colleges must work to support students in having more positive, humanizing experiences throughout the college-going process and throughout college. This research gives insight into how first-generation Latinx students are experiencing already existing support programs as well as how they are

experiencing colleges and can be used to inform how universities and educators can play a role in college retention. In addition, this study gives insight into the decision-making process for Latinx students considering college, why Latinx bilingual students choose college, which colleges they choose, and what factors go into their decisions.

Another reason this research is necessary and relevant is the political context and backdrop in which this project took place, during a Trump and post-Trump era of heightened anti-immigrant sentiments, extreme racism, linguistic racism and xenophobia, as well as during the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the previous administration which pushed DACA recipients to the margins, and the changing policy of the new administration, such as the current House Bill that would give Dreamers a path to citizenship, it is important to talk about and stay on top of policy that impacts Latinx youth and their families. This study brings forth the experiences of applying to college with undocumented immigration status, family abroad, or mixed-status families, and how these students are finding funding. Also, in the context of the global pandemic, it has been and continues to be crucial to get the perspectives of immigrant youth about the changes to higher education impacting them and the struggles (some new and some continued) that they are facing.

In focusing on a transition, from high school to college, this study also offers up different ways of thinking about transitions, to reject binary thinking of moving from one space to another, of a transition marked by arriving marked with success/failure. This conceptualizing of fluid, non-binary transitions help trouble notions of meritocracy and "success" stories which have greatly impacted the Latinx immigrant community. This research is also important as it challenges assimilationist assumptions of integrating to college. It expands and argues for a reconceptualization of family involvement in the college going process to include factors outside

of school spaces. We often think of college and career readiness support as limited to in schools; however, this research shows the many ways families and communities outside of school systems impact a student in their pathways to college.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Chicana Feminist epsitemologies and post-positive realist perspectives of identity, and takes up pláticas methodologically, to better understand the experiences of Latinx students as they transition to college, what educators can do to support their transition, and to think about how educators can work alongside Latinx students to fight erasure.

Chicana Feminist epistemology

I use a Chicana Feminist epistemology and conceptual tools of borderlands, mestiza consciousness, and *bodymindspirit* from Chicana feminism throughout this dissertation. Writing and researching from a Chicana Feminist epistemology means rejecting binary thinking and moving towards intersectionality and hybridity (Arredondo, Hurtado, Klahn, Nájera-Ramírez, & Zavella, 2003, p. 2). Chicana Feminism privileges life experiences and knowledge of Chicanas in education and education research (Delgado Bernal 1998). In particular it validates and recognizes the borderland experiences of Chicana/Latinas as strengths.

Borderlands theory (1987) extends the physical geographical conceptualization of borders to the symbolic: “psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual... Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper class touch” (p.19). Borderlands are a space of hybridity, “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.” As a third

space, characterized by complexity, borderlands is a helpful theoretical tool to conceptualize the multiple subjectivities and multiple marginalized social locations of my participants. Delgado Bernal (1998) describes it as a "geographical, emotional, and/or psychological space occupied by mestizas" (p. 561). As the participants in my study are going through multiple transitions (of cultures, languages, and then the transition from high school to college) and living in the liminal spaces or borderlands, going between cultures and languages, this conceptual tenant of a Chicana Feminist epistemology is particularly relevant to this proposed study.

The notion of a mestiza consciousness comes from living in the in-between space or life in the borderlands, as the experience and psychology of hybridity is embodied in Latinx women of color. Anzaldua (1987) describes mestiza consciousness to refer to someone that "straddles cultures, races, languages, nations, sexualities, and spiritualities--that is living with ambivalence while balancing opposing powers" (Delgado Bernal 2001, p.626) Going through multiple cultures and languages, Anzaldua (1987) explains that mestiza consciousness is in part a coping strategy through developing a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity (p. 79). In relation to educational practices Delgado Bernal (2002) operationalizes a Mestiza consciousness as "the way a student balances, negotiates, and draws from her biculturalism, bilingualism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities in relationship to her education" (Delgado Bernal 2001, p. 623) Both *borderlands* and mestiza consciousness are useful tools to think about how my participants navigate multiple identities and cultures. Mestiza consciousness is located at intersections of racism, sexism, linguicism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, and patriarchy; it is born out of negotiating, balancing, and fighting within and against these multiple systems of oppression.

I am drawn to Chicana feminism because it challenges patriarchal, heteronormative, White Western conceptualizations of knowledge production. It charges those who take it up with drawing on alternative systems of knowledge/knowing that can disrupt western colonial assumptions about knowledge and knowledge production (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002). One way a Chicana feminist epistemology challenges western ways of knowing is through *bodymindspirit,* which values and acknowledges the body, mind, and spirit in research. This theoretical perspective is crucial in my rejection of researcher neutrality. Research from a Chicana feminist epistemology does not eschew emotions and spirituality from the work; rather, it rejects "the body-mind-spirit split common in positivist and so-called 'objective' forms of research" (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012, p. 512).

Lastly, I take on and am challenged by a Chicana feminist epistemology because it requires researchers to grapple with and "confront those aspects of ourselves that render us the colonized or the perpetrator, particularly if we are working with marginalized communities (i.e., the immigrant, the queer, youth, and people of color), even if we are from these communities" (Calderon et al. 2012, as cited in Fierros and Bernal, 2016, p. 102). As a white researcher, I must be attentive to how, through my work and my engagement with my participants, I am either challenging or perpetuating systems of oppression. Chicana feminism requires that I center reciprocity with my participants and not be exploitative of the relationships I already have with them. It requires that I challenge my assumptions through dialogic engagement. Throughout this dissertation, I was in constant reflection and dialogue with myself and with participants to think about power dynamics, reciprocity, what I am contributing to the communities with which I am doing research, and how through dialogue and engaging with participants, I am challenging assumptions and presumptions about participants and their experiences.

Post-positive Realism and Epistemic privilege

Other theoretical tools that are at the foundation for this project is the notion of epistemic privilege which comes from a post-positivist realist perspective. Moya (2000) explains the limitations of a postmodern epistemology in theorizing about identity; while a postmodern perspective succeeds in troubling essentializing notions of identity that are informed by a positivistic search for the truth, or "the self as a unified, stable and knowable entity" (p.7), it does not offer the theoretical tools to "analyze the epistemic status and political salience of any given identity… to ascertain and evaluate the possibilities and limits of different identities." (p. 7). Moya (2000) explains that identities "are often assumed or chosen for complex subjective reasons that can be objectively evaluated" (p. 8). A post-positivist realist perspective recognizes that there are more and less accurate explanations and representations of reality and that people can offer better and worse interpretations of their experience. The identities we construct and perceive of ourselves and that are ascribed to us by others have real, material consequences that affect our lives and how we experience and understand the world (Fernandez 2002).

A post positive realist perspective leads to the concept of epistemic privilege by recognizing that certain identities allow for more accurate or better interpretations of experience and of reality; a person's social position within hierarchies of power can make them more able to see and understand those hierarchies and systems of inequity. Moya (2002) defines epistemic privilege as "a special advantage with respect to possessing or acquiring knowledge about how fundamental aspects of our society (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) operate to sustain matrices of power" (p.38). Campano and Damico (2007) describe epistemic privilege as "those with the least power as best positioned to understand inequality" (p. 223). Being from an oppressed group is not in and of itself an epistemic privilege; rather, epistemic privilege is

claimed through a person's recognition that their experiences offer them particular insights and unique vantage points from which to inquire into social hierarchies (Moya 2002).

Though our identities offer subjective experience, recognizing the identities and perspectives of marginalized groups allows for a "deeper knowledge of objective social structures and their effects" (Mohanty 2018, p. 418). The social locations of marginalized subjectivities are "located in society in such a way that their everyday experiences are likely to produce certain kinds of insight about the social world," (p. 422) which leads to universal claims tied to the material objective knowledge about society.

Mohanty (2018) explains that both Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality and the notion of epistemic privilege come from a "non-positivist conception of objective knowledge." Intersectionality also shows us how overly abstract and homogenizing group labels, such as the label 'people of color,' erase the ways in which social structures impact other identity markers within these larger categories. The notion of epistemic privilege undergirded my participant selection as I sought Latinx participants from a variety of backgrounds, social class, and race. Intersectional identities and a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences helps produce a more accurate analysis of society and the ways systems of oppression work. Mohanty (2018) points out that "acknowledging that the oppressed have an epistemic privilege means that members of dominant groups acknowledge, in the relevant contexts, their own blindnesses, their own socially-shaped ideological distortions." (Mohanty 2018, P. 426). As a researcher and a member of the White dominant group researching alongside my participants, in recognizing epistemic privilege, I must attend to my own "socially-shaped ideological distortions" and assumptions through dialogic engagement with my participants.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this inquiry is manifold. Through this dissertation I aim to better understand the experiences of bilingual Latinx students as they transition to college, to listen, attend to, and illuminate their educational stories and the nuanced experiences of Latinx youth. I also aim to center the lived experiences of my participants and show that their stories of college going matter despite dominant college going narratives. As Bettina Love explains in *We Want to Do More Than Survive*,

> We need to recognize the specific nuances of different types of dark oppression, recognizing that not all injustices are the same...All Latinx people do not face the same discrimination. AfroLatinx Americans or Black Latin Americans face colorism. Latinx who are lighter-skinned do not have the same discrimination as their lighter-skinned brothers and sisters. Research shows that in Latin American countries such as Bolivia, Mexico, and Colombia lighter-skinned Latinxs achieve the highest educational outcomes. Black Latinxs achieve the lowest ... It is important for educators to know how deeply unjust systems affect people and their communities in unique ways, but also it is imperative to understand the intersections of injustice" (54-55).

Love (2019) calls for intersectional social justice that attends to the variety of experiences within broad categories or labels of identity. As such, another critical purpose of this study is to open up new understandings of what educators can do to support first-generation Latinx students in the transition to college, to work alongside them to fight erasure and oppression. In order to be a co-conspirator (Love 2019), working actively against white supremacy in education, educators must have a deeper, richer understanding of structural

and systemic forces that keep racist nativist hierarchies in place and challenge our assumptions around Latinx college going youth that erase individual experiences.

The overarching research question that guides this inquiry is: How do first-generation Latinx bilingual students experience the transition from high school to college? To address this question, the research will address the following sub-questions: (1) How do they navigate cultural and linguistic expectations in the transition to college? and (2) How do they describe their experiences in high school college preparation and their experiences in college?

Positionality

As Saavedra (2001) explains, "although a simple idea, it is a very difficult journey to self-examine, especially when we must confront our multiple privileges" (p. 265). As I continue to grow, reflect, read scholarship, and prepare to carry out this work, I must continuously reflect on who I am in my research.

What brings me to this project

As part of the Department of Education's College Readiness 'AP for All' initiative in the 2017-2018 school year, I began teaching one of the first AP English literature classes to a group of all bilingual immigrant youth. With the goal of increasing access to AP level coursework to all high school students throughout the city in order to be more college ready, I began to question giving students "access" in an educational system that does not value other literacies or other forms of capital. I found it problematic that an initiative which attempted to provide equitable opportunities for students did not recognize multiple forms of literacy and knowledge nor attempt to broaden these conceptualizations of literate practices. From my positionality teaching the course, the suggested 'AP for All' curriculum not only maintained a traditional White, Eurocentric literary canon with White and Western norms of literacy, it left those elements of the

curriculum unquestioned and central to the coursework. I also felt the tensions of promoting a program that claimed to eschew tracking or categorizing students yet celebrated the elitist labels of "advanced" and "pre-college"; the messaging that taking an AP-level class was attainable for *all* through individual hard work, a strong work ethic, and mere access to the course rang of the false notion of meritocracy that I was trying to push against; the AP programming through AP for All seemed to gloss over the intersections of unjust systems at play, the structural inequities and systemic racism that impacted in the educational trajectories and experiences of my immigrant students, and positioned college as *the* pathway to success. Moreover, the more students enrolled in the program and sat for the AP exams, the more recognition and praise my school received from the DOE for its "equitable practices." However, the number of students enrolling in AP classes only gives information about just that-how many students access this type of college readiness program. It leaves out how students are experiencing the programs, if it is a positive experience, or if students completed the program.

As a teacher and researcher "in the contact zone" (Lytle, 2000), I began to use my AP classes as a space to explore curricular invitations that recognized my students' epistemic privilege and literacies. I hoped my classes would be generative spaces to challenge hierarchies of power and to disrupt deficit discourse around their English language "proficiency" and academic language that was tested in the College Board's AP exam. In the AP class, the students and I would often purposefully veer from the College Board's recommended syllabus and reading list to research the topics and literature that interested us, sharing our experiences, learning from each other and forming close relationships. In their junior and senior years, we would talk about college and career goals in class as well as the tortuous process of applying to college; this happened mostly through informal conversations. I wanted to learn more about my

students' experiences with the college going process, how their first year(s) in college were going, and, looking back, what they thought about their experiences in high school and participation in college and career readiness supports.

The lenses I bring as a teacher are tied to my own race, class, and gendered positions. As the daughter of White, working class parents in the suburbs of Detroit, I grew up in the borderlands of the urban and suburban. In this way, I find Anzaldúa's explanation of borderlands particularly illuminating for my childhood context: "[b]orders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*...The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the white and those who align themselves with whites" (P. 25-26). My childhood neighborhood tried to define itself as a mostly White-middle class, "safe," neighborhood distinguished from the "unsafe" spaces of Detroit, the "inner city." I attended a suburban public school with classmates from similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds as my own, and my schooling privileged white-middle class literacy norms and ways of knowing. Recognizing that the lenses I bring as a teacher are tied to my own race, class, and gendered positions, I seek to make visible and interrupt the assumptions about whose knowledge counts in schools and to be critical of how I may be upholding (and challenging) these systems by the work I'm doing in schools.

Challenging deficit discourse around bilingual youth and disrupting inequities and power structures in education have been commitments I have threaded throughout my work as a teacher, teacher educator, and researcher. As I work through Milner's (2007) framework of researcher racial and cultural positionality, I recognize that in my positionality of teacher and researcher, particularly my role as the teacher of my participants, I am at risk of becoming what Villenas (1996) refers to as a colonizer of research: "claiming authenticity of interpretation and

description under the guise of authority," (p. 713). As a former teacher to my participants and an outsider to their lived experiences, throughout this project I was in a process of reflexivity and attended to being a listener, rather than jumping to help and advocate for them. I also had to check my biases and influences as a teacher so that I was not pushing college on my participants. I hold a position of power as a former teacher, where they may seek approval or want to please me by participating. Throughout the research project I created opportunities for dialogic engagement to challenge my assumptions, which I describe in more detail in Chapter 3.

Terms

Goodwin (2002) in their study on preparing teachers to work with immigrant students, points out that "most of the literature that focuses on teacher preparation for the success and achievement of children of color fails to explicitly frame immigrant children as a group that exhibits particular issues and needs. As a consequence, immigrant children are rendered invisible when they are subsumed under these broad and inclusive labels" (p. 161). I approach the operationalization of the following terms in relation to my participants with the same concern of the homogenizing effects of broad labels that Goodwin (2002) points out. For this study, I will be utilizing the following terms:

Bilingual, Bilingual students, bilingual youth: Throughout this dissertation, I use the terms *bilingual students* and/or *bilingual youth* (rather than Emergent Bilingual, English Language Learner or Multilingual Learner) to refer to students who are (or were) taking ESL or ENL (English as a New Language) classes and who speak more than one language. I describe my research participants as bilingual youth, building from the guidance of Ofelia Garcia (2009), who coined the term Emergent Bilingual. Garcia (2009) uses the term Emergent Bilingual to describe students whose first language is not English and who have not been reclassified through English

proficiency exams. While English Language Learners (ELLs) or Multilingual Learners (MLLs) are more readily used labels in the NYC Department of Education context to describe students whose first language is not English, the term Emergent Bilingual, "makes reference to a positive characteristic, not one of being limited or being learners, as LEPs and ELLs suggest" (P. 322). In this present dissertation study, the participants started high school taking English as a New Language (ENL) classes and received the label of English Language Learners (ELLs). In using the term bilingual youth (rather than emergent bilingual) I am recognizing bilingualism of my participants.

Latinx: I use the term Latinx and Latinx youth to refer to people of Latin American descent; as opposed to "Latina/o", Latinx emphasizes nonbinary gender identification.

First-generation: Toutkoushian Stollberg and Slaton (2018) bring up the debate around defining "first-generation college students" in higher education research and how different constructions of the term "first-generation" can have different implications in studies. They (2018) define first-generation college students "as someone who is the first member of his or her family to go to college...usually based solely on parental education" (p. 1). When I use the term first-generation college student, I extend this definition to mean someone who is the first member of their family to go to college in the United States. Some participants of this study have parents or family members who attended college in other countries in Latin America; given the focus of this dissertation research, "first-generation" will refer to being the first to go to attend a US college. I operationalize the term in this way because it allows for the possibility of a variety of experiences and backgrounds to be explored. In this way, students with different degrees of privilege fit under the category of first-generation, such as students who have had family

members attend college in their home country and have varying degrees of socio-economic wealth.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There is a dominant narrative around college-going youth that "others" Latinx students (Covarrubias et al 2017; Solórzano & Yosso 2002; Solórzano et. al. 2005). Researchers have noted that the institutional norms of the college going process (such as the college application, college essays, and documentation status) prioritize assimilation to the dominant white culture. The grand narrative of going to college when represented in academic research through numbers or hard data alone further erases the raced and gendered experiences of Latinx students going to college (Covarrubias et al 2017). A "single story" (Adichie 2009) around first-generation Latinx college students as lacking, struggling and behind gets reproduced in the media and in academic research, which limits the exploration into the complexities and nuanced stories of marginalized populations essential to understanding systemic oppression (Solórzano & Yosso 2006). Given this, the aim of this literature review is to explore the scholarly work that helps to show the complex and nuanced experiences of first-generation Latinx students in the transition to college.

In this chapter, I examine research that addresses the experiences of first-generation Latinx students going to college informed by a Chicana Feminist lens. I use a Chicana feminist lens to review the literature because it challenges patriarchal, heteronormative, White Western conceptualizations of knowledge production, and instead privileges life experiences and centers alternative ways of knowledge/knowing. There is a growing body of literature that reflects the diverse thoughts, lived experiences, and perspectives of first-generation Latinx students making the transition from high school to college. This scholarship is often qualitative in nature and in combination with critical frameworks. In reviewing this literature, I situate my dissertation

among previous scholarship and highlight ways in which this project will build on and contribute to the field. From my analysis of the literature, I identified 3 interrelated aspects, or threads: (1) the values and goals of Latinx students (2) major obstacles and supports for them in the journey, and (3) how they navigate academic spaces fraught with cultural and linguistic erasure. I have organized this literature review by topics relevant to the experience of the transition to college; within each section, these 3 aspects are threaded throughout like a *trenza* (Quiñones 2015).

Models of the college-going process: college *conocimiento*

What factors contribute to students going to college? What does it mean to be "college ready?" What influences support first-generation Latinx students in going to college and how do they make decisions on which post-secondary pathways to pursue? Scholars from more positivist orientations have attempted to pinpoint factors of "college readiness" and conceptualized college choice models (Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Perna 2006) that look broadly at the college-going process, such as societal, institutional, familial, and personal factors that contribute to the post-secondary decision making process. Acevedo-Gil (2017) explains that when applied to Latinx students, these previous models of the college-going process fail to "include nonlinear choices (Bergerson 2009; Cox 2016), consider community college enrollment (Nuñez and Kim 2012; Yosso and Benavides Lopez 2010), and account for social contexts (Rios-Aguilar and Kiyama 2012)" (p. 831). Building on Perna's (2006) model, Acevedo-Gil (2017) creates a framework with 7 nonlinear spaces that draws on Anzaldua's (2002) concept of *conocimiento.* The 7 spaces of college conocimiento are (1) El Arrebato (aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree), (2) Nepantla (searching for college information), (3) Coatlicue (anticipating college obstacles), (4) El Compromiso (planning for and applying to college), (5) Coyolxauhqui (choosing a college), (6) a clash of realities (conflicts

with college), and (7) spiritual activism (self-advocacy and peer support). Acevedo-Gil (2017) describes college *conocimiento* as "a serpentine process where Latinx students reflect on the college information they receive in relation to their intersectional experiences when preparing for college" (p. 834-835). What we learn from the work of Acevedo-Gil (2017) and others who have attempted to conceptualize college-choice models is to eschew notions of typicality that attempt to homogenize the experiences of Latinx students into a linear pathway. This dissertation study provides insights into the experiences of the "serpentine process" (834).

Family involvement

One major factor connected to the experience of going to college is family involvement. Despite narratives of uninvolved, uncaring, or uninformed families who may not be able to help Latinx youth navigate the college going process, the research that follows here has shown how families of Latinx students are involved in preparing for college, in the decision making process, and in helping students persist in college. This research also expands the notion of family involvement beyond White, middle-class, heteronormative conceptualizations of family as limited to parents. Many Latinx immigrant youth travel to the US and stay with relatives, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins or older siblings, and they may be staying with family members they have never met before coming to the US. Knight, Norton, Bentley, and Dixon (2017), for example, use a combination of data collection methods in their one-year critical ethnography of 27 black and Latinx 9th grade youth to look at expanding notions of family involvement in the college going process. Their data entails semi-structured interviews, observations, and youth co-researcher counternarratives. Of note is the way they use a participatory methodology by having the 9th grade students of their study serve as co-researchers, collecting stories from their families about the college process and their views on college. As Knight et. al explain, "Youth co-

researchers constructed and negotiated counterstories of their family's involvement in college-going processes that were often invisible in their urban school" (107). These counter narratives challenge the monolithic and deficit orientations that schools have around Black and Latinx students' family involvement in the college going process.

Once at college, family involvement continues to be a factor that helps first-generation Latinx students transition and persist at college. Marrun (2020) examines the varied ways that Latinx families take part in the lives of their children in college. They explore the *historias familiares* (family stories), *dichos* (proverbs), and *consejos* (advice giving narratives) that were shared to their participants by family members. The participants of this study described how their family held high expectations for them and "communicated the benefits they perceived in having *una carrera* (a career or college education), including having employment stability and a better quality of life" (p.165). Marrun (2020) concludes by offering recommendations for higher education and policy to create more welcoming and affirming spaces for Latinx students and their families. In particular, they call for culturally responsive orientations and programming, increased bilingual Spanish-English communications to families, and "mobile-friendly websites that include bilingual and video/imagery content" (p. 177) to increase entry points for Latinx families to engage in the college experiences of their children. Literature in K-12 contexts more readily calls for inviting and incorporating the knowledges and languages of families in the classroom and school community, such as through funds of knowledge, (Moll et al 1992) than in higher education research. Studies like the work of Marrun (2020) that call for culturally relevant and sustaining practices for families in higher education continue to be limited. As such, this dissertation study contributes to this understudied aspect of the transition to college for first-generation Latinx youth by providing more insight into how their families participate in their

college lives. Through participants' recommendations for educators, this study also contributes to developing strategies or recommendations for integrating Latinx families into college life in ways that feel supportive and beneficial to the students.

Parents of first-generation Latinx college students view college as a way of upward social mobility, and do not want their children to experience the financial hardships they have been through (Kiyama 2010). Another study that looks at the intergenerational educational aspirations of Latinx college graduates is Garcia and Mireles-Rios (2020) work. Garcia and Mireles-Rios (2020) explore the influences their college-educated fathers had on their college and career trajectories. While this work does not address the experiences of first-generation college students, the authors' use of *pláticas* to explore the roles Chicano fathers play in their daughters' college choices offers insight and nuance to the "serpentine process" (Acevedo-Gil 2017, p. 207) of going to college for Latinx youth. Through "intimate and informal conversations" (p. 2060) with their own college-educated fathers, the authors analyze their personal college choices and the influence their fathers had in their post-secondary decisions. They use critical raced-gendered epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 2002) and take up Acevedo-Gil's (2017) aforementioned college-*conocimiento* framework. Research on Latinx families tends to focus on mother-daughter relationships and *consejos* (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994), so Garcia and Mireles-Rios (2020) address a critical gap in the extant college decision making literature through their exploration of the father-child relationship among families of color in college choice and completion.

Garcia and Mireles-Rios (2020) focus on *El Arrebato*, *Nepantla*, and *Coatlicue* from Acevedo-Gil's (2017) model for their analysis of their *pláticas*. One of their takeaways was how "*pláticas* with [their] fathers impacted [their] college choice process, helping [them] develop [their] social justice identities and future selves," (p. 2083). They call for more studies that

examine how “experiences with discrimination and oppression among college-educated families of color (inclusive of mother-daughter, mother-son, father-son relationships) affect college choice processes and how intergenerational cultural knowledge has a direct or vicarious impact on the career trajectories of their children” (p. 2082). Farrington (2018) also explores intergenerational and familial educational resilience through the testimonios of four Latinx brothers who earned advanced degrees. Using a LatCrit theoretical framework, the individual testimonios of the brothers tell stories of overcoming educational obstacles, such as not having college counseling or not having Latinx role models in K-12 schooling, while at the same time sharing their pride in Latinx culture and ethnicity (p. 391) and their parents’ strong commitment to education. Each of the brothers expressed in some way that “it simply was not an option to do anything but succeed in school” (p. 400).

Even when the families of first-generation Latinx college students do not have familiarity with the college application process, as in the case in Farrington (2018), Latinx parents hold high educational aspirations for their children and are active participants in the process. This involvement and influence can also be a source of tension and contradiction that Latinx youth must navigate. In another study that looks at family involvement in the college going process, Hernandez (2015) explores the narratives of 17 “high-achieving Latinas” through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) theoretical perspective, noting how the participants negotiated individual and familial expectations for deciding what college to attend.

Hernandez (2015) finds that there is a tension between finding a financially feasible college option while negotiating how close the student will be to family and that family has a significant influence in the decision making. Participants in this study expressed “the tension of being close enough to maintain family ties but also far enough away to feel independent” as well

as the desire to "[get] your money's worth" (p. 210) by factoring in financial aid packages, affordability, and prestige of universities. From this work we learn about the ways in which Latinx youth are navigating multiple factors such as proximity to family, financial feasibility, and their desire to either go away to college or stay at home.

Villenas and Moreno (2001) also explore the tensions and "the teaching and learning that occurs between mothers and daughters through *consejos* (advice), *cuentos* (stories) and *la experiencia* (experience)" (p. 671). They note that the lessons shared between mother and daughter have "tensions and contradictions yet [are] open with spaces of possibility" (p. 671). The Latinx mothers of the study give contradictory *consejos* to their daughters about the value of being independent, to be able to *valerse por si misma* (to be self-reliant) and being *una mujer de hogar* (a woman of the home) (p. 673). The questions and tensions that the work of both Hernadez (2015) and Villenas and Moreno (2001) bring up leads to a series of further questioning that is relevant to this dissertation and is explored further: how do first-generation Latinx youth negotiate and conceptualize the value of a college degree and what role does family have in decisions about where to attend college? If students choose to go away to college, what decisions brought them to that? How do they navigate tensions around being closer to family, of having responsibilities to support family by contributing to rent and other expenses? What does the "college experience" mean to the participants of my study and what anticipated value (monetary, social and cultural capital, or otherwise) are my participants and their families associating with college?

Immigration status

Figuring out how to pay for college is a major aspect of the college-going process. The process of weighing out the financial feasibility of post-secondary options can be even more

precarious and daunting for students with undocumented immigration status, who navigate elusive sources of financial aid in a changing political terrain around immigration status. Undocumented and DACA-mented students must navigate the gatekeeping mechanisms of White post-secondary institutions amidst the xenophobic, violent, and anti-immigrant climate and discourse (Arredondo, 2018) that has characterized the Trump presidency and that continues post-Trump. Gomez & Pérez Huber (2019) define racist nativism as "a form of racism that has historically targeted Latinx communities based upon real or perceived immigrant status that in turn, assigns a foreign identity that justifies subordinating practices and policies" (Gomez and Pérez Huber 2019 p.1). Racist nativism (Pérez Huber 2018) has increased during the Trump administration. Within the scholarship that explores the experiences of undocumented and DACA-mented Latinx students going to college, the work of LatCrit scholars, like Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel Solórzano, help give language and historical context to racist nativism and the racist nativist microaggressions that manifest in the lived experiences of undocumented and DACA-mented students. In these studies the use of testimonios helps to capture the complexities of the lived experiences and counternarratives that often get overshadowed in discussions around immigration policy.

Introduced under President Barack Obama in June 2012, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) significantly impacts the access to sources of funding for college-going undocumented youth. DACA grants undocumented people who meet eligibility requirements to receive a temporary two-year work authorization and defer deportation removal (U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement 2018 as cited in Gomez & Pérez Huber 2019). In 2017 the Trump administration ordered an end to DACA and no new applicants were processed. Then on June 18, 2020 the Supreme Court blocked the Trump administration's attempt to end DACA so that

now DACA recipients can renew membership and new applications are being processed (Homeland Security: DACA, 2021). While undocumented and DACA-mented students are not eligible for federal financial aid, DACA-mented students may be eligible for private scholarships, state financial aid, and in-state tuition depending on the state. Cebulko and Sliver (2016) look at data collected from longitudinal interviews with DACA students in Massachusetts and North Carolina to examine how federal and state policy interact in ways that either "legitimize or delegitimize their presence" (p. 1554).

The work of Cebulko and Silver (2016) reminds us that there are more DACA-friendly states and institutions of higher education that impact the experiences of undocumented students applying and attending college. For example, in New York, undocumented students can recieve in-state tuition if they have attended a New York high school or graduated from a New York high school. (Senator José Peralta New York State DREAM Act, 2021). The participants of this dissertation study graduated from a New York City high school and were enrolled in colleges and universities in New York. Also particular to the New York context, the New York Dream Act, Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), and Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) are other sources of financial assistance that are not dependent upon documentation status. Currently 17 states offer in-state tuition for undocumented students (Tuition Benefits for Immigrants, 2021). This dissertation sheds light on how students learn and share information about state and institution specific sources of financial aid.

Undocumented and DACA-mented students face unique challenges attributed to their documentation status. Pérez Huber & Cueva, (2012) illuminate how, when racialized as immigrant, both undocumented and US born Latinx students experience the effects of racist nativism; however, in addition to physiological and psychological effects of racial

microaggressions (Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012), DACA-mented and undocumented students' journeys through college are characterized by stress and uncertainty related to documentation. To explore the intersection of race and immigration status as well as the particularity of experiences of Latinx undocumented college going youth, there is a body of research that employs on LatCrit theory and narrative methodologies. Pérez Huber and Gomez (2019), for example, provide insight into the experiences of DACA-mented Latinx youth in college through in-depth interviews with 10 DACA-mented college students. In their testimonios they describe racial incidents and acts of racism they have experienced throughout their lives and specifically while on college campuses. The participants described verbal racial microaggressions, often with university staff. For example, one participant recounts an experience she had with a financial aid administrator when she was inquiring about more financial aid or loans. The financial aid administrator told her that she "should be grateful because people like [her] shouldn't even be getting money in the first place" (p.7) The participants noted how it seemed that the racial incidents increased throughout Trump's candidacy and presidency, as "people felt more comfortable vocalizing their racist nativist beliefs," (p. 7). One thing to consider from this work is how the geographic location of a university and the surrounding political alignments of college towns may impact the level and intensity of anti-immigrant rhetoric that Latinx students face. In historically white college campuses and college towns, there may be heightened anti-immigrant discourse, and at the same time, it is worth noting that even academic spaces that present stronger advocacy measures for undocumented students, the schools and communities are still situated within broader anti-immigration and assimilationist policy and discourse.

The testimonios shared in Pérez Huber and Gomez (2012) also speak to the participants' commitments to activism and resistance work, and Pérez Huber and Gomez (2012) note how

“the participants were determined to create counternarratives of undocumented immigrants by excelling academically and achieving their professional goals” (p. 12). This finding of the desire to create counternarratives through academic and career achievements tied to advocacy is echoed in Pérez Huber’s (2017) work with the testimonios of Chicana undocumented women who “have overcome tremendous barriers to graduate college and become professionals that work with and for immigrant communities” (p. 374). Pérez Huber (2017) explores the *testimonios* of undocumented Chicana/Latina women who graduated college and work as advocates of immigrant communities. Highlighting mestiza consciousness and *convivencia,* Pérez Huber (2017) calls to light the ways in which the Latina women of her study bring their ways of knowing into their professional advocacy work and serve as pedagogies of resistance. Similarly, Perez, Rodríguez, and Guadarrama (2015) document the resources that undocumented college students draw on in their educational trajectories. They explore stories of undocumented college-going youth that center the “pivotal familial, institutional, and community factors that have an impact on their college opportunity and choice.” This particular study contributes to the extant scholarship on undocumented students by looking specifically at the stories of students in community colleges in addition to students at 4-year institutions, as it aims to represent the high percentage of Latinx students in community college.

Pérez Huber and Cueva (2012) explore the educational experiences of Chicana/Latina students and the racist nativist microaggressions they experience in the K-12 context and the impact it has going into their college lives. They interview 20 students, ten of whom were undocumented. Pérez Huber and Cueva (2012) use various conceptual tools of CRT and Chicana feminist scholarship such as “theory in the flesh,” *conocimineto*, and *remolinos* (p.404). The participants describe their transitions into English-dominant spaces causing feelings of academic

inferiority or feeling “not good enough.” For example, one of the participants shares how she went through elementary and public schooling with the label of English Language Learner (ELL) student and didn't feel “smart enough” in her English dominant classes, and this feeling carried into college. When she was rejected from her top choice school, an elite private research university, she blamed herself for not being smart enough. She ended up going to a community college and did not want to apply to other colleges as she anticipated more rejection. This student credits the encouragement of another Latinx counselor who pushed her to apply to other universities. This research centers relationships and the impact that mentors or femtors play in the educational trajectories of Latinx youth.

The work of Kleyn et al (2018) also brings forth the important role of college counselors in secondary contexts. Kleyn et al (2018) looks at testimonios of current and former undocumented students at varying levels of higher education-from undergraduate to doctoral programs-to better understand and draw on strategies of support and resistance. One of the participants of the study recalls the anguish around deciding what to write for her college essay; she wanted to tell her story of living undocumented for her essay but was initially very hesitant to reveal her status. Another participant from the study similarly recounts how the college application process was particularly difficult because, in order to achieve her parents' dream for her of attending a college in the US, she had to expose her documentation status to college counselors in her school. She describes feeling crushed after being told by a high school counselor to find out about the process for applying to college without a Social Security number on her own and to report back when she figured it out. As Klein et al (2018) highlight from this particular testimonio, “Counselors can be gatekeepers to the futures of undocumented immigrants, especially in the absence of families that can help them navigate the challenging

college application process" (p.38). This research helps us consider implications for educators to support undocumented youth applying to college in secondary and higher education spaces. This study also speaks to the role that high schools play in supporting the transition to college by looking into lived experiences of students throughout their transition to college. Rather than looking at "college pipelines" in terms of merely providing access into college prep programs and colleges, the work of Kleyn et al (2018) supports the need to further look at how students are experiencing college prep programs and their actual transitions to college.

Undocumented students have the right to a free K–12 public education in the US through the Plyler v. Doe ruling of 1982, but this does not extend to college. Financial supports for higher education and policies that impact undocumented students vary at the state-level. Thus, the qualitative studies described here call attention to an overall need for high school and college educators to have an awareness of the ways in which policy, race, and immigration status impact the experiences of Latinx college going youth. This body of research also demonstrates why a LatCrit framework is necessary to understand the racialization of immigration status and policies that are based in institutional structures of white supremacy and xenophobia. Of particular relevance to this dissertation is how, regardless of documentation status, students may be experiencing racist nativist microaggressions throughout the application process and college.

Supports at the high school level

There are well documented gatekeeping mechanisms at the high school level that Latinx students navigate. Standardized high school exit exams, for example, and college entrance exams like the SAT, privilege literacy in academic English. Second language acquisition has pointed to how it can take between 3–7 years to be fluent in a second language (August & Hakuta, 1997; García & Wiese, 2002), and recently arrived bilingual students are expected to

pass these exams in less time. Solorzano & Ornelas (2002) have looked at the racist and discriminatory practices that impact Latinx students enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. They note that AP courses have been linked to points for college admissions and associated with higher academic expectations by teachers, but at the same time, the curricula promulgates and privileges a White, Western canon and representation of history. Thus, it is important to understand how Latinx students work within and against these assessments that privilege White and western forms of literacy in order to gain access to college. What do first-generation Latinx youth do at the secondary level that prepares them (or not) in college and career pathways?

Marciano (2017) explores how and why youth interact with their peers in the college-going process, and how they use new media literacy practices with peers in the college-going process. Marciano (2017) finds that youth engage in reciprocal relationships with their peers to encourage and share information. Marciano (2017) points out that these reciprocal relationships are forged "outside of the confines of college preparatory programs, where much research about the influence of peer groups on college readiness and access of Black and Latina/o youth is situated" (p. 179) and as such, this research emphasizes the need to look at experiences outside of school spaces and recognize that learning about college happens outside of college and career readiness programming. This study also highlights new media literacies such as texting and Facebook as ways that students engage in discussions around applying and enrolling in college. Thus, an implication for this present dissertation is that Marciano (2017) encourages researchers to expand the artifacts of data collection, such as social media, as mediators to students' experiences of going to college.

From the research that incorporates narrative methodologies at the high school level in relation to the college-going process, we can also see the importance of opening spaces for students to share their stories, spaces of shared vulnerability, and counter-storytelling. Fernandez (2002) draws on LatCrit and Critical Race Theory to understand the experience of a Latino student in a Chicago public high school. She uses these frameworks because they "prioritize the social categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality and recognize them not only as social constructions but also as categories that have material effects on real people" (p. 46). As a starting point for her study, she emphasizes the importance of viewing students as knowledge holders and hearing what they have to say about issues in education, as she asks, "What gets left out, then, if we do not hear students' voices?" (p. 45). Pablo, the student of focus in her narrative research, describes how he did not feel challenged and how teachers set lower expectations for him in ESL classes so that he was not adequately prepared for college writing courses his freshman year. He expresses frustration at the deficit views his teachers had of him in high school.

Another important influence at the high school level on first-generation Latinx college students noted in the literature is the impact of having Latina/Chicana mentors to guide first-generation Latinx students throughout the post-secondary decision making process and of having mentors that demonstrate an ethic of care. Garcia, Woodley, Flores, and Chu (2012) describe transcaring strategies (translanguaging, transculturación, trans collaboration, and transactions) in what they consider successful models of New York City public high schools that serve a majority of bilingual students. Transcaring is a "culture of care that allows for the creation of third spaces within school, transcending traditional dichotomies around language, culture, place, and measurement found in many US schools," (p.798). Hoon (2013) also highlights the role

of educators who practice care toward Latinx students; in a meta-study that included testimonios of Latina/Chicana educators and students they found embodied caring pedagogies that fostered a sense of belonging for Latinx students. Overall this body of narrative research which highlights experiences in high school brings forth and centers the reciprocal relationships and care that are at the base of this proposed dissertation.

Navigating college spaces fraught with cultural and linguistic erasure

Another significant topic explored in the literature on Latinx first-generation students in their first year at college centers on the spaces and ways in which Latinx students fight against cultural, linguistic, and experiential erasure. The cultural and experiential knowledge that Latinx students are devalued and subjugated by white middle-class values (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018). Clemons (2016) reveals how even the systems in place purported to support first-generation Latina students in their transition to college uphold deficit orientations towards Latinx students. Using the "life history method," Clemons (2016) looks at the influence of social capital on Camilla, a first year college student who had emigrated to the US in her first year of high school. Camilla's narrative is interspersed with Clemon's analysis through the theoretical lens of Bourdien social capital. Camilla narrates her experiences and the moments she deems significant throughout the timeline of her life, from childhood up to her first year in college. Clemons (2016) concludes that "[Camilla's] story illustrates the massive cultural and structural inequities that students encounter" and that her anecdotes from her last year of high school and first year in college emphasize "the potential negative effects of social capital, even when a student accesses dominant networks" (p. 2063-2064). Kolluri (2020) looks at the transition from high school to college of 12 Latinx students through interviews and observations and creates the term "patchwork capital" (p. 3) to describe the "piecemeal approach" that low income Latinx students

use of applying “dominant and non-dominant cultural resources” (p.3) and cultural capital. Kolluri brings up academic readiness, faculty interactions and racial campus climate as major obstacles for Latinx students in their first year of college.

Flores and Garcia (2009) reflect on the positive effects of a “Latin space,” and the testimonios shared in that space in predominantly White institutions in order to combat erasure and isolation. Through testimonios, Flores and Garcia (2009) describe an organization they established for Latinas at the PWI, the process of starting the organization, the significance of the space to the participants, and they also reflect on some of the tensions around what is shared and what is left undiscussed in these spaces. The tensions, they point out, are generative and lead to new understandings and further questions to be explored around *Latinidades* (p. 167).

Using the concept of mestiza consciousness, “the way a student balances, negotiates, and draws from her biculturalism, bilingualism, commitment to communities, and spiritualities in relationship to her education” (p. 623), Delgado Bernal (2001) explores the “pedagogies of the home” of Chicanas college students. Through interviews with 30 Chicana college students, Delgado Bernal investigates how Chicanas navigate, survive, and succeed in an educational system that often silences and erases their experiences. The interviews evidence how Chicanas negotiate their own resistance, identities, and culture. Moreover, the participants in Delgado Bernal’s study show a commitment to community and to their families. They spoke of their desire to give back and as “they are the first to go to college, they are the role models for their families and communities and are the example for younger siblings” (p.632).

Conclusion

Based on my review of the literature, I now detail how this study builds on and adds to the growing body of work that centers and amplifies the voices and experiences of Latinx youth

in the transition from high school to college. Methodologically, this study builds on the affordances of pláticas and testimonios to help researchers and educators to understand structural inequalities and the ways in which Latinx youth navigate systems of oppression as part of the college transition.

To begin, this study is unique in terms of its participants, Latinx youth hailing from the DR, Guatemala, and Mexico, who arrived in the US within the past 8 years, attended a NYC public school as an English Language Learner (ELL), and received ESL support while in high school. The participants in this study also participated in various college and career initiatives in their high school, such as "AP for All." In my review of the literature, particularly of studies that take up testimonios and pláticas, I found there were more testimonios of Chicanos from the West coast than from the East coast and even more limited studies on the NYC context. Given the large number of Latinx immigrants in NYC from countries around Latin America, this dissertation adds to the plurality of Latinx youth voices with regards to the college transition. The participants of this study were at different stages of attending college, so this study also showcases nuanced and multivariate experiences in postsecondary education. Furthermore, this study took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which impacted the educational experiences of all the participants, as they in one way or another, took up remote learning. The impact of remote learning on first-generation Latinx students has yet to be studied in detail.

Much of the literature on first-generation Latinx students in their first years in college does not account for the experience of learning English as an additional language as well as the labels of ELL and taking English proficiency tests at the college level. When the students in this study entered NYC public schools they were considered newcomer or beginner ELLs. By their senior year of high school some participants were considered former ELLs, and some still

receiving ESL services. As recently arrived immigrants, they have gone through the double transition of moving from their home country to the US, transitioning to high school, and then the transition to college, all within a shortened time frame. Furthermore, the participants were enrolled in a high school for bilingual students, which in some ways was a culturally affirming space, as they had teachers and staff of their same cultural and linguistic background, were in a bilingual program that supports their native language, and were with peers from their culture and in a school of all immigrants. Some of the participants of this study are now attending Historically White Institutions (HWI), that are not culturally affirming but rather in areas that are culturally marginalizing, as they enter rural White neighborhoods in a Trump and post-Trump era where there are xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiments, discourse, and actions. These details are important because they present other contexts than the ones featured in the literature. These particularities were not visible within the current literature.

In summary, what I contribute to the field through this dissertation are stories from Latinx youth that show their nuanced lived experiences navigating new spaces and navigating systems of oppression. These stories are necessary because they add meaning to the numbers, they show us how students are experiencing the support that educators try to provide for recently arrived immigrant youth who are trying to figure out post-secondary options. They show stories of living, working, going to school during a double pandemic- COVID-19 and systemic racism.

Chapter 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is informed by a Chicana Feminist epistemology, as I take up pláticas as methodology. It is a reflection of my research commitments and views on the research process, knowledge, and knowing. In alignment with Chicana Feminism, I see research as a collaborative and co-constructive process. As Delgado Bernal (2002) explains, "Participants are viewed as contributors and co-constructors of the meaning making process. Whether the researcher has a long significant relationship with the contributors, or the relationship is new, it is grounded in *respeto* for the contributor as a holder and creator of knowledge" (p.111). My methodological approach rejects a one-sided interview/interviewee dynamic. Instead, a Chicana Feminist and pláticas methodology centers reciprocity and shared vulnerability of the participants and researcher. Throughout the research process, I shared information, engaged in meaning making, and was learning and (un)learning, alongside my participants. Given my aim to open spaces to allow for marginalized voices, stories, and experiences to be amplified and centered, my research questions, methodological tools, and approach to data collection and analysis were assembled to support this goal.

Research questions

The overarching research question that guides this inquiry is: How do first generation Latinx bilingual students experience the transition from high school to college? In addressing this question, the following sub-questions are also explored: (1) How do they navigate cultural and linguistic expectations in the transition to college? and (2) How do they describe their experiences in high school college preparation and their experiences in college?

Research Design

In this qualitative research study, I employ methodological tools that align with a Chicana feminist epistemology, specifically pláticas as methodology and method, in order to explore the nuanced experiences of my participants in the transition to college.

Pláticas as methodology and method

Pláticas are informal conversations in which trust between participants and the researcher is foregrounded and in which the entirety of the conversation, the discursive twists and turns a conversation may take, are recognized as data. Unlike a structured or semi-structured interview, in which questions are prepared by an interviewer and answered by the interviewee, platicas are fluid, informal, and conversational; questions are generated over the course of the conversation, guided by the research questions, and the researcher follows the participant down what comes up in the plática. Fierros (2017) explains, "a researcher's interests and themes guide the plática, which allows the contributor to discuss those topics that matter for them, and which pertain to the research themes." (p. 72-72). They take place in one-on-one or group settings and are a "way to gather family and cultural knowledge through communication of thoughts, memories, ambiguities, and new interpretations" (Fierros & Bernal 2016, p. 647).

Pláticas are both a method and methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal 2016). Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) review the shift in research from pláticas as method to pláticas as a Chicana/Feminist methodological praxis. They then outline five principles of a pláticas methodology:

1. Pláticas draw on Chicana/Latina feminist theory and is "often woven together with other critical theories that center the experiences of marginalized individuals

and draw attention to the multiple ways systems of oppression effect the daily navigations of some people, to the benefit of privileged others" (p.109).

2. Pláticas centers the relational aspect of research and recognizes participants as co-constructors of knowledge.
3. A pláticas methodology views lived experiences as a related part of the research inquiry, recognizing the intertwining nature of our daily lives and identities. (p.112).
4. The use of pláticas can potentially create a space for healing and catharsis, as "pláticas flow from past stories of pain and trauma, current negotiations, and future hopes" (p.114).
5. Pláticas centers reciprocity, reflexivity, and trust through an exchange of "raw openness and vulnerability" between the researcher and contributor (p.114).

My research design is aligned with Fierros and Delgado Bernal's (2016) principles of a plática methodology. In reading and learning about a pláticas methodology, I was drawn to the fluidity of exchange between contributor and researcher, the centering of relationship, reflexivity, trust, and shared vulnerability in the research process, and the commitment to calling out White, patriarchal, heteronormative systems of oppression.

Because of my positionality as a former teacher of my participants, and the positionalities of my participants, of particular importance to the methodology of this study was the intentional centering of relationship, reflexivity, trust, shared vulnerability. Using a pláticas methodology recognized the relationships I had with my participants as strengths, and valued that these relationships would be developed over the course of my dissertation work. Rather than a formal, semi-structured interview, with a question/answer dynamic where there is limited to no

engagement between questions, a pláticas methodology supported the fluid and conversational dynamic of our sessions; a pláticas methodology allowed for us to veer off topic, share side-stories, and reminisce about memories from the past. Whereas the formality of semi-structured interviews with a question/answer dynamic would have limited the depth and vulnerability of the exchanges, pláticas felt natural and honored the relationship we had already going into the project.

Testimonios

Through pláticas, testimonios emerged from some of the participants of this study. While there is no single fixed definition of testimonio as methodology in the literature (Perez Huber 2009), there are generally recognized elements of testimonio. Testimonios are typically considered to be life stories told by a person from a marginalized group to someone who records, transcribes, and disseminates it to bring attention to and challange injustices (Perez Huber 2009; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Prieto & Villenas, 2012). They tell individual stories within collective histories of oppression, struggle, and erasure (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Testimonios originate from Latin America and Latin American studies (Booker 2002). Testimonios are political and intentional. They have been called "narraciónes de urgencia" (urgent narratives) (Jara & Vidal 1986) because of their aim to bring awareness to oppressions and marginalized knowledges and call for transformation (Perez Huber 2009; Saavedra 2011).

Testimonios can be stories of resistance, agency, healing, and resilience. They tell stories of lived experiences navigating systems of oppression and challenge dominant narratives. As such, testimonios have been used to tell counterstories from marginalized voices (Bernal et al., 2012; Cruz, 2012; Prieto & Villenas, 2012). Delgado Bernal et al. (2012) explain,

"Methodologically, testimonios reclaim authority to narrate and disentangle questions concerning legitimate truth" (p. 365). Through the telling of lived experiences, testimonios challenge the notion of objectivity "by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance" (Delgado Bernal 2012, p.363). The testimonios shared by some of my participants are related to their educational journeys marked by marginalization, resistance, and agency. They share individual narratives located in collective experiences of structural inequalities and are (re)presented in Chapter 4.

Participants

I now articulate the criteria for selection of my participants. My criteria for selection aimed to highlight a range of experiences and the particularity of those experiences. I had 4 participants, all former students of mine, who came to the country in high school and had the label of "English Language Learner," which meant they had received ESL/English as a New Language (ENL) services during their high school career. They were at various years in their college program at the time of data collection. I sought to represent a range of levels of degree completion in college (from freshman to senior year), as well as participants hailing from a variety of countries in Latin America, and attending a variety of schools in New York.

Table 1

Profile of study participants

Name	Country of Origin	Starting __ year in college at the start of data collection	College
Claudia	Dominican Republic	3rd year	Mid-size public state

			university in suburban New York
Estrella	Mexico	4th year	Large urban public university
Yessi	Dominican Republic	2nd year	Large urban public university; Small, private urban technical school
Cecilia	Guatemala	1st year	Large urban public university

The reason I wanted participants from a range of countries was driven by the findings in my review of the literature in Chapter 2, which pointed to the need to contribute to highlighting a multiplicity of experiences from students from various Latinx backgrounds, to further challenge the dominant, homogenizing view of college going Latinx students. In addition, I sought participants that represented a variety of levels of completion towards a college degree particularly to explore perspectives and experiences throughout the college transition trajectory. Given the unique time that this study took place, participants were already enrolled in or had entered college during the COVID-19 pandemic. A participant in their first year at college had the experience of applying to and attending college during the pandemic, while a participant in their second or third year of college experienced college pre-pandemic as well as during the transition to remote or hybrid learning. This study contributes to adding to the extant scholarship

on the college transition by looking at the nuanced experiences of first generation Latinx students during the pandemic. These experiences gave insight into questions around navigating housing, technology, and how they perceive the pandemic had or had not impacted their educational trajectories.

Another significant criteria for participant selection in this study was that all participants had participated in some form of college and career readiness programs supported by the NYC Department of Education, which in this study were AP for All, school sponsored college visits, and NYU's College Advising Corp. As established, the aim of college and career readiness programs is to increase access for students from minoritized groups in NYC high schools to college preparation programs and rigorous curriculum. The reason this was a significant criterion for participant selection was because oftentimes access to college and career readiness programs is seen as synonymous with equity. Without looking into the experiences of those impacted by college access initiatives, educators are limited in their ability to understand the effectiveness of these programs. Given my positionality as the former ESL, English, and/or AP teacher of my participants, I was particularly interested in looking at the experiences of my former students, to see, now with time and distance from the class, what stood out for them and their perceptions of how it may (or may not) have impacted their educational pathways.

Also, I sought participants who were first generation Latinx college students. Participants may have had parents who attended universities in their home country; however, they were the first in their family to attend college or university in the US.

Pilot study

This present dissertation study builds on my pilot study which was conducted throughout the Fall semester of 2019. For my pilot study I explored the experiences of a first generation Latinx bilingual student in their transition from high school to college through testimonios. My research participant, Odalis, was one of my former students from the Dominican Republic. At the time of the study, she had been living in the US for 6 years and was in her first semester at a small private college in a suburban area located outside of NYC.

I conducted 3 semi-structured interviews of at least 90 minutes in duration to elicit testimonios. The first 2 interviews were conducted through FaceTime, recorded, and transcribed. For the in-person interview, Odalis took me around campus, showed me her dorm, the places she hangs out, and we had dinner with one of her new friends, another first generation Latinx student she had met through a program that served first generation college students. After dinner, I conducted the third semi-structured interview, which was recorded and transcribed. In the third interview we began to brainstorm and co-construct recommendations for educators and researchers to support the transition from high school to college. To analyze the transcription data I broke the interviews into smaller chunks based on categories related to my research questions. In my pilot study, these categories were (1) identity, (2) agency, and (3) college experience. I then developed themes which I shared with Odalis as well as the evolving paper I was writing for a graduate level class via a Google Doc that Odalis could add to and edit. I asked Odalis to see if there was anything that she wanted to add, change, or take out in her testimonios and in the analysis. We then continued to collaborate on a Google doc to write up the findings and recommendations section. After writing the paper with Odalis's testimonios,

themes, and recommendations for educators, we dedicated the paper to her mother and presented it to her on her mother's birthday.

From the pilot study I learned various things that have resulted in minor but significant changes to my research design. First, the pilot study caused me to reconceptualize and broaden my understanding of "data." I learned that there may be other multimodal artifacts that can help me gather testimonios such as photos, collage, drawings, music, videos, poems, or journals, as well as social media posts. I needed to be attuned to what my participants wanted to share or what they suggested as useful tools to help share their stories. For example, in our first Facetime interview, while showing her dorm setup, Odalis showed me posters with inspirational quotes and photos she had chosen to adorn the walls near her bed, and she described what those images meant to her. The description of these images and posters on her wall and the narration of her decision-making process around what to hang up are all valuable sources of data (although I did not include this at the time of my pilot), as these data sources can give insight into aspects of her identity, culture, and family. Also, throughout the pilot study, Odalis used Instagram to post Insta-stories. Insta-stories is a feature that allows users to post images and short videos that disappear after 24 hours. Users tell stories through images and short videos and viewers can see a day in the life of that person. Odalis documented moments on campus, social events, and re-shared motivational quotes and news. I would often comment or like the stories and we would check in with each other through the messenger feature of Instagram. This multimodal form could be a source of testimonios for the digital age. Learning from my pilot, an additional step I took in data collection was that I asked participants what materials or artifacts, if any, they would like to include to facilitate their stories.

Another take away from my pilot study that impacted the shape of my research design was that it led me to pláticas as a methodological tool. At the time of the pilot study, I was only using testimonios as methodology through semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. What I found is that, because of the relationship already established with my participant of the pilot (and with the participants of this study), as a former teacher, the ways in which we communicated demonstrated a natural back and forth exchange as is characteristic of people who have known each other for a long time. I found in my pilot study that it was actually constricting to try to stick to a semi-structured interview format. In my pilot, what started out as a plan to collect the testimonio of my participant was actually a fluid and dynamic process that exhibited the form and commitments of platicas. We spent time checking in with each other, I gave a quick Facetime tour of my new apartment in Queens, Odalis gave me a tour of her new dorm room and how she had decorated. Amidst the planned interview questions, we often veered to talk about boyfriends past and present, healing from relationships, friendships, and the excitement of the cafeteria. For these reasons, a pláticas methodology was more appropriate for this dissertation.

When I started interviewing Odalis for my pilot study, I anticipated I would learn more about the experiences of Odalis in college, the supports that were helpful or things that led her to success as a first generation Latinx in college. Indeed, through our conversations and our co-creation of recommendations for educators, I gained insight into possible support for bilingual students making the transition to college and considerations for educators at the secondary and college level. However, one of the most valuable aspects of this research was deepening my relationship with Odalis. My dissertation is conceived and carried out from a place of deep care and admiration for my research participants, a desire to check in with them and reconnect, to

learn from and with them as they share their stories and experiences. One of my commitments as a scholar is to engage in education research that views "human relationships as ends in themselves rather than an instrumental means to an end" (Campano and Ghiso, 2016). These relationships are necessary for rigorous and ethical research practices.

Data collection

Pláticas call for open exchange, being comfortable with things not going as planned, and acknowledging that the data collection process can never be fully anticipated. As I collected data, I was attentive to and guided by the tools for data collection my participants brought forth. I was also flexible and open to (re)considering tools for data collection, thinking about the impact my methods had on the communit(ies) with which I was working. While holding on to the flexibility and fluidity that comes with a Chicana Feminisit epistemological and methodological orientation, I now delineate my research design and research activities that were used to address my research questions.

Artifacts of data collection

Artifacts that were collected during my phases of research activities included audio recordings and transcriptions of all pláticas, as well as photos, video, drawings, songs, course papers/assignments, Instagram posts, and saved insta-stories that were shared during our pláticas by the participants.

Data collection involved 3 sessions of individual pláticas for each participant and a fourth session for a group plática. These sessions of data collection took place over the Spring and Summer semester of the 2021-2022 academic school year. In session 1 of data collection, I used pláticas to catch up with the participants and to start talking about their experiences in college. In session 2, I used pláticas with more targeted questions related to my research questions. In

session 3, I used "walking pláticas" where I walked with the participant [in person or virtually] through their campus and/or other spaces that were significant to the participant. Lastly, in session 4, I used a group plática where participants came together to share their experiences about their time in college and about the research process in general with each other. At this group plática, participants shared their testimonios or other artifacts from the research project to the group and made suggestions for educators supporting first generation Latinx students making the transition to college. I now delineate more specifically what these sessions of pláticas looked like.

Session 1: Platicas and catching up

Because my participants were former students, I had had a relationship with previously but had not spoken to in a while, the first plática was mostly to catch up, to (re)get to know each other more, and to begin talking about experiences in college. This included sharing basic information, talking about home and school life, and engaging in conversation. I invited each participant to share stories in whatever way or medium the person felt comfortable. For example, they could tell their stories, experiences, or any information that they wanted to share through talking; but they could also share their stories through images, songs, collages, or artifacts that they cherished as telling of their experiences. For example, one participant shared a song they listened to frequently in their first semester of college that helped them get through difficult times. Another participant shared photos and quotes they had saved on Insta-stories throughout the past year. Another participant shared titles of books and a term paper from a course that had challenged and changed her thinking.

Session 2: Pláticas—Exploring the transition to college

In the subsequent session of pláticas, I transitioned to questions that were more directly connected to the focus of my research. I asked participants more in-depth questions that got at the experience of the transition to college, as well as negotiating cultural expectations. With some participants, these pláticas elicited testimonios. I asked questions related to experiences in college taken and adapted from Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) study of first generation women in the academy (Appendix A) . These questions aimed at bringing forward the experiences of the participants in their first days of college, some of their most pleasurable or memorable experiences, tensions between the culture of their upbringing and culture of college, and if college was what they expected.

It is important to note that these questions were not asked in a set order; rather, I took up Riessman's (2008) advice of "following participants down their trails" (p. 24).
I prepared questions before the interview that I would like to ask but respected the dialogic, non-linear nature of the plática. Furthermore, in conducting my pláticas, I also held to what Reissman (2008) said around narrative methods, that "[i]f we want to learn about an experience in all its complexity, details count. These details include incidents and turning points, not simply general evaluations" (p.23-24). While I had a set of questions I wanted to ask my participants, I was reminded that "[t]he specific wording of a question is less important than the interviewer's emotional attentiveness and engagement and the degree of reciprocity in the conversation" (p.26). In this phase of data collection, I aimed to capture the life stories and experiences in high school and college; these could be shared as testimonios. Again, I asked participants in this phase of data collection what tools for data collection they thought would facilitate telling their stories or would facilitate the sharing of their experiences.

After each individual plática, I transcribed the Zoom recording, read the transcript of the plática, and generated additional questions based on themes that came up in that plática. I shared excerpts of the transcription from the session back with the participant in the subsequent plática for their feedback, asking probing and clarifying questions such as, "In the stories you told me, are there ones that we should look at and discuss together? Is there something missing?"

Session 3: Walking pláticas

For the third individual pláticas–walking pláticas– I toured a space (or spaces) that were significant to the participant. These walking pláticas took place in a variety of ways. I asked my participants if they felt comfortable to meet individually in person on campus or in a setting of their choice for a tour of the space or "walking plática." I also proposed alternatives to meeting in person such as a virtual tour of their campus or significant places via FaceTime or Zoom or by sharing pictures, video, or descriptions of spaces that were important to them on campus. Examples of spaces could be a dorm room, study area, community space, building, cafeteria, or outdoor school space.

A meaningful and significant aspect of my pilot study design that I wanted to maintain for this dissertation was the connection to place and space. In my pilot, for the third interview my participant gave me a tour around her campus. She introduced me to her new friends; we went to a campus museum she had been wanting to go to but was nervous to go to alone; she showed me her dorm, the common area, her favorite places to study in the library, and the college grounds that she said made her feel like she was in a movie. We also went to the cafeteria and met with a friend. The stories that came out from these places were all useful insight into her experiences in college.

My use of a walking plática stems from Pink's (2008) work with urban tours which she describes as "'shared' walking, eating, drinking, imagining, photographing, and audio- and video-recording, alongside and with research participants" (p. 175). To conceptualize urban tours, Pink (2008) describes her ethnographic research in an urban tour of Mold, in which the participants showed her around town and stopped for coffees and pictures. They used photography, walking, and eating as "ways of ethnographic knowing" (p. 183). Places hold experiences, memories, and conjure thoughts and language. Pink (2008) explains that a reflexive attention to the experiences of walking and eating, to how people walk and create routes in urban contexts, and to how they themselves reflect on these practices "invites new understandings of other people's ways of being and knowing" (p.180-181). What is salient from Pink's (2008) work with urban tours is that it reminds us of how, through their embodied experiences, people imagine and remember. For these reasons, touring a space or spaces that are significant to the participants was an important feature of my data collection design.

I met 3 of my participants in person for a walking plática on their respective campuses, and one participant did a virtual walking plática on their campus, where they shared stories and pictures of spaces on campus. I did not video record the spaces from the walking pláticas to ensure the privacy of participants and other people who may have been in the background. During each individual walking plática, I asked questions about the space and what it brought up. In this session of data collection, I was able to get a sense of spaces and places that were important to the participants, as well as the experiences that were tied to place.

In addition to the individual proposed/planned walking pláticas, I met with each of my participants at least once more over their summer break and invited them to dinner or lunch. Though I hadn't initially planned these meet ups in my data collection, they were important to

add and note here, as a small way for me to show my gratitude to my participants for their time. Having dinner/lunch was also a way to remain connected outside of the research and share more stories and experiences with each other.

Session 4: Group plática

In the last phase of data collection, participants came together to talk about their experiences in college and their experiences of the pláticas; they reflected on preliminary themes from the data, and recommendations they would give to educators to support the transition to college. The group plática took place in the fall 2022-2023 semester on Zoom after all individual pláticas had been conducted, transcribed, coded, categorized, and after I had developed initial themes. I reproduced on a Google doc quotes from the individual pláticas, with names and identifying information removed, as well as some of my preliminary themes and thoughts. I had participants first write and reflect on these excerpts and what it was bringing up. We then engaged in dialogue around the themes, if they were the themes they would use to categorize this data, and if there were other things that came up. Lastly, we collectively worked on recommendations for educators and actions that they were already doing or were planning to do to support other students with the college transition.

Subini Annamma, in a class discussion at Teachers College in Spring 2021 shared her experiences doing DisCRT research and cautioned against doing “drive through ethnographic research” that does more harm than good to minoritized communities; researchers who are doing “drive through” research enter a community using critical narrative or ethnographic frameworks, get the data they need, and then leave and do not return to the relationships they had initially forged for data collection. Given the extended time between the individual pláticas and the group plática, the group plática offered an opportunity for the participants and researcher to reconnect.

Going beyond member checking, we were able to learn from and with each other again after some time had passed. Some of the participants already knew each other or knew of each other, as they had all attended the same high school within the span of 4 years. Given these relationships, the group plática was a time to share, celebrate, reflect, and commemorate experiences. We planned to meet again around the time of the participants' college breaks and stay in contact.

Data analysis

In alignment with the qualities of qualitative research, data analysis happened throughout data collection; it was iterative, ongoing, and continued after collection. It also involved a collaborative process in which data was shared with participants for their feedback and input. I now outline my data analysis process.

To begin, I audio and video recorded each individual plática on Zoom, which I then transcribed. I conducted an initial/open coding of the data by reading the transcriptions of pláticas line by line and assigning a word or short phrase to represent a salient and/or evocative attribute to selections of the data (Saldana, 2013). In my initial coding of the data, I noted salient topics related to my research questions, as well as codes that did not connect to the research question because, from a Chicana Feminist epistemology, the entire exchange of the plática is valued and seen as data. While coding, I also began to notice commonalities and tensions within and across the pláticas.

After my initial/open-coding of the individual pláticas, I then did an axial coding of the data to look for common threads across the pláticas. I organized the codes into categories (Bogdin & Bilkin, 2007; Charmaz, 2014; Cresswell, 2014) and broke the transcriptions into smaller chunks based on those categories which I sorted based on category. I then re-read and

analyzed these chunks of text more in-depth, holding in mind the scholarship of my literature review, my theoretical framework, and research questions, in order to develop emerging themes that addressed my research questions.

As Bogdin & Bilken (2007) describe "Analysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns." (p. 159) "Data" in this project was conceived of to be any artifacts that come out of the research process guided by the research questions. As noted, these artifacts included but were not limited to transcripts of pláticas, my analytic journal, photos, music, a journey map, and course papers. I did several readings of the pláticas to narrow down three themes I found most salient. In alignment with theoretical and methodological considerations for humanizing research, I confirmed with participants that these themes captured what they deemed critical (Souto-Manning, 2014) through the group plática and a shared Google Doc, which I now describe in more detail.

Inspired by Perez Huber's (2009) three-phase data analysis process of testimonios, I included a collaborative phase of data analysis with my participants which was embedded in the group plática, as mentioned before. In this phase, participants were invited to collaborate on the analysis of data. After analyzing the data myself and coming up with preliminary themes, in the group plática, I created a shared Google Doc that had the themes and participant quotes. Participants were invited to make notes on these quotes and themes, what was coming up as they read them, as well as if they agreed, disagreed, or would add to or change the themes. I then read excerpts of quotes from the transcriptions of pláticas (with names left off), I shared themes that I thought these selections highlighted, and asked participants how they interpreted them. I asked if there were any stories we should return to, if anything was missing, or if anything else needed to

be attended to in the transcripts and analysis. In this final phase of data collection, as mentioned, participants were also invited to share their testimonios, talk about their experiences in college and reflect back on their experiences in high school. From this group plática, we then co-created recommendations for educators.

The collaborative aspect of my data analysis was essential in order to address the issue of (mis)interpreting student voices. Traditional methodological approaches to data analysis would not have captured the complexity and power of my participants' experiences, which we discussed and analyzed together.

Researcher Positionality

As Fierros and Bernal (2016) explain, "Adopting a Chicana/Latina feminist perspective in educational research is more than just adopting a theoretical lens, becoming familiar with a literature, learning corresponding methods, and analyzing data. It embodies who we are and requires us to grapple with our activist-scholar role, embrace alternative ways of knowing, and confront those aspects of ourselves that render us the colonized or the perpetrator, particularly if we are working with marginalized communities" (p. 102).

To think more on my positionality, as I was documenting the experiences of a group to which I did not belong, I needed to continuously be reflecting on how or if this work was perpetuating the power dynamics of domination/subjugation that I was trying to disrupt. I needed to be attentive to the issue of "giving voice" and the issues of representation. As Hinterberger (2005) puts it, "transforming power relations and improving the material conditions of people's lives is complicated by the contradictory and difficult problems of representing the subjectivities and identities of 'others'" (Hinterberger, 2005, p. 74).

One of the ways I attended to the issue of interpreting and (mis)representing was to invite my participants to collaborate in analyzing emerging themes from their pláticas and testimonios, as previously detailed, where we collaborated on the findings and possible recommendations for educators. Furthermore, I continued to recognize that I was an outsider to someone's lived experiences and was mindful that, as a former teacher to my participants, I held a position of power as a teacher, where they may seek approval or want to please me by participating. While there were affordances of already having a relationship with my participants, there were also reflexive challenges that came with my positionality as a teacher.

One of these challenges was that I had to attend to being a listener and manage my impulse to be an advocate. Often in my role as teacher I have helped students to apply to college, written letters of recommendation, or helped students navigate paperwork in the application process. In my pilot study for example, when my participant Odalis told me about a professor who was giving her attitude because Odalis had challenged and corrected her on a math problem. Odalis explained that she felt unsure of herself and was staying quiet and not participating. I quickly jumped to being a problem solver. 'Could she go to office hours? She shouldn't let that stop her from participating! Was there someone she could talk to about this on campus?' My teacher- impulse to fix or advocate kicked into gear. As I collected data for this dissertation, I would take notice of when these feelings arose in me and journal about it, naming the feeling, and pausing before offering immediate suggestions that may limit or prevent further discussion from unfolding.

Validity and Limitations

Given that this work seeks to explore the particularity of experiences, possible limitations that come up are around issues of interpretation and relationality. One possible limitation to the

study is that, in recording the experiences and testimonios of others, and inductively producing findings, the findings and construction of the pláticas and testimonio are interpretative, and are structured and presented by the researcher to a larger audience. In this way this dissertation as a whole becomes a narrative or text. In order to continue to attend to issues of representing the stories of others, participants were invited to collaborate in analyzing themes and selections from pláticas and testimonios. I positioned myself as a co-researcher with my participants, not an "expert" that would interpret their experiences.

Moreover, an issue of validity that comes up in this type of research is that my presence and interaction with the participants inevitably impacts the way a story is told, (Sommer, 1995); as such, I was attentive to my influence over the stories that are being told and how my positionality as a former teacher was impacting the narratives as well as the experience of participating in the pláticas. In addition to the collaborative phase of data-analysis in the group plática structure, data analysis also happened throughout the research process, as I would start each individual plática by sharing excerpts of the transcriptions back with the participants; I asked them if there were stories we should look at and discuss more, or if there were things that were missing or needed to be revisited. As such this research engages in member checking (Creswell 2007) as it invites participants to view and assess the credibility and accuracy of the data and findings presented.

I also wanted to be attentive to not putting a burden on my participants, making sure that my participants were not doing the interviews to please a former teacher. I did not want to take advantage of the relationships I have with my participants. To be respectful of their time and commitment to the project, I worked around the schedules of my participants and was very open and flexible for changes based on things that came up throughout the semester. I prioritized this

emphasis on flexibility and centered this when reaching out to participants. I also made myself available to my participants (and continue to), often checking in with them throughout the research process and offering help for proofreading assignments or helping prepare for exams or presentations throughout their school year.

There are instances of translanguaging in Spanish and English throughout the platicas. I speak Spanish and occasionally participants may switch to Spanish to express ideas or specific cultural references. In an attempt to maintain the transcriptions of pláticas closer to their original form and to maintain participants' voices, recordings were transcribed to reflect the translanguaging; words in Spanish were purposely not translated to English.

Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Experiences of the college transition

In this chapter, I introduce in detail each of the participants and their individual experiences that address the overarching research question of this study: How do first generation Latinx bilingual students experience the transition from high school to college? I (re)present the stories and experiences that were shared by my participants during our pláticas related to their educational journeys from high school to college. I also present testimonios that were shared during our pláticas. My goals in this chapter are to share the powerful narratives of the participants and examine the experiences relating to their college transition. The chapter is organized by sections dedicated to each participant: Claudia, Estrella, Yessi, and Cecilia.

Claudia

Claudia is from the Dominican Republic. She moved to the US with her mother and 2 younger brothers when she was 16 years old and in the 11th grade. I first met Claudia at STAR, the high school where I have been teaching for nearly a decade, as a student in my intermediate ESL class and then in my AP English class. In her senior year of high school, Claudia took AP Spanish and AP English through AP for All, a college and career readiness initiative of the NYC DOE. When reflecting on her time in high school, Claudia described being very involved in school activities and organizations: she was a member of the yearbook club, and the LGBTQ club, and she participated in school dances and events like a school community mural project and a student panel presentation for a conference at Teachers College. "These experiences made my relationship with school much more positive and suddenly college didn't seem as scary of a

prophecy to fulfill," Claudia explained. Describing going to college as a 'prophecy to fill' underscores the pressures Claudia was navigating around attending college. Claudia felt attending college was more of an expectation than an option for her. In high school, college was positioned as *the* pathway to being successful, and she was inundated with the messaging of its importance; at home, Claudia navigated family expectations to be academically and professionally successful like her mother. The confluence of these expectations led Claudia to call into question the value of a college degree.

Over the course of our pláticas and through an autoethnography assignment for a class she was taking at the time of data collection, Claudia explored where this pressure of attending college and being successful stemmed from, digging into both the explicit and indirect sources of pressure. In the sections that follow, I draw on excerpts from our pláticas together and from Claudia's original autoethnographic to render her experiences in her journey to and through college in ways that I hope capture Claudia's brilliance, confidence, and insightfulness.

The pressure to attend college: "[P]ouring college through our eyes"

Claudia is the first in her family to attend college in the US, however, she is not the first to earn a college degree. Her mother studied civil engineering at a prestigious university in the Dominican Republic. Claudia recounted, "Mami had heard people talking about how civil engineering was a hard major and a hard career, and she was like, 'I'm gonna do that! I'm going to go for the hard one!'" She noted how, because of her mother's successes, her extended family expected Claudia to follow in her footsteps:

> Since my mom was such an accomplished person at a young age, everyone sort of expected the same from me and my brothers. My mom is smart and driven, studied civil engineering at the most prestigious university in the Dominican Republic with a

> scholarship, got married, and had two kids; she graduated and exercised her profession for twelve years before changing careers. It was never explicitly stated but I was somehow expected to replicate my mother's accomplishments; in the eyes of my extended family, it should've come to me naturally because *"tienes los genes de tu mamá"*/"you have your mother's genes," referring to her smartness.

Claudia's comments about her mother's educational background and career in the Dominican Republic, as well as her family's educational aspirations, disrupt monolithic narratives of students from these places having interrupted education. It disrupts how places in the Caribbean are often characterized from a deficit lens. Moreover, her words are a counter-narritive to deficit portrayals of Latinx immigrant parents as uneducated or uninformed about college.

The pressure to attend college and be "successful" came more from her extended family in the Dominican Republic than it did from her parents.

> I had conversations with my Dominican friends about how their parents expected them to become doctors and teachers and lawyers, and how they didn't like their parents. I could never truly relate to those feelings and didn't have much to contribute to those conversations. You see, I had asked my mom what she wanted me to be when I grew up, expecting a profession for an answer, but she always responded the same way: "Happy. I want you to be happy." Added to the fact that, the older I got, the closer me and my mom became, and I never felt like my mom had a predetermined idea of what I should do with my life. But I still felt highly pressured to be a 'good person' (whatever that means) and get excellent grades.

This pressure to attend college became even more intense and explicit when she started high school in the US, where she found college to be at the forefront of most conversations about life

after high school. Claudia recalled how teachers listed 'preparing you for college' as the reason behind most high school assignments, activities, and motives for graduating. She would hear teachers, the principal, or the guidance counselor say things like, "this will be good for you for when you are in college."

> In high school, you guys start pouring college through our eyes. *Oye pero se lo mete a uno hasta allá abajo por la garganta y por todos lados.* It's ridiculous. It got to a point where I was like, do I really want to go? But then I was like, let me just get a degree because, even if it's not a degree that I'm going to use for something, if I have a degree, I might get paid better.

Here we see how Claudia was questioning the value of a degree, contesting college as the end goal of her secondary studies or as the marker of a "good" education, as college was being positioned in her high school; instead she examined the material benefits of a degree. The rhetoric of the importance of going to college influenced what classes she took in high school. When Claudia signed up to take AP and College Now courses, she was at first hesitant because she thought they would be very challenging, but she ended up taking them anyway because they would be "good for college." While Claudia was questioning if she even wanted to go to college, she was still influenced to participate in things that might prepare her for college or "look good' on applications. Again, we see how college is positioned in school as a marker of a successful education and courses associated with it are viewed as more challenging and carry more weight or prestige.

Applying to college and help with FAFSA

Despite all of the in-school messaging to attend college, Claudia struggled to find support for starting the application process and finding colleges. While her mother knew about the

college process in the Dominican Republic, navigating the US system was new for the family. "It was very difficult because I had no clue what was going on. I was learning everything on the go...it's not something I was familiar with, you know, my parents couldn't help because they didn't know either." One example that we discussed was the slew of standardized testing required to go to college. Claudia said her family was unfamiliar with the Regents exams, NY high school exit exams, as well as the SAT when they started at STAR. Her high school counselor signed her up for the SAT and helped her find the testing site in the city where she was to take the exam. Her high school counselor also encouraged her to attend after-school SAT prep tutoring.

However, Claudia found limited support from the high school's college advisor, with whom Claudia could only meet during the school day because she would often have to leave right after school to pick her little brother up. In order to meet with the college advisor, she would have to request a pass to leave class, but she did not want to fall behind, so she rarely made appointments. Claudia had a feeling that she was missing information, that she "didn't know what [she] didn't know." While Claudia knew all of the major universities in the Dominican Republic, she didn't know the names of colleges in the US; she noted that there may have been many colleges that could have been a good fit, but she didn't know how to find them and eventually got overwhelmed, applying only to the places she had heard of through class trips to visit the campus or from other teachers and students. She knew she wanted to go away for college and live in the dorms, but she also didn't want to live too far from family and wanted to stay in state for in-state tuition.

> I was trying to keep everything organized, you know, and trying to do some research on schools, but in the end, I just gave up and was like I'm just applying to the ones I've heard. I'm just trying to go somewhere.

Similar to the experiences of many of the participants in this study, knowing which colleges to apply to was a major challenge that was oftentimes resolved through Google and Youtube searches of campuses. While in high school, Claudia attended a college visit to a New York City university, as well as to a private college upstate; both trips were organized by the school's Spanish/NLA (Native Language Arts) teacher, Ms. Martinez, who Claudia credits as a major support in the college-going process that continued into her first year at college.

Claudia explained that Ms. Merecedes, also a Dominican, first-generation college student, "understood things…She got where we were coming from, and it's just nice because it's like I don't have to explain things to her, like the cultural stuff." Ms. Martinez helped Claudia fill out FAFSA and get the tax documents she needed from her parents, who had been through a divorce, which further complicated the process. Ms. Martinez would call her parents and talk them through the process in Spanish.

> Ms. Martinez helped a lot. I called her freshman year of college too to figure out how to do FAFSA again. After that, I've been doing it myself. So I kinda know how to read the taxes now. And I just do FAFSA myself. I always try to file before January because it opens in October and you can file any time between that period and the middle of summer, but I file within the first three or four months that it opens because you have greater chances of getting a good deal.

Claudia's comments about Ms. Martinez speak to the important role of Latinx teachers in first generation Latinx students' college-going experience. Ms. Martinez was able to communicate and connect with Claudia's family, and with Claudia, in ways that other teachers without the same cultural and linguistic background could not. Moreover, her comments show the ways in which teachers go above and beyond to support students, though this work often goes unnoticed

and uncompensated in schools. Once in college, Claudia's friend group would serve as a support to each other, sharing information about deadlines and other important topics (such as applying early to FAFSA to get more aid) in a group chat.

Friends at college

One of the things that stuck with me from pláticas with Claudia was the joy, excitement, and celebration that comes from making new, deep friendships. Claudia's friend group and social life were a significant part of her experience at college that she valued and was a source of pride. Claudia shared pictures from parties taken on disposable cameras (that were then digitized for social media) with her friends. We talked at length about her friends, how they met each other, what they would do for fun, and where they would hang out (which is different from *going* out). Even throughout the pandemic when her friends were not all physically able to be together, they stayed in touch through Snapchat, Instagram, and a WhatsApp group. She felt lucky to have found her community right away in her freshman year:

> I think one of the things that helped me the most in college was having a community. In my case I was able to find it by luck, we met each other because we lived in the same building…I met my roommates who are still my friends. You know, it was so crazy because we didn't know each other. It was just like we were just put together and we started to get to know each other. And we were like 'so they just put all the Caribbean people up on this side?!' you know, that's just what they did. We became close friends real quick.

Another important aspect of her social life at college was her work study-position which helped cover the room and board but also introduced her to meeting people and making friends on campus. She was the manager of the student union building, or as Claudia put it, "I babysit a

whole building for like 8 to 12 hours a week." Because of this work-study position, Claudia was often negotiating and renegotiating her school load and work responsibilities. For example, at the start of our pláticas, Claudia was thinking through her class selection for that semester: "My job requires a lot of time from me and I cannot always do homework when I'm at the desk…so I was like I'm going to take it easy this semester and see what happens." In her position at the student union building, she was in charge of setting up and registering student events on campus, which kept her in the loop of events and organizations she may be interested in.

> Because I work in the building, I know everything that's going on. So I always know when an event that I might be interested in and that might have people that I know or I might get along with are going to be in the building. And like a lot of these events are always like, really welcoming to people, so it's always nice to go. Even if you just show up one time, they are glad you showed up, you know, because they want people to show up…I've also met a lot of great people that were also in the same situation as me through Spanish classes, the Spanish club, and the Korean Club.

She became a leader of the Swing Dance Club that tried to meet virtually during the pandemic. These clubs and activities were a major part of her social life at school.

Race

Through our pláticas and her coursework, Claudia also reflected on race and her racial awareness, which really developed while at a PWI:

> It's funny because even though this is a predominantly white school, I don't interact with that many white people. Most of my friends are black or Latin American. My friends are descendants from Jamaica or Nigeria or their parents are from there so they are second

generation Jamaican. My one friend is Dominican. My roommate is Dominican too. Her boyfriend is Salvadorian.

All my friends are either black or brown, you know, legally speaking like, you know, in the respective groups, but then me personally, you know, where do I go…What box do I take? I have to put black. I'm not white. You know I don't look white. It all depends on who I'm with, who I am hanging out with, where I'm at, and if I'm filling out paperwork or not, because I can say X, Y, or Z, but when it comes to the groups culturally, you know, I don't belong. So I could put on the legal papers that I'm black, but culturally I'm not black, you know.

In her autoethnography for her college class, Claudia wrote:

> Arriving in New York City and needing to fill out a gazillion of legal papers regarding personal information, I was thrown off by the box regarding race. I didn't know what to put, the options were limited and after much deliberation, the only plausible option was "Black/African-American." Even when the choice was made, ticking that box felt like stepping into someone else's wet skin. My understanding of the concepts of race was all acquired here in the U.S. and when added to my refusal to assimilate into American culture, it might explain some of my reasons to pursue higher education beyond high school: to make others see me as more than boxes to be ticked off.

Claudia's reflection is a reminder of how there are identities we choose, identities that are imposed, identities we may hide, and identities that are taken away:

> I don't want to say like I hide, you know, any part of me. There's just stuff that I bring up less. Like I know none of my friends like K-pop the way that I do, so I just don't break that shit up. I keep that shit to myself…My professors, obviously, most of my professors

have been white people...mostly white people in some of my classes. Mostly my Women's Studies classes, you know, there's not a lot of people of color, and when there is, you know, you try to stick together…You know, I try to speak a little bit more properly when I'm in class and with my professors and stuff like that, but I still throw in a lot of colloquialisms, a lot of slang, because it's just easier and none of my professors are ever like 'Oh speak properly,' because they understand what I'm saying. In papers obviously, I write very differently from how I speak.

Staying on campus during the COVID-19 pandemic

For Claudia, the pandemic hit in the second semester of her freshman year at college. As mentioned, being able to live away from home and in the dorms was a major factor in her college choice, so the prospect of having to return home to take classes remotely was a very distressing change. Claudia had made friends and just settled into life at college. She described going out to parties with her friends and enjoying life, "as you see in movies…Things were going great…Let me tell you, freshman year was great!" Then, at the start of March 2020, there was a water crisis on campus, so students were sent home early for Spring break and then asked to stay home a week longer. Once she returned to campus from Spring break, Claudia received an email from the college informing her that school would be remote, except for special circumstances for students requesting to stay on campus:

It was like…We celebrated Ray's birthday. We celebrated my birthday. It was so cool. Then March came and we had a water crisis on campus, so we had no water, no water, no water. There was no water, no drinking water. No water to shower. Nothing. Because one of the pipes that bring the water from the reserve…some stuff, like lead or some poisoning material, got in the water, so they had to shut everything down.

They send us to spring break and then they send an email: “stay another week.”And we’re like… ‘So we get an extended spring break!?’ Then, when we came back from spring break, Covid news was recent. So, we all started hearing about Covid, we all just got back and they sent an email like, “Yeah, you all gotta leave…We’re canceling in-person school for the rest of the semester.”

And at the bottom of the email, I remember, my saving grace was that it was like, “If you really need to stay on campus, you know, fill out this form and we will accommodate you.” And that's how I ended up living by myself at the end of my freshman year. It was lonely because all my friends were home.

Claudia was one of the few people who remained on campus for the duration of the Spring semester of 2020. Claudia splits her time between her mom’s apartment and her dad’s apartment and would have had trouble staying focused on school at home.

Technically I could have been back home, but I can't do school from home, you know. I live with my dad and I share a room with Jay and Emanuel, my brothers…At home, I don’t have space. We have a desk…Yeah, we have one desk. And when I started school, Jay was still in high school, so he was still using the desk. And we share a bed, you know, and the living room is not a habitable space most of the time because my dad is not organized. So it was like I couldn't do school from home. I remember… Last year, my sophomore year, I did finals from home. I had to prepare all my notes and all my stuff before going home because I knew I wasn't going to be able to do much when I was home.

Claudia described the Spring 2020 semester on campus as an extremely lonely time. She did not see anyone and only left her room to pick up meals in the cafeteria. To help her mental health, she would Facetime with friends and family, listen to music, live stream and record BTS concerts, and go to therapy.

In her sophomore year, students returned to campus, but classes remained remote and social gatherings were limited, so she would sneak her friends into her room or meet in other friends' rooms to socialize. Again, having her friend group was a huge support during this time of remote learning.

Consejos

Throughout our pláticas, Claudia expressed *consejos* and wisdom shared with her from her mother. As mentioned before, Claudia's mother always told her that above all she wanted Claudia to be happy, passing on her experiences and cautioning against compromising her own desires to bend to other people's expectations:

> What my family members with their little comments fail to realize is that my mom learned that her degree, husband, and kids were not the pinnacle of her life. After divorcing my dad, my mom went on to look deep into herself and find that just because she had done what society had dictated of her as a woman, she was not done living. She tried to teach us this lesson so I wouldn't make the same mistakes.

In her autoethnography, Claudia also reflected on breaking free from expectations, referring to song lyrics from "Under Pressure" in the movie *Encanto:*

> These expectations (being smart, a good student, a good daughter) not only loomed over my head from a young age but, without me noticing for years, were crushing me. Luisa, in the movie *Encanto*, says it better: "If I could shake the crushing weight of

> expectations/ Would that free some room up for joy/ Or relaxation, or simple pleasure? / Instead, we measure this growing pressure."

Claudia applies the *consejos* from her mother to her life, in particular with her major, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies, which has been the topic of concern and confusion with her extended family. They question the value of studying gender and sexuality over "something practical like medicine or engineering." Claudia recounted, "sometimes my grandma and my aunties will say something, like 'so, *what* are you doing?' and my mom was like 'It doesn't have to make sense to anybody else, it has to make sense to you.''

> My grandma sometimes sends me messages like ...how do I say this... she's trying to tell me 'Oh don't get confused…' She for some reason is concerned that I'm going to convert into something. I don't know what she's scared of... Maybe because of the gender part of the major. But I always tell her, 'don't worry abuela, I'm like good, you know, I know what I am. I know where I stand.

Through pedagogies of the home (Delgado Bernal, 2010), Claudia's mother's promoted advice about following passions, instead of bending to others' expectations, which was reflected in Claudia's strong sense of self.

Pláticas with Claudia highlighted the complexities of the college going journey that resist neatly packaged "single stories" of first generation Latinx youth as either succeeding or struggling. Claudia's experiences of preparing for and attending college weave together memories of joy and frustration, curiosity and exploration, and loneliness and community. Claudia shared photos, music, and readings that were representative of the ups and downs of her time at college. Moreover, her comments are counter-narratives to stereotypical views of Latinx parents being uninvolved or uneducated. Claudia's mother had a high level of education and her

family held high academic expectations of her, so much so that Claudia wrestled with the pressures of being "successful" in a hyper college-focused environment. Her comments also lift up the work of teachers, in particular Latinx teachers, who go above and beyond in their work with bilingual students in the college going process. Lastly, a salient thread of Claudia's reflection is the importance of community, of feelings of belonging, which we will see echoed in pláticas with other participants.

Estrella

Estrella first came to the US when she was 15. Estrella is from Mexico and speaks Mixteco, Spanish, and English. I remembered Estrella as a shy student, developing English in my ESL class. She needed to pass the English Regents, New York State exit exams, so I focused mostly on that in class, and unfortunately, I didn't get to know her well. I am so grateful for being able to (re)meet Estrella through this project. From our pláticas, I got to know so much more about Estrella: her passions, her commitment to learning, her desire to give back, her strength, and her positive spirit. Pláticas with Estrella has been a reminder of how I carry my own biases into my work as an educator, and how, even with the best of intentions, educators can track students into paths. Pláticas with Estrella is a reminder that college and career readiness supports, though intended to be for "all," can still be inaccessible. It also speaks to how a focus on college readiness can limit opportunities for getting to know and supporting students.

Before sharing some of Estrella's experiences in her journey to and through college, I begin by sharing excerpts of a testimonio that emerged from a plática about Estrella's journey to the US and her educational experiences growing up. This testimonio shares vulnerable and painful personal memories, alongside how she has faced oppression in her educational journey, and what fuels her *why* for attending college.

Estrella's journey

Estrella grew up in a small town in Mexico. When she was a child she lived in a house with her grandparents, her mother, her mother's 6 siblings, and their children.

> My mom had 6 siblings and all of them had like 6 kids, a big family, and my grandma and grandpa used to live there. So there was no time for my mom to teach us how to read and write, because she used to cook all the time. I really, wanted to read because I was big, I was 8 years old and my classmates and teacher would tease me and ask me "can you read this?" And I would be so shy and embarrassed, sometimes I would cry, because I didn't know how to read or write.
>
> I remember going to the church and praying and asking my God, 'oh please God, I would really like to read and write.' I really liked words, and I really wanted to understand the meaning. So I just started.. I grabbed a book… Something inside of me said, 'Okay, start reading, reading, reading, instead of playing.' I made myself to read more, to write more, and to pay a little bit more attention at school.

Her education was put on pause in 2012 when her mother passed away in a tragic accident.

> In 2012, that's when I stopped studying because that's when my mom passed away and I was taking care of my little sister and little niece because her mom, my aunt, was here in the United States. At the same time, I had to work. I used to go to school like maybe every other day. And when I did go, I didn't know what was going on because I didn't go the day before….I used to not pay attention that much in class because, I don't know, I got distracted. Or maybe it's because of the Spanish too, like sometimes, you know, when you learning another language, it's hard for you to catch what the teacher is teaching because they're speaking fast.

Estrella first learned Mixteco, which was the primary language of instruction through first grade; after first grade, her classes were all in Spanish, which made school more challenging.

Her mother passed away on the day of her 14th birthday in a tragic accident and Estrella had to take care of her sisters and niece. The passing of Estrella's mother has forever marked her life. Estrella's mother is her inspiration to go forward in her education; she was a strong model of hard work and a giving spirit.

> Since I can remember, she had been working so hard, my mom. I always saw that. She always had to do something else, to take care of us. She had to cook. She had to get money, and I understand, because she had to give us food every day and we had to eat. She went to my little town to get corn. In Mexico, we use corn to make our own tortillas. So she used to do this for us in order to eat. I remember the day before she left, she said, " I'll be back on your birthday, tomorrow, after 10 AM for sure, for sure." …And then I was waiting for her on my birthday, April __. She was supposed to be there already. And I was waiting for her but instead, I received this message that she got into it an accident and I was crying…
>
> I think that when she passed away something disappeared or something changed in me, because it's like, you don't have your whole heart. It breaks your heart because that's the only person that understands you. I was feeling so lost. I used to go outside and cry and cry and be by myself, but then I said to myself, "Oh no, you have to go back home because your little niece is there. She has to eat. You have to wash clothes, you have to cook and you have to do all these things."

After her mom's passing, her older sister, who had already moved to the US, helped Estrella and her younger sister come join her. Estrella was experiencing domestic violence at home which prompted her to leave.

> A year after my mom passed, my sister decided to send for her daughter, my niece, to come to the US. And then two years later, they saved some money to send for us. I didn't want to live with my brother anymore because he would hit us. From my little town to Mexico City. From Mexico City, I took an airplane to Tijuana. And from Tijuana, that's the border, I stayed there for like more than a month because they were planning everything of how the process was going to be, how we were going to cross… And that's how I came.

Once in New York, her older sister encouraged her to attend high school, even though Estrella felt pressure to work to pay off her migration journey to her brother-in-law.

> I was supposed to start working because my brother sent for me and he paid to the coyote like 8,000 dollars. And that's a lot of money. And he said, "Okay, now that you're here, girls, you're going to work, Estrella, because you're the oldest one," and I said, "Okay, but I want to study." I don't know how and why but my sister said, 'Okay, I think you should study and go to school' because I was 15 years old. That decision to study changed my life.

One day, after going to the hospital and not having a guardian to sign the paperwork, she was referred to an immigration lawyer, and Estrella learned she could stay if she had a legal guardian.

> [The lawyers] said if you have the opportunity to get a guardian or someone who will adopt you, you can become a US citizen... "Really?!" I said, "And what is the benefit of that?" I said because I didn't know. They said "Well, you can travel, you can go to

> Mexico, you can learn more English, go to college, and they gave me all these benefits and I liked what they said. Because that's what I really wanted to do, to progress, and do better.

The assistant principal of STAR high school adopted Estrella and her younger sister, after finding out about their situation. This was another major turning point in Estrella's life.

> Thanks God because of the decision to go to school, I got a second mother, I got papers, I got a new home, food, house, everything. Sometimes I think that I'm so blessed and I've been so grateful for what I have and what I want to be. Everything motivates me to keep going and be a good person for my family to be proud of me.

Estrella's journey leading to college is powerful on many levels– she navigated her way through various systems of oppression, while experiencing extreme loss and hardships, and keeps a positive outlook on life and strength. It sheds light on how, even in a school that prides itself on being culturally affirming and supportive for students like Estrella, the individual experiences of a student can be overlooked.

Moreover, Estrella's experiences in high school show how schools can generalize academic ability and "potential" based on English language proficiency and not consider them in college and career readiness efforts. Upon entering high school, Estrella was labeled SIFE (Student with Interrupted Formal Education). Throughout high school, she was developing literacy in Spanish and English and worked after school. Because of this, Estrella couldn't participate in many after-school activities. What's more, she wasn't invited or considered for many college and career opportunities that other immigrant students in her high school were taking advantage of, perhaps because teachers, like myself, had already made assumptions that

she wasn't interested or wouldn't be able to do the work. Estrella speaks back to this in her testimonio.

> Sometimes people would say I'm quiet and shy but actually I'm not. It's just because sometimes I don't know how to express myself, or sometimes, when people are talking, I get lost or I don't understand. But in Spanish, I'm like 'bla bla bla bla bla.' I'm very social and I love to talk and share. So we can say in English I'm a little bit shy, but in Spanish, I'm not at all. When I came to high school, I studied but I also wanted to work to help pay my brother back. And my sister was working at this laundry …So I used to come to the high school Monday through Friday and work Saturday and Sunday. And I used to miss a lot of things by working.
>
> In high school, Ms. Martinez would talk to us after Spanish class, and because I was taking classes with good students... Anthony, Melissa, you know…they would talk, "Oh Miss, You know, I got accepted here, or I did this opportunity." And I was like, they do all of this, and I don't even do anything. I don't stay after school for tutoring. They are creating a robot in the robotics club. And I was like 'How can I become a part of that group?' I always wanted to be with the *smart* students, and I was listening to them talking…And I was like 'Oh I don't know that.' I used to feel like *less* because I honestly didn't know how to do all the things they were talking about or how to socialize with people and start speaking English. So I think Ms. Martinez' class is where I got some ideas about college from hearing them talk and wanting to be a part of it.

Estrella's comments on wanting to be with the "smart students" who participated in activities like the robotics club, emphasizes how "smartness" requires access, and Estrella's circumstances prevented her from accessing available opportunities. Even when college readiness opportunities

are intended to be open to all students, there may barriers to participation. Moreover, very different from Claudia's experience, Estrella learned about college and the extracurricular college and career readiness activities through overhearing about it from other classmates. As I reflected back on my time with Estrella, I realized how I had treated her differently than other students: why didn't I push her to write a personal statement, as I did with Claudia? Why didn't I ask about her college applications? This lack of communication about college was actually sending a loud message that Estrella heard, when she said " I used to feel like less." When resources and time are limited in school, teachers, like myself, may find themselves doing a mental "triage" of students, in that they spend more time investing in supporting the college-going process of some students who have more "potential," where "potential" is exhibited by school-based literacy skills and a stronger command of English.

The college-going process

A bilingual science teacher, Ms. Perez, helped Estrella with FAFSA and explained what forms she would have to fill out. Estrella recalls "googling" universities in New York that were good for technology or related to computers.

> I just googled it. I just googled "college for computer systems" and City University came up. And I said, "Okay, that's the one it's gonna be." Ms. Perez gave me the information. She helped me create my FAFSA account. Oh, also they said you have to write an essay. That's when I wrote the essay.

Estrella studies Computer Information Technology at a large public university in New York City. Her interest in computer sciences was influenced by her mom who enrolled Estrella in computer classes in Mexico as a child.

> When I was 8 or 9 years old, my mom told me, you have to go to computer classes. She used to pay for me to go weekly to learn how to use a computer, to learn how to use PowerPoint, Microsoft, Excel, and Publisher. I did not want to because it wasn't something that I thought about, it's not something that I choose. But since she sent me to take all these classes, well I was sitting there, watching, and learning. Then, when I moved to the United States and they asked me in high school, "What do you want to study in college?" I was like "Huh..good question…Well, I don't know, I started studying something and never finished it, my computer classes, so maybe I can go into technology, maybe computers, or something."

While she knew she wanted to study something related to computers, deciding on a major was a longer, more complicated process that involved some trial and error.

> I had a little bit of a hard time with my major. When I got here, they said my major was hospitality management, but I didn't choose that one, and I said "No, I don't want to do that. I'm not really interested in that." And they said "Okay, you can choose another major," and I picked chemical engineering. And that didn't work. It was so hard. That was an only-boys major. It wasn't because of that that I changed, it was because it was really hard for me because it was more about building and tools and really physical. You have to make things. So then I decided to switch to Computer Information Technology. I like it so much now. I want to do it because I want my mom to be proud of me, wherever she is right now. And also, I want to do it because it is a challenging major.

After being assigned a major she did not choose, we see Estrella drawing on what Yosso (2005) refers to as navigational capital. Estrella agentively explored other majors of interest, and later in our pláticas, expressed how she would like to impart the knowledge she gained from this

experience to students, like herself, who were navigating choosing a major for their first time. Estrella pursued a major she thought would have made her mother proud. Her narrative emphasizes the educational aspirations her mother had for her, and aspirations that Estrella passes on to her family and friends. Having a clear goal and a "why" for her studies has helped Estrella get through some of the more challenging times at college. One of her sources of motivation is her niece. She explained how she wanted to show her niece, who she has helped raise for most of her life, that graduating from college is possible and she wanted to show her the value of school.

> Because I have a niece who I think is now 16 and she's my priority. My priority person. I want her to be proud of me. And I want to finish college. I mean, she's my best friend, my niece, and I was her mom for like two years...We have a connection.
>
> And because the only thing I wanted to do was study, to someday get my degree and get a profession. That's the thing that kept me going.

Estrella talked about having difficulties in her freshman year with language, finding her way around campus, and struggling in a summer semester math class.

> When I started at City University, I started in the summer, right away after graduating. And that wasn't good because I took math. And what I have learned now is that you don't take hard classes in the summertime because it's a short semester. You should take maybe public speaking, communication, you know, easy classes, in the summer. Yeah, I didn't know that at all, so I took a math class and honestly I failed that class; there were only four weeks for all the chapters from Chapter 1 through Chapter 12. Oh my god, yeah I experienced that. I learned.

I didn't know English, I understood maybe 20% of English, but was not talking in English. So I was like ‘Okay, I want to try to make this work’ and I used to ask all the students, ‘Oh excuse me, do you know where is this department located?’ I mean I didn’t say exactly that because that was good, and I wasn’t that good then.

She made 2 good friends at college who were also learning English at the time, and they helped each other with classwork and sharing information, but making friends in her classes hasn’t been easy, especially due to remote learning.

> In college, people can be so friendly and at the same time, they can be so reserved. I met some friends, Sia and Misha, an Indian girl and a Chinese girl. They’re so nice. We exchanged some presents at Christmas, we see movies, and sometimes we do things, but they don’t go out that much. … I made more friends who are Indian, or from Pakistan, because I got connected to them because we all were learning English as a second language.
>
> Now that we have online classes, it’s hard to make friends. I have only 2 classes in person, and the others I have online. So online I see their names, but I don't really talk to them.

Estrella was attentive to the differences in making friends in college versus high school, and making friends in person versus online. Navigating the bureaucratic complexities as a new student on campus, and then transitioning to remote learning in the pandemic, Estrella’s college-going process is marked by the community sources of support she formed, such as her college friends who were also learning English.

College-based supports

When talking about the college-based supports that have helped her the most, Estrella was very adamant about how important it was for students to seek out TAP, the New York State Tuition Assistance Program, and ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associates Programs), a resource for first-generation college students specifically in CUNY schools. ASAP, in particular, set her up with an advisor and helped her navigate the university.

> It's really helpful to have the ASAP program. That's what I've been telling everyone, even the high school students and the new students that are coming from high school to college, I tell them 'You have to get ASAP.' ASAP is the best program because they give you free Metro cards for 2 years, free textbooks for 2 years, and a free advisor for 2 years, and the advisor helps you with making your class schedule and everything.
> It's only for two years. After that, you're on your own. You have to get your own Metro card, your own textbook, and make your own schedule. But they teach you, so you know. You have to do workshops for this program for the first month. They're really good, those workshops are really helpful because they are actually for your classes. They ask you: How are your classes going? Are you liking your professors? Do you have the textbooks? Have you started your assignments? - and they will ask you all kinds of stuff.

In our walking plática, Estrella showed me the building where her ASAP workshops and advising took place. She also showed me the Welcome Center as another significant place.

> In the Welcome Center, you get almost everything. I remember having questions about connecting to the Wi-Fi and they helped me, and then the Student Life Development program is there too. Before Covid they used to give us free food, do activities, you know, to de-stress yourself and to get to meet new people. And I really liked those kinds of events because you would get to know people and I would always ask them for their

> major first, like 'What's your major? What classes are you taking? How many classes are you taking?' And then that's the way I started getting connected to them and getting to know the subjects, the majors, and about the classes.

Family support

Another major support in her time at college has been her adoptive mother. Estrella explained that because of her adoptive mother and family, she has been able to experience another culture, learn more English, and has stability and financial and emotional support. Estrella became close with her adopted extended family, spending time together and traveling together. When Estrella was feeling pressure to work while in college, her adoptive mother encouraged her to stay focused on school.

> What my mom told me is, Estrella, don't worry. This is the time to get educated. I know you need money. I know you want money, but someday you will get it. You will get it after you finish school. Do one thing at a time. Don't worry, you're going to be okay.

Estrella noted differences between advice from her Mexican family and from her adoptive family. She explained that she found American culture to be focused more on doing what you want, whereas Latin culture centers around having a responsibility to your family and being prepared for the worst of outcomes:

> I don't know, but I can say that the American way I think it's so different from the Latino way, because Americans tell you to do whatever you want, how you want it, when you want it, and to go for whatever makes you happy. I think that's the idea. You know, Latin families say, 'Oh, you have to do this because you have to be prepared for your future, for your family. You have to get ready, because you never know if this and that bad things could happen.' Instead of advising you of good things, they are focused on letting

you know the bad things that will happen if you don't do this or if you don't study or if you don't choose a good man to marry.

Estrella's comments here reflect her cultural understandings of American individualism, "to go for whatever makes you happy," and Mexican collectivism, being prepared for the future "in case bad things could happen," as she lives in and navigates both cultural expectations.

Mentorship and giving back to the community

During the time of data collection, Estrella was helping her friend Gaby, another graduate of STAR with applying to and registering for classes at a city community college. Gaby was navigating her documentation status alongside meeting deadlines for financial aid. In addition to the bureaucratic particularities of applying to college, Gaby was also juggling work, having a medical procedure done, and living with her parents during the pandemic. All of these factors were at play in her application process, and Estrella's friend kept barely missing the deadlines. Then, once she had been admitted, Gaby would not register fast enough for the classes that would fit her work schedule, so she would push back her studies until the next semester.

> So now she's going almost like two or three times a month to my house so I can help her. I helped her to do her last semester schedule. I helped her to file TAP. That's the other thing. Most students have to do TAP, because FAFSA is something from the Federal, but TAP, that's for everyone, for undocumented kids. I was telling her, 'You have to be on time with the deadlines, Gaby.' Because what I have noticed so far is that, when she's in college, she really wants to work. When she's working, she really wants to go to college.

Estrella's comments point to how significant peer-to-peer mentorship is particularly in local contexts. Oftentimes colleges or universities have programs for first-generation college students in general or for first-generation Latinx students, however, there are particularities within these

larger identity markers that must be addressed. Having a more local context for sharing expertise between and among students within a school community that can speak to the details of a particular college would be very beneficial. In the example of Estrella and Gaby, working with someone who had already gone through the experience of applying and who knew the details of Gaby's situation, helped Gaby get the support to eventually enroll in classes.

During data collection, Estrella was doing an internship for her degree at STAR. She was in charge of technology set-up and support at the school. She expressed that what she most enjoyed was helping students set up their devices, learn more about computers and programs, and talking to them about their future. Estrella expressed how important it was to connect to students in high school and talk to them about college. She would like to support students with the application process, understanding what majors are, how to take advantage of college-based supports, and navigate financial aid.

Estrella's experiences shared in pláticas and in her testimonio bring forth her commitment to education, the educational aspirations of her mother and adopted mother, and her hopes for the future. Estrella's high school experiences unearth unintended barriers to accessing college preparation supports, and also point to the ways in which a focus on college readiness can hinder opportunities for getting to know students on a more personal level. At college, Estrella navigated an educational system while continuing to learn English, she made and kept friendships through a pandemic, and studied for a career she is passionate about. Amidst all of these experiences, Estrella desires to give back to the community, taking what she has learned from navigating both the education and immigration systems, and imparting this knowledge to others who could benefit from it.

Yessi

Yessi was born in the US and grew up in the Dominican Republic. She moved to the US by herself when she was 16 to live with a half-sister she did not know well at the time. Yessi described how growing up poor in the DR and traveling between the DR and the US in her childhood prompted her solo move to New York. She wanted a better education and knew that she could attend public high school in New York for free. Her family couldn't afford private school in the DR or to buy school materials, so they were in support of her coming to New York for school.

> Even though I was like back and forth when I was 7 and 8 years old, I didn't have an education. So I just came by myself in high school. In my country, my father and my mother didn't have the money to send me to school. So, yeah, at least here, I knew I could have the high school. I thought if high school was the process easily, it could be that easily too the college. Yeah, since I heard about public school. But the reality was another stuff.

In what follows, I share excerpts of a testimonio that emerged from pláticas with Yessi about her experiences of the college transition. Her testimonio critiques the education system, and economic and racial inequities.

Journey through high school

I met Yessi when she started at STAR as a 10th grader. She was very friendly and outgoing and quickly made friends with her classmates. One of my favorite memories with Yessi in high school was when we marched in the NYC Pride March with the school LGBTQ club that she organized. Sometimes Yessi would come to my class before school and we would eat breakfast together and talk about what was going on in her life.

Yessi was labeled "at-risk" and "SIFE" when she started high school. She struggled with literacy in Spanish and had to pass the Regents, New York State exit exams, and accumulate enough credits to graduate in a short period of time. While navigating the academic challenges of high school, Yessi was also navigating an unstable and challenging home life. The half-sister she was living with would leave Yessi at home with her two small children and expected Yessi to take care of the kids. Yessi explained, "Basically I was raising the kids myself because she was never home. I would feed them, help them with the homework, and put them to bed. I had to cook and clean. The youngest has autism so I had to be there for the home visits with the city person." In her junior year of high school, right before the pandemic, Yessi turned 18 and was able to start a training program to become an at-home health care attendant. She wanted to work to save money, move out, and support herself. She could no longer stay at her sister's apartment, so Yessi moved into a shelter. The following week after having moved to the shelter, schools shut down due to the pandemic, and Yessi had to quarantine in the shelter. She contracted Covid in late March of 2020, and spent weeks in isolation in a room in the shelter. In those early months of Covid and remote school, I remember checking in with Yessi through messenger or phone calls. With the help of the guidance counselor from STAR, after Yessi was cleared for Covid, she moved into another sister's house and then eventually moved into an apartment with her friends. She found it challenging to stay focused on school while going through housing insecurity and struggling financially, but she noted that, different from her time in college, she had teachers and counselors with whom she could speak.

> My journey in high school was more easy [than college] because I could speak up to my teachers and my counselors about what I can do and how I can improve myself. I'm not going to lie, I did lose myself during Covid because I was worrying a lot about how to

> pay bills during school. Even at a young age, from 16 to 19, and I was worrying about bills, and it was so difficult. So when I graduated from high school, I didn't know how to to move forward, like regular students would do since I didn't have my parents in the country.

Yessi’s journey through high school was marked by uncertainty and navigating the unexpected, yet she noted how she had guidance and support to make it through. In high school Yessi was already considering college as a way to improve her financial situation, but upon graduating, she “didn’t know how to move forward, like regular students,” pointing to a distinction she makes between herself and students with parental support. As she looked ahead to college, she weighed the material benefits of a college degree with the cost of attending.

“They don’t make it easy”: Applying to college and financial aid during Covid

Yessi applied to college in her senior year when she was attending school remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. She would meet with the high school college advisor virtually by making appointments on Zoom. She googled colleges in New York and watched student-created video tours on Youtube to see campuses since she could not schedule in person tours. In order to be eligible for FAFSA, Yessi needed to submit tax information from her parents, who lived in the Dominican Republic; she had limited contact with them, making this an even more difficult task. She was advised to apply for a “dependency override” for students who have “circumstances that they feel should qualify them as independent students even though they still fall under the dependent student category for the purpose of the FAFSA” (FAFSA for Non-Traditional Students, 2017). In order to do that, she had to submit a letter from her parents saying that they no longer supported her. She also had the shelter she was staying at during the

start of the pandemic write a letter of support confirming her stay there, but it still was not enough evidence for the override to be approved.

> My application process. I hated it.When I went to the college advisor, she already knew my case. She was like, ‘Yeah, you know that it is going to be difficult.’ She even had to pressure me to look for evidence that I didn't want to because I didn't have that type of relationship with my parents. She was like, ‘Okay, your mom has to do a letter, your father has to do a letter, saying that they don't support you,’ and I'm like, ‘Oh my god! Why?!?’ That shouldn't be that way. If you want to pursue education, what type of evidence do you need apart from the fact that I want to improve my skills, to improve myself?! That should be enough. But no. They need the paper from my father’s retirement. Like is he really 69 years old? Can he really not afford you?
> He’s in the DR! So you know, what is his Social Security? He has been 20 years out of the country. And my mother, she didn’t have papers even. It was crazy. So she [the college advisor] was like “Okay, but I need the letters, I need proof, I need evidence.”
> I did the letter myself because it was hard for me telling my parents that I didn't have their support, the educational support, because they were looking at me like, “Oh my God, my daughter came by herself to the United States to do her stuff, to pursue her dreams, to have an education!” So I didn't want to disappoint them.

This painful experience really brings out what these bureaucratic processes are asking students to do, as Yessi recounts being asked to get a letter from her saying that they could not and did support her.

> And, you know, even though they got the letters, that’s the least thing that the City University will see, like they don't even care. They really don't care. Yeah because after

that, after we sent all the letters, I had to wait like for 2 months to do a meeting with the administrator. I mean I have the emails, if you want to, we can read them.

Not a long time ago, I wanted to transfer to [another city college], and the same process. We did a video call and I told my ex-boyfriend, 'Put 10 minutes in the timer because that's the most they will give me.' I waited like two months for this meeting and they did it dirty, in 10 minutes. I just explained myself like, I didn't have my parents, I didn't have even a house. I have the letter from the shelter that I live over there three months so they know that I cannot support myself, so I need the financial aid. And the only thing that they told me in a few words was, you're not 24 years old and you have to be a dependent of your parents until 24 years old. And then I was depressed and I was crying and all this stuff.

Yessi was deemed ineligible for FAFSA in the CUNY system as "the final decision rests with the college financial aid administrator," (FAFSA, 2017). Yessi falls into a gray area of financial aid that is often not talked about for Latinx immigrant students. Though she was born in the US, she lived most of her life in the DR. She files her own taxes, and has experienced unstable housing, but because she is not old enough to be considered an independent, her parents are required to submit their taxes, which they cannot do.

Yessi was accepted into many colleges but she couldn't figure out how she would pay for tuition without financial aid.

I applied to Hunter College, Lehman College, Mercy College, York in Queens, I remember it was 5. And from the five of them, I got accepted in all of them, but the only thing was, they accept you, but the difficult thing was the financial aid, the financial support. They can accept everybody. And then you can fail if you don't have the right

information, if you accept stuff on the internet, you don't communicate with anyone, then you will owe a debt for like no reason. So yeah they basically told me after the meeting, they told me “Well you can start here, you can do your semester and then apply for next year. The only thing that you have to do is you do student loans. And I'm like, yeah. But then you have to give $3,000 or $4,000 for fees. So I wasn't comfortable with that.

She applied to TAP (New York State’s Tuition Assistance Program), submitting forms multiple times. She recounted how, when she called, they would tell her to resubmit the same papers and that they would get back to her. Ultimately, she decided to enroll in the nursing program at a large urban public college in New York, while still trying to find sources of financial aid. It seemed that she would get SEEK at this college. SEEK is “a New York State higher education opportunity program offered at CUNY's four-year colleges. It is a program designed for students who have the potential to do well in college, but would benefit from enhanced academic support and financial assistance.” The SEEK program would cover tuition but, similar to TAP, they needed to see her parents’ tax information.

> I went to [a large public university]. I just did one semester since FAFSA didn't help me and it was because of a point of the educational system. They didn't consider myself independent since I was 18 to 19 years old and I didn't have my parents taxes. So, my taxes weren’t sufficient to prove that I was living by myself, even though I showed them my lease. They said, ‘Okay, you have to be 24 years old, or you have to be married to be independent in New York City to complete your taxes.’ That was so ridiculous.

Yessi found the school environment and the experience of communicating with the financial aid office to be impersonal and dehumanizing.

> So when I came my first day, I knew everybody told you okay college is different, but it's ... I don't know.. my feeling is, it isn't supposed to be like that because, the first thing, every teacher makes sure that you know the first day that they don't care about you. Every teacher was like with the same, same lines: we don't care if you have something to do, we don't care if your homework is late, we don't care if you are slower as others. You have to do this and do that and do blah blah blah. So I felt like it wasn't like a safe environment like I used to have in school. At least I knew my teachers would be thinking about me or maybe wanted to plan something to help me. But in college it was like, Okay, I don't trust nobody here. Even though I paid more money for this. So yeah. That's one hard take- that nobody cares. Even your advisors. I had 2 months over there, I never met my advisor.
>
> They don't even want to see your face, you like do it online. They give you like the number and stuff. And they just told you to pay, and for that they are really fast. Because if you keep calling like I did to figure out FAFSA, they are busy. But then to pay, they are like 'Oh you just go to the website, sweetheart.' So they were really fast with that. I didn't even know if they would notice that I was going to classes if I didn't pay, since the classes were so big. That's the other thing. Okay, I know it's public school but why the classes are so big if we are paying so much money?

She took out loans to cover the first semester tuition, however while she was waiting for the loans to be applied, there were fees that she had to cover out of pocket, which she did not anticipate and did not have the money to pay.

> I didn't have any money because they were like until that stuff is approved, you have to pay half of the semester in here. In [large public university] one semester was $3,000 and

> something, bla bla bla. I paid just for my books. And now I still owe like $2,000 from [large public university]. From that first semester. And I didn't even finish the whole the semester because they kicked me out because I couldn't pay the half of it.

Almost 2 months into her first semester, when she was in a large lecture-sized class, an "official person" came to her class, called her by name, and told her that she could no longer stay due to her outstanding fees. She was removed from campus.

> So yeah, basically, I had like an official person come into the big class, like with 600 people like, 'Oh, you are Yessi?' And I'm like, 'Yes, I am.' 'So you have to come with me.' And they took me apart and they told me, 'Oh you saw the email that we sent you,' and I was like 'What email?' And they showed me the email like 'Oh no, we send you the email and it said that you can no longer be part of the classes until you pay.' And I was like Okayyyy. Everyone saw. And I was so embarrassed. And they walked me out of the school. I was crying like the whole train of my house.

Yessi recounts this experience as traumatizing. After, she fell into a depression and spent the rest of that year working.

> I was done. I was thinking that my life was done with my education. I think I will have like a trauma from that. I think that if I try in the future, something like that will happen. But that's the thing; if you stop trying with your education, you will never get somewhere. When I got frustrated, it was after when I was sitting in my room like, 'okay, I did quit my full-time job to be in college, to focus on myself, to focus on my education, to focus on improving my skills. What do I do now? Because here, in the city, it's like a million people. So full-time jobs are not right around the corner. When they offer you a

full time job, it's because they are under-staffed and you have to be a slave the whole day, just for a few coins.

Both of my parents were in the DR, and I was crying. I was depressed because I was thinking, 'Okay, I'm just 19 years old, I will be like everybody who works, works, works, and they never find a job where they can be comfortable.' I was living check to check and I was thinking that maybe if I do the career that I like, I can get up from the depression I was in because that was a very, very, very hard period that I was depressed. I was thinking, What can I do in this city and in this new opportunity that I have? That's why I came to New York City, for a better education. I'm supposed to be a citizen of the United States, but even still that's not enough, that's not enough proof.

I left the nursing home because it was too depressing for me, the environment. Because a lot of *viejitos* were dying. And a lot of people were dying inside, they didn't have the chance to say goodbye to their families. I spent the whole day, you know, cleaning up vomit, changing diapers, and stuff, and the screaming and crying all day from the elderly people. I was like I don't want this for the rest of my life. I know I want to be in a healthcare facility, I want to be the title that puts me with the high privileged people, that people say, 'okay, she's not like someone who changes diapers all day.' So I went into Customer Food service. And I saw how for $15 an hour, you have to be a dishwasher, you have to be a person that grills, you have to do the customer cashier, everything at once for under...underpayment. And I thought 'I don't want to do this the whole time. Even if I take like a course, that's nothing compared to what the city needs.' It's not even about what you need, it's what the city needs where you are living. So I was like 'okay, I have to do something else.'

Starting again at another college

The following summer, Yessi was ready to try college again. Though she had originally hoped to become a nurse, she began to negotiate the amount of time she would need to spend pursuing the degree with the possible financial outcomes, looking at what programs would lead to her making more money than what she was currently being paid as a home health aide. She applied again to public universities in the NYC area, but she had to pay the college application fees, and was unsure if the outcome for FAFSA would be any different.

> Now what do you have to do, if you know the education system, they don't approve that you're independent to have FAFSA. So I was thinking, okay, let's see something smaller than a nurse, what's smaller? CNA [Certified Nursing Assistant]. I was thinking, because I already have my home health aide, CNA is too little because it's the same. It's like housekeeping but we're just a few hours different from the Home Health Aide. So I was thinking okay, Medical Assistant. That's an associate. Okay, so how do I do an associate degree? And I was seeing the CUNY application, and just the application is like $80. The application is $80. How will I do like five applications and they say no to me or it will be the same story. And I was crying like oh my god how will I pay $80 for an application to see if they say yes or no. I was traumatized. I didn't want to spend that much money. And I had another call with Lehman College and they told me the same thing, the same: Okay. First of all, pay this for the application. Second of all, after I paid and I waited, like three months, they told me, 'Nope, you have to blah, blah, blah, blah.' Okay.

She found a technical school that had a medical assistant training program. This was a private school, but they accepted her petition for being an independent thus overriding the need for her parents' tax documents for FAFSA, so she was able to take out student loans and get financial aid.

> Then I went to this school in Penn Station. And they said, okay, yes, you can have FASFA but since this is a private school, you have to pay more for tuition, like you have to pay double. So I took like the $6,000 that FAFSA gave for one year. Plus, after I graduate, I have to start paying the student loan, because I took a student loan for the whole year.

She was nervous that her new college was going to scam her or charge her more than they originally stated:

> I still don't believe it. Like after all the rejections I had before with the other schools, I think like hmm is this a trick? Maybe it's because they will put like $4000 more on the bill at the end of the day because I think this system the only thing they worry about is the money, that's what makes me scared.

Different from her experience at the large, public university where she had started, she felt the support of the instructors and staff. They gave her a personalized tour of the school facilities; they explained the attendance process and program plan. She also felt that the professors cared if you were learning. It was very hands-on and practical.

> The first thing that I noticed when I signed up…Okay, all of them they care about the financial stuff. The thing that I noticed is that my advisor, I have already her email. I can email her every time that I want with a question. Why didn't I have that in [public college]? …So that's the first thing that I noticed with College of Health Profession

> Training. And she showed me the classrooms. She made me familiarized with the the environment that I would be in. She didn't make me scared or maybe overthink how things would be. She explained to me the process. They gave me my orientation, they showed me everything, they showed me the people I can talk too, like "This is your director. It's a big school, like 9 floors. This is the people you can talk to for financial support. This is the people you can come to if you are absent or very late. This is the type of professor that you will have. This is our classrooms. This is the break room." I was so fascinated. That they really take their time to make me comfortable. That's why I think I felt more comfortable with my first day in person than in [public college].

In her program, Yessi would meet with the same group of people for a "cycle" of instruction. Most of her classmates were older and were studying to change careers in the medical field. She felt welcomed and like she could talk with her new classmates. She was looking forward to drawing blood in her upcoming cycle. In describing her experiences at New Age Training, she described positive relationships with the instructors and students.

> I love it. I really enjoy it. You have different classes, like different days of the week. Like we start with this class for three weeks, when we finish we move on to the next one. For example, I've been taking Writing Communications. So after two weeks of Writing Communications, I start Anatomy. After Anatomy, it's Medical Office Administration in two weeks, and that's why it's like a group. I feel like I'm like in a little family now. Because everybody treats everybody how they should. The teachers can see themselves in the students because the teachers are already people who passed through the medical field. They are doctors, nurses, and medical assistants teaching classes.

Intersectionality

In her testimonio, Yessi speaks to how being multiply marginalized, as a poor, Black, fat Latina has impacted her experiences with college in the US.

> Education and the financing, that's the last thing that you should be worrying about if you want to pursue your dreams here. So maybe I think that's why a lot of people quit because they don't make it easy for you to pursue that career. I think they do that because they like more slaves than bosses, in the educational system.
>
> Yeah, they like to keep people on the floor, the people that already made it. That’s why people say, if you make it in New York, you can make it anywhere. Because it’s so difficult, but that, at the same time, is so sad. That's why people get depressed. They live the rest of their life miserable. And I was feeling miserable too. But you make your way. You know even though life will give you slaps on the face, *par de galletas*, you would like to be different; you would like to have a different apartment, a different house, and all of that is from the base of the education.
>
> You know that if you work in a McDonald’s, it’s not the same thing, as if you are working even as an assistant teacher because people will treat you different. Work here in New York City doesn’t mean just the money you make, it is the title that you have in your face even though you will make like less money. For example, housekeeping, you can earn $20 an hour doing housekeeping. And you can earn $15 an hour to be an assistant teacher, but people will see that the teacher is better than the housekeeping person. Why?

> I think people should have the same respect because work is work. But I think it's because not everybody gets to have the same education, so they see education like high privileged people. Yeah it's hard. You try to be like high privileged people too.

In a group plática, Yessi pointed out how some of the participants did not bring up issues around race impacting their college experiences, but that it did not mean those issues weren't there for Latinx people. She referred to another participant who was light skinned, thin, and who had the support of her family here.

> [Cecilia] can fit in in the stereotype and fit herself into the public. She's light-skinned. I personally think everything matters when you are Hispanic or when you come from a different background since people judge you. If you have brown skin or the type of hair that you have, or the pronunciation you have. Even though [Cecilia] is the same Hispanic as I am, people will judge me first and harsher than [Cecilia], because she's a little girl with long, straight hair, light skin, pronunciation perfect. They will think she has a better future than me just by the way that she looks. Even though that's true because, you know, maybe she will have a better job in the future because in the interview, the type of mentality the interviewer has with her compared with me.
>
> In my experience, let's start with the Dominican people. Maybe we can have like the same accents but we are different sizes, different colors, different hair. We are all different. So I've seen how people treat Dominican people in the work environment and in the educational environment different, it depends on how they look. I've been put on the grill I don't know how many times instead of the Dominican girl who has long curly hair and like a *mami* figure.

> They go to the cashier and I go to the back to the grill. Why? Even if I ask to be in front, even if I am better with people. I can make more people laugh there. Why am I always on the grill, and she is in the customer service? So maybe because people see my... my... you know, how you look. So it's the same with education. Maybe a professor will be more, you know, more patient with one person than the other, it depends on how your body language is.
>
> People see my accent, my color, when I have my colored hair, and my braids, and they maybe think like 'Okay you are not a resident or maybe you are going for your papers.' Or 'Oh, you live without your boyfriend, maybe your boyfriend is gringo and you're looking for papers.' They will see the title or your face.
>
> I was with my uniform today and and I was coming from the train, and I see how a white lady looking at me because it's, you know, from downtown. And I was looking at her and she's looking at me, and I'm looking at her, and I bet she was thinking I came from housekeeping because of the uniform. Where I know she don't know that I'm doing my medical assistant career. And what I know from her looks, she thinks I'm regular housekeeping person because of my looks. Maybe she goes to an urgent care or a hospital and she will find me there.

When talking about what would have helped Yessi in her transition from high school to college Yessi was adamant about how above all, having support of parents would have been the most helpful.

> I would say…I don't want to sound like a little child, but the support of my parents. Yeah, that would be more easier because even today I ask myself if I did the right thing.
>
> Because in my country even though I didn't have food, I didn't have a great education, I

knew that I would have someone’s shoulder to be in. But when I came here and I saw that nobody cared after I was in college and I was alone by myself. I said goodbye to my teachers and goodbye to my counselor and I didn't have nobody and I have to work. There were days that I just ate like the school food. That was so messed up to me. Or I would just eat the shelter food.

Yeah during Covid, I would get the breakfast they gave and lunch. And even feminine products I used to pick up over there because I didn't have the money. During the shelter, I was trying to save to move to an apartment, so during that time I couldn’t be just wasting my money in food when I had food in the school and it was terrible. So I think my parents support or at least like somebody who was looking after me during my education would be perfect.

Through these hardships, Yessi is proud of herself and her accomplishments:

I could say that I'm a student here in New York City because I knew that it has a meaning in the future. Even though I didn't finish [public college], I could say at least I got admitted. They have a GPA requirement from 3.5. Not everybody gets into [public college].

I don’t have the best vocabulary, but the only thing that I could say, I have the best effort. Like I will keep calling you, keep emailing you, keep going, but I will get there at some point. I was so happy that I was between all those *blanquitos* coming from rich, rich families, and I was coming from the bottom. Like the song “Started from the bottom now we here.”

Yessi experienced the trauma of being kicked out of her first college in front of a large lecture-sized class for not paying tuition. She had to navigate the bureaucratic processes of

applying to financial aid and not qualifying despite jumping through painful hoops of reaching out to her parents with whom she already had a tenuous relationship. She was working throughout high school and college, and looked to college for its possible financial benefits as well as for the cultural capital, or as Yessi put it, "I want to be the title that puts me with the high privileged people." Her experiences of housing instability and poverty in her educational journey also bring to light reasons that first generation Latinx college students may drop out or have to pause their studies. As she experienced the excitement of starting again at another college and studying something she was passionate about, the trauma of her previous experiences with the education system lingered. In the private medical training college, she described feelings of being welcomed with adequate and personable advisement, and feelings of belonging, ("I feel like I'm like in a little family now"), important qualities for colleges who aim to support first generation students and culturally relevant pedagogies to take stock of.

Cecilia

Cecilia is from Guatemala and moved to the US with her family in the middle of 8th grade. She speaks English and Spanish. She lives with her mom, her stepdad, 2 siblings and her dog. Cecilia started high school at STAR in beginning-level ESL classes, and by her junior and senior year of high school, she was taking AP English through the college and career initiative AP for All. The Covid-19 pandemic started in her junior year of high school, and she completed her senior year remotely, as was the case for Yessi. Many of my memories of Cecilia were formed over the computer, during remote learning. I remember how her positive energy radiated through the computer as we navigated very challenging times in the world and in education. In what follows, I share excerpts from our pláticas that render her experiences of the college

transition in ways that I hope capture her creativity, dedication, kindness, generosity, and positive spirit.

Getting oriented on campus

At the time of data collection, Cecilia was a freshman at a large, public, urban college. She is a psychology major and hopes to one day be a therapist or counselor. Like Yessi, Cecilia was unable participate in in-person campus tours and relied on student-created Youtube videos of campuses. It was only after enrolling, that she was invited for an official tour of the college, although, the tour was still virtual.

> I was completely lost in the process. I didn't know what to do. So what I did was, because I was trying to look for if they have some meetings to show with the campus or anything like that, but they didn't. And I was like, okay, so I need to find a way to see how campus looks like. And I went to YouTube and and put 'How is [urban college in New York]'s campus.' And there were videos where the students were showing all the classrooms and everything. So, I was like, okay, I like this, this one over here is better. And that's the way I did it because they didn't have anything.

Cecilia was able to apply to sources of financial aid, and worked over Zoom with the high school college advisor to navigate the application process.

> [The college advisor] was really, really helpful. She gave us like so many videos. And we also had like one-on-one sessions so she could explain. She'd be like 'let me see your TAP' and we would share screen and she was guiding us through the process and she would be like 'Okay, you need to do this and that' or 'Okay these are the options. This is the way you can do it' or 'Do this another way because this way doesn't work for you.'

> And she always try to help us a lot with that. She was so helpful but it was a really stressful process.

Having never seen the campus before in person until her first day of classes, Cecilia described the stress and anxiety of not being able to find her classes.

> First day of school: I cried! I cried. Literally I cried. I was completely lost. I didn't know where to go because the first day, my first class was online, the second one was in person, and the third one was online. So I had to go to campus because it was just 25 minutes between the classes, so I didn't have time to commute, you know. So I had to take the online class on campus. So I went to the campus, and the first class was online, I was fine. Then for my second class that was in person, I didn't know where the building was, or how to find the classrooms, and there were so many people, so many people and, oh my God, I was like, what am I gonna do? Where am I going to go? And because I'm shy, I didn't want to ask people. So I was crying and I was like, oh my God, what am I gonna do? I called my sister and she was like 'Okay relax, and you're going to go ask somebody. Relax, relax. You're going to ask someone because you have to get to class.' So after I cried, I asked someone. Like do you know where this is? And he was like, okay, it's the one right in front of you. And I was okay, great. Thank you.
>
> And that person explained to me how to find the classrooms, like he explained everything, 'you're going to swipe your ID, and then you can take the elevators or escalators wherever you want, and then you will find the classrooms.' And I was like 'Thank you so much' and then I find the classroom. But yeah I cried. That was a really bad thing. I was walking on the street and crying.

In a moment of crisis, Cecilia called on her sister for support to talk her through the ordeal of not being able to find her class. This surfaces the familial capital (Yosso 2005) of marginalized groups, the lessons of "caring, coping and providing educación, which informs our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness" (p. 79) that are often overlooked or unrecognized in the discourse of college-going supports.

The pressure from perfectionism

Cecilia described feeling pressure to get good grades in college, which she said stems from her perfectionism. She also noted feeling pressure to live up to her identity of being a "good student" and "intelligent." She noted how her friends didn't intentionally put pressure on her to do well at college, though she still felt a pressure to meet their expectations.

> Everything I do related to school, I want it to be perfect. And if things don't go the way I want, I would get like frustrated. I really want them to be like perfect and that's not good, I would say, because it makes me like...it's so stressful the fact that sometimes it doesn't come out the way that I want.
>
> The pressure. And the fact that my friends aren't like…they don't do it, like pressure on me, but they are always like, 'Oh my God, she's a really good student. She's in college right now, and shes doing really good' and they don't put that pressure on me, but I do it by myself. You know that I have to do a good job in school because that's everything I'm doing.

When Cecilia failed her first calculus exam, the pressure to meet the expectations of a "good student" made it difficult for her to tell her parents, as she didn't want to let them down.

> Last semester when I failed the first exam that was in calc, I failed it, and that was like the was the worst day of my life because I didn't fail exams in high school, so I didn't

know that feeling. I hadn't experienced it. So it was the first time and …that was the worst day, and I didn't tell my parents and they don't know about it.

I didn't know how they were going to react about it because they're always like, 'Oh my God, she's so intelligent. She did really good in high school and she's really good in college.' And I didn't want them to feel like that I wasn't doing enough. I was afraid of their reaction. So that's why I didn't tell them.

Struggling to find advisement

Cecilia was placed in a calculus course her freshman year because she had taken pre-calculus in her senior year of high school; however, she felt unprepared because her high school pre-calculus course was remote and she hadn't learned enough of the material. After failing the first exam, she wanted to meet with her advisor, but found it was nearly impossible to find an avaialble time slot for advisement.

> I had 5 classes, and I passed 4 out of 5 because I was taking calculus because I took pre-calc in high school but we didn't learn anything because it was through Zoom, so I didn't learn anything. So that was the most challenging class for me. Plus the professor, he was like, 'If you're learning, that's perfect. If you're not, that's your problem. I'm not gonna help you. You have to do whatever you want, or you have to learn it by yourself.' So, we were like 'Oh my God.' …So it was like something really hard for me because it was so stressful. I had to watch like 4 or 5 YouTube videos in order to learn what we were learning in class and that was so stressful. So I tried to focus more on calc and I didn't focus on my other classes. I had to drop the class.

> And it was their fault because for [urban college in New York], the first schedule they gave it to us. So we couldn't change anything until we ask for permission. A block schedule. And it's not easy to talk to the advisors.
>
> …I scheduled an appointment with one of the advisers and he told me that I was in the wrong class, that I was supposed to take pre-calc, not calc, and that they had made a mistake. So I had to drop. And I'm gonna take pre-calc now, next semester..

Cecilia started her freshman year already with a clear vision for her major, but she had to figure out her schedule and the classes she should take for that major on her own using the school's website. She explained the process for registering for courses, and emphasized the importance of registering just as enrollment opened; if not, a prerequisite course might already be filled, which would then delay her progress in the major.

> Basically, they have it on their website, they have like for every major a plan or something like that, and they give you some classes like flexible core courses. And then suggestions for the major that correspond…. Registering it's so stressful because if you're not there like at the time the enrollment opens for you, there are no more options.

This time pressure was also felt in regard to scheduling advisement, which involved an online system she had to learn to navigate. She was not designated an advisor that would remain with her through over the course of her studies, like Claudia, who had the same advisor all 4 years; instead, Cecilia would get randomly assigned anyone who was available during a particular time slot. This was a major difference she noted between high school and college. In high school, she was very close to the school guidance counselor and would talk to her often. In college, however, she did not know who would advise her and it was a different person each time, so she had to keep explaining her situation again and could not build a relationship with that person.

> I don't have like one advisor. They are many advisors, but there are so many people so. We we have an app, it's called Navigate. So we can go there and schedule appointments with advisors over time. Every time it's a different advisor, it's not the same one. And I don't like that we have different advisors. I want one like [high school counselor].

Cecilia described how she would keep checking the website, only to find all the time slots were full. For example, in order to drop the calculus class her first semester, she could not get an advisement appointment until the end of the semester. By that time, she was concerned that the course would appear on her transcript.

> It's really hard to get appointments with the advisors so I was trying almost every single day to make an appointment, and the appointments open at 9 a.m. So I was like waiting for it every single day until I got one, but it was almost at the end of the semester…It's on my transcript unfortunately, that I dropped the class. It didn't affect my GPA so that's good.

Cecilia is a MaCaulay Honors student, which means she is the recipient of a full-tuition scholarship. However, Cecilia noted that she would have preferred to not have received this particular Honors scholarship because it meant she did not get SEEK, which she learned from her friends in other CUNY schools, provided financial assistance *in addition* to mentorship, which is something she wanted more of. SEEK provides additional support "for students who are considered to be economically disadvantaged and academically underprepared" (SEEK Program, 2023). She explained that she didn't get SEEK because her grades in high school were too high, and that her friend who got SEEK had just below an 85 average in high school. Cecilia's thoughts on getting financial support, but limited to no academic support in college, brings to light how representational decisions for support programs are being interpreted and experienced

by students. Cecilia commented that if she would have gotten lower grades in high school, she might have been considered to be a SEEK recipient, which would have helped her more throughout her degree program.

"I have to do everything myself"

Other differences Cecilia noted between her high school and college experiences were the increased class size and having a hard time getting to know people.

> Well it's been... Oh my God...It's been really challenging because you know that STAR was a really small community, but now I'm at [urban college in New York], so it's pretty big, so it was really challenging for me because I was used to know everyone there and to be so friendly. But now at college I feel like, I don't know, it's something really different. It's been hard. The first semester was really hard for me but now this is my second semester so I'm like more comfortable about that. I am making friends and I'm trying to be like more, I don't know, more friendly.
>
> I think that the most difficult thing is that I'm a shy person. Well, not so shy. But yeah, I'm shy. It's kind of challenging for me the fact that I have to do everything by myself. If I need help, I have to go and look for it or I have to ask for it or I have to make friends and I have to talk to them in English. And the fact that the classes are like pretty big, around 30-40 students. So, I wasn't used to that because, you know, at STAR they were like pretty small classes, 20-15 students. So that's challenging for me because I don't feel like the teacher pays attention to us, to every student. They just don't care if you're learning; if you're not, that's your problem. So I think that's the most challenging.

Cecilia echoes the comments of other participants, like Yessi, who felt like professors didn't care about them or their learning, and which was markedly different from their high school

experiences. She also described how, although she was still living at home with her parents, they were less involved than they were in high school.

> I used to tell [my parents] like every detail, everything, and I used to talk to them, like "Oh my God, I did that and this, and I have this project." I don't tell them anymore about it because I feel like it's like.. Plus my mom started working now. So I don't have that much time that I used to have during high school. So I don't talk to them a lot about it anymore. Like, because, when I was in high school, my parents were always on top of me. Like, 'Hey' 'How are you doing? And are you doing homework? and What grades are you getting and how was your day?' And now that they're not asking me that, I know it is all me, it's all on me, so I know I have to do it.

Friendship

Cecilia made one really close friend at college, who was also learning English and spoke Spanish.

> I have one friend, a good friend. I met her last semester. We were lost and we were like trying to find the classroom and we realized that we had the same schedule and so I made a friend. It's just one friend. We are majoring in psychology. So we try to work, like when we're making our schedule, we try to combine our classes, we try to have classes together, so we can help each other. We speak English and Spanish. She's Dominican.

Cecilia described her friend as very outgoing which, in turn, encouraged her to become more vocal in class and talk with people, especially because her friend would introduce her to other people. With her friend, Cecilia felt she was starting to overcome her shyness. Another thing that helped her talk more to people was that her first semester, she had the same classes with the same group of students based on their block schedule.

The good thing about [the college] is they gave us like a block schedule and they gave us our first schedule. And we couldn't change anything without any asking the advisors. So, there was a group of students that had the same schedule last semester. So, that's how we made friends last semester. There were like 15 people that we had the same schedule so we would see each other every single day. Yeah, we made friends and we have a group chat. We just we don't talk that much, just like ‘Oh, we have homework?’ Yeah it's due in a couple days' that's it- we just talk about classes.

Although Cecilia was a part of the cohort group chat, many of the connections she formed did not go beyond sharing school information and chatting about their classes.

Navigating linguistic expectations

Different from other participants, Cecilia noted the diversity of the teaching staff at the large, urban public college she was attending.

[College in New York] it’s diverse, like the city. The professors are diverse. Some of them speak Spanish too. There’s one professor and we even have the same last name. The professors are also diverse, actually I haven't seen any white professor.

The first day of classes, they gave us like survey and they always ask if English is your native language or do you speak any other languages. And then they ask, ‘Is there something you want us to know about you, or about your English.’ So I always tell them like, ‘Okay, so English is my second language and I'm trying to improve my English. So please, excuse me for any mistakes,’ or things like that. And they are always so nice. And they ask me, is there something I can help you with? Or here are some websites. You can go and and it will help you with your English.

She felt supported by her professors with her English. However, she had encounters in classes where she felt judged by her classmates and she described how she would adapt her speech and try to imitate others.

> There are some students, like, they judge you because they feel like they're... I don't know..like they feel they know more than everyone else. People tend to judge you because of the way you act or the way you speak. So I'm always trying to listen to how people speak first before I say something… I'm always try to hear people the way they speak or the words they use. I try to do the same and speak the same way they do.

Though Cecilia's comments seem to point toward attempts at assimilation to a normative white academic linguistic register and academic identity, we also can see here how her metalinguistic awareness is such that she recognizes and responds to various language registers (Orellana 2003). This highlights a strength of bilingual bicultural youth who are able to purposefully employ a critical examination of conventions of speaking and writing to communicate with different audiences and registers.

Motivation for getting through the hard times

One of Cecilia's high school memories that helps her get through difficult times was also connected to her command of English. At the end of her freshman year of high school, her English teacher recommended she take the English Regents. Cecilia was nervous she would not be able to pass the exam because of her English, but she studied a lot and passed.

> When I was a freshman, [my English teacher], she pushed me to take the English Regents that year. And I was scared because I was like, I don't speak English well and what am I gonna do? Like I was scared of that and I was like I'm not going to pass it. But then she was always like with positive thoughts, and she was like okay you're going to pass the

> Regents, don't think in a negative way. I was like okay. And I took the Regents and I passed it and I remember with a 70 something and I was like, oh my God, how did I do that? And because after that, I realized that I was able to do everything I wanted to do and that's something I always remember. When I'm in classes or when I have to do a project or things that seem hard, I think about that. And I'm like, okay, if I could do that, I can do this now.

In a high-stakes standardized testing saturated environment, Cecilia's past experiences with the English Regents exam mediates her college academic identity and how she positions herself to challenges: "if I could do that, I can do this now." Other things that help Cecilia in challenging times is listening to inspirational music and drawing.

> One song that I used to listen to like almost every day, especially last semester, it's in Spanish. Well, it's in Spanish and English at the same time. And it's called *Todo va a estar bien*--That's like a really inspirational song. So it helped me a lot too last semester, evertime I felt like I can't with school stuff. And because I don't work, so everything I have to do is to school…It was number one on my playlist and the only one.

In one of our pláticas, Cecilia showed me her drawings, which she had photographed and added to her Instagram page. Though not many people knew of her passion or talent for drawing, she explained it helped her relax and was just fun.

Connecting with a student from STAR

During data collection, another student from STAR, who was a classmate of Cecilia's and who had just been admitted to the same college as Cecilia, reached out to her for help. The student hadn't heard back from the college to schedule her orientation.

> Yeah, [Aliana] texted me and asked me like how was my experience and that's what I explained to her that, like I got the email for the orientation like three weeks after I submitted everything. So I told her just, it's okay--they take their time to send those emails.

Cecilia, explained the process and took it upon herself to give the student a tour of the campus. The student also needed help scheduling placement tests, registering for classes, and she had questions about financial aid. Cecilia acted as a mentor to this student, and they remain in contact.

Conclusion

The individual experiences of the participants rendered in this chapter resist neatly packaged narratives of struggle, of "overcoming obstacles," or of linear trajectories of success. The range and variety of experiences shared here counter singular narratives which often get reproduced around Latinx bilingual college-going youth. They are stories of multiple life transitions, of living, working, and studying before, during, and after a pandemic. They share the joys of making new friends and the loneliness of starting in a new place, the importance of family connections and community, alongside feelings of exclusion. We see how the participants navigate the emotional and material labor involved in the bureaucratic processes of applying to college; they also contest the value of a college degree and college as a marker of "academic success" in White mainstream spaces that were designed without their cultural and linguistic practices in mind.

In order to understand and fight systemic oppression, we need to explore the range of individualized experiences of marginalized populations. Claudia, Estrella, Yessi, and Cecilia's portraits show distinct experiences but also overlapping themes of working and fighting in

systems of oppression. In the next chapter, given the range and variety of the topics and experiences shared by the participants, I look across participant pláticas to analyze themes I identified related to my research question. I will then give recommendations and implications for educators. The knowledge the participants shared from their experiences can be used to create more equitable and culturally responsive educational opportunities.

Chapter 5: THINKING ACROSS PLÁTICAS FOR TRANSFORMATION

In this chapter, I analyze themes that emerged in looking across participant pláticas that address the research question: How do first generation Latinx bilingual students experience the transition from high school to college? The themes that I examine here are 1) the construction of "smartness" and its impact on the college-going journey, 2) the importance of Latinx mentors, and 3) the variety and variability of supports at the college level. I then share the recommendations participants brought forth for educators. I conclude with methodological considerations and implications for researchers and educators.

Theme 1: The construction of smartness and its impact on the college transition

All of the participants referenced notions of "smartness" at various times when describing their educational journeys to and through college. Their relationship to smartness was not fixed– they mentioned smartness as an identity they had ascribed to, an expectation they felt pressure to live up to, or as something exclusionary. The label of "smartness" in the participants' college-going experiences had myriad effects on how they see themselves, on the educational opportunities they had access to, and on the interactions they had with educators and classmates both in high school and college. In a discourse of college readiness, college access, and opportunity-oriented education, the data from this study made visible the hierarchical orientations of academic "potential" that were at odds with efforts of a culturally sustaining pedagogy, where "potential" or "smartness" was exhibited by school-based literacy skills and a stronger command of English.

The social construction of “smartness” and its connection to whiteness as a tool of white supremacy has been documented by many (Hatt, 2016; Leonardo and Broderick 2011; Skiba 2012). The literature has also highlighted how measures of “smartness” in the form of grades, test scores, the SAT, and college prep curriculum act as gatekeeping mechanisms that result in the further marginalization of communities of color (Harry & Klingner 2014; Hatt 2007, 2012, 2016). As previously demonstrated in my review of the literature, there is a significant body of work that contests hegemonic, patriarchal, heteronormative, and white conceptualizations of smartness and knowledge production. I argue that the data from this study calls us to look even closer into the ways in which “smartness” gets reproduced and plays out in school spaces that are focused on college access for all. My research highlights the nuanced, often easily overlooked, ways that discourses of college readiness marginalize first-generation bilingual Latinx students and their knowledges, even when schools are focused on equity and culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2014; Paris, 2014, 2021), which ostensibly are meant to position them as smart, as knowledge holders and creators.

Intersections of “smartness” and language

Looking across participant pláticas illuminates how “smartness” or “college readiness” were often associated with a command of English and traditional school-based literacies. The participants were characterized as “smart” or more “college ready” particularly based on their command of English and they internalized these claims about themselves. For example, Estrella described feeling more confident and motivated when her peers started to call her smart in high school; at the same time, she described feeling “less than” and excluded from a group of “smart students” who participated in extracurricular activities and college prep opportunities. When she started high school in the US, Estrella was surprised to find that she was already familiar with

some of the things being taught. She felt encouragement from peers and teachers for her academic achievement.

> Because in my country they did teach us already what the students were seeing here. And I was like why are they teaching that here now, like I saw that already, even though I didn't pay that much attention…. And then they were like 'Wow! You're good.' And then I'm like, wow... I'm that smart. And this process was a really good change for me because I didn't even consider myself as smart or intelligent.
>
> …My friends made me believe that I was smart. Maybe it was there all along, but I didn't see myself like that before, I didn't see that I was capable to do something and all in English. So that was a really good change for me because I started to trust more myself, challenge myself, and, and see that I can do hard things.

Estrella's lived experience, realizing she already knew the content she was being taught and coming to see herself as smart, is a counter-narrative to how students with the label of SIFE are often characterized as "behind" in school. We also see here how "academic ability" is positioned alongside English proficiency when she says, "...that I was capable to do something and all in English." While developing her literacy in Spanish and English at STAR, Estrella shared how she felt encouraged and supported by her teachers and peers.

> I still remember when I came to the United States that I wasn't considering myself smart but when I came to this high school and then the teachers would see me and they would tell me, I don't know how, but everyone would say 'Estrella you're so smart' and then I started to believe it. I started to believe it because of people... I could feel people's love. I could feel people supporting me, and I was like, they're saying it for something.

Estrella's words are a testament to pedagogies of care, ("I could feel people's love,") and to culturally affirming and asset-based pedagogies that view students' cultures, languages, identities, and communities as valuable resources. At the same time, it also points to how Estrella conceptualizes smartness as more of an intrinsic quality that was brought out of her by her teachers and friends, ("maybe it was there all along…my friends made me believe that I was smart,") and in conjunction with a command of English.

Cecilia also referred back to a time in high school when she felt encouraged by a teacher to take the English Regents and this experience had a lasting impact on her. In her first year at STAR, Cecilia passed the English Regents, despite feeling unsure of her academic English. Cecilia would draw on this memory of how she overcame an academic challenge whenever she was going through other challenges at college.

> …I was scared because I was like, I don't speak English well and what am I gonna do? Like I was scared of that and I was like I'm not going to pass it. But then [my English teacher] was always like with positive thoughts, and she was like okay you're going to pass the Regents, don't think in a negative way.... I took the Regents and I passed it and I remember with a 70-something and I was like, oh my God, how did I do that? And because after that, I realized that I was able to do everything I wanted to do and that's something I always remember. When I'm in classes or when I have to do a project or things that seem hard, I think about that. And I'm like, okay if I could do that, I can do this now.

Both Estrella and Cecilia's comments evoke the connection of "smartness" to their command of English. For Cecilia, an assessment, or school-based marker, was a validation of her smartness. Their comments are set within a backdrop of standardized assessments and measures of college

readiness that privileges white, Eurocentric literate practices, “mainstream academic knowledge” (Banks 1993), and English monolingualism. As previously noted, specific to the New York context, in order for students to graduate high school they must pass the New York State Regents exams, and exit exams for key content areas such as Algebra, Geometry, Science, US History, Global History, and English. While some subject area exams can be taken in the student’s native language if it is available, the English Regents exam must be taken in English. NYC public schools, like STAR, are evaluated on the 4-year graduation rate, as well as by the college readiness opportunities offered to students. Students learning English or who need extra literacy support may need more time to meet the high school graduation requirements. Second language acquisition scholarship has pointed to how it can take between 3–7 years to be fluent in a second language (August & Hakuta, 1997; García & Wiese, 2002), and in the US secondary school is typically a 4-year pathway. This puts time pressure on teachers and administrators to get bilingual students to meet graduation requirements. There are real, material consequences for students who do not graduate with a high school degree. An emphasis on exit exams that test academic English also has implications for how students’ cultural and linguistic knowledges can be relegated to a position of less importance to English in the enacted curriculum.

In a neoliberal educational context of accountability measures, smartness was tied to English and to school-based markers of validation. The participants described smartness as an intrinsic, individual quality, as something that they possessed, that could be drawn on or conjured up, and that was signaled by externals markers of validation. Estrella described smartness as was something that friends brought out her when they told her she was smart. Cecilia described smartness in relation to her success in a school-based assessment. In both

examples “smartness” and it’s intersection with English and assessment were at odds with the the mission of STAR to be a culturally and linguistically affirming space for newcomers.

“Smartness” and college readiness– Constricting opportunities to connect with students

As mentioned, the participants of this study were enrolled in a high school for bilingual students, which in many ways was a culturally affirming space. They had teachers and staff that shared their cultural and linguistic background in a bilingual program that viewed their home language as an asset and encouraged the use and development of both languages. However, a heightened focus on college readiness and the pressures of high-stakes exit exams diminished the opportunities for teachers to get to know students and develop relationships with them, as was the case with my relationship with Estrella. I felt I did not get to know Estrella when she was my student as well as I did the other participants. Because of the pressures I was facing at that time as a teacher to get Estrella to pass the English Regents, much of our class time centered on explicit test prep. The pressures to be “college ready” or to prepare students in order to gain access to college can result in teachers glossing over or erasing the individual nuanced experiences of students, their migration journeys, and their personal circumstances. It can compromise the time and space required for establishing relationships of shared vulnerability and trust; these conditions are essential for immigrant youth to be able to share their lived experiences, transnational identities, and journey stories, which can lead to healing.

While Estrella expressed positive feelings of being supported at STAR, (“ I could feel people’s love. I could feel people supporting me.”) she also described painful moments of exclusion, of feeling less than others and being an outsider to the “smart” students.

> I always wanted to be with the *smart* students, and I was listening to them talking…And I was like ‘Oh I don't know that.’ I used to feel like *less* because I honestly didn't know

> how to do all the things they were talking about or how to socialize with people and start speaking English.

Her words bring forth the contradictions of how in a newcomer school meant to affirm students' cultures and languages, tracking was still happening. Estrella did not have the same exposure or access to college preparation opportunities as the other participants, which had an impact on how she saw herself in relation to "smartness." "Smartness" requires access and Estrella's circumstances outside of school, working to help repay the cost of her migration journey, limited her access to after-school college-prep opportunities. She also did not have access to AP English courses (like other participants) because it was deemed more pressing that she develop English and foundational literacy skills and pass high school exit exams in order to graduate.

Teachers may unintentionally be reifying exclusionary practices within their own school-based, local contexts, despite trying to help all students to gain access to college. When resources and time are limited in school, teachers, like myself, may find themselves spending more time investing in supporting the college-going processes of students who appear to have more "potential" based on a stronger command of English and school-based literacies. Simon and Campano (2013) describe how mechanisms of normal curve positions students based on a socially constructed hierarchies of "ability" and achievement. "Normal" is the result of a "socially produced and locally instantiated phenomena (school achievement) masquerading as inevitable reality, an ideology that serves to reproduce social inequalities." (p.22). Thus, one manifestation of the normal curve ideology in the context of STAR was that students were still being sorted or "tracked," even when the school was committed to supporting all students, to being culturally and lingusticall affirming, and approaching students from a place of strength. The experiences of the participants shared here point to sorting mechanisms that label all

students, whether implicitly or explicitly, and how there must be a closer examination of the ways college readiness work is interpreted and experienced by students.

Why were the teachers at STAR so focused on preparing students for college, or as Claudia described it, "pouring college through our eyes"? Teachers are trying to prepare students so that they can attend college and challenge deficit views about bilingual students so that they don't think they are "not college material." Yet, in doing so, going to college becomes a marker of "smartness," of doing a "good job," or academic success and achievement tied to English. This can lead to educators not really seeing their students and their realities and can aslo lead to not all students being deemed "college material."

Insider versus outsider

"Smartness" also reified conditions of insider versus outsider that participants experienced upon entering college. As hooks (1994) explains, "racism, sexism, and class elitism shape the structure of classrooms, creating a lived reality of insider versus outsider that is predetermined, often in place before any class discussion begins" (p.84). We can see this in the experiences of Yessi who described how, when she started at a large, urban public university, she felt an "imposter syndrome" in which she perceived she was "behind" other students.

> I was like, okay I haven't catch up with my pronunciation, I thought that I would have to do double the amount of work that people do. Like okay for [Public College], I see the grades, the GPA, I think there are people who are smarter than me, I think there's people who were born here who will understand easily this stuff…

The dichotomy of "behind" - "ahead" that is expressed in Yessi's words here and throughout the participants' portraits point to the pervasiveness of normal curve ideology in education (Simon & Campando, 2013). Transitioning into an English-dominant space, Yessi expressed concerns

around her pronunciation and "smartness." According to raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores 2020) a student is deemed successful or proficient in academic language "by the white listening/reading subject whose perceptions have been shaped by histories of colonialism that continue to frame racialized speakers as coming from communities with linguistic deficiencies that need to be policed and corrected." (p. 25) Judgements about the "correctness" or "appropriateness" of language are rooted in coloniality and white supremacy and reinforce social status, capital, and power. Yessi's "imposter syndrome" around language was not just an erroneous perception or a result of low confidence, but rather, an awareness of the ways in which "the white listening/reading subject" makes judgments of "correct" languaging practices that have social and material consequences (p. 25). This shows her cultural and linguistic dexterity, and challenges deficit perceptions of her language practices. Claudia described how she makes decisions about the ways she communicates at home, at school, and with friends.

> You know, I try to speak a little bit more properly when I'm in class and with my professors and stuff like that, but I still throw in a lot of colloquialisms, a lot of slang, because it's just easier and none of my professors are ever like 'Oh speak properly,' because they understand what I'm saying. In papers obviously, I write very differently from how I speak.
>
> …Because people are not going to listen to you, if you put it in plain words, sometimes you have to, you know, be jargony and use the over-complicated, you know, language…throw it to them in a way that *they* are going to listen to.

Claudia speaks to how institutions have treated language and literacy as white property (Prendergast, 2003) and also shows an awareness of the need to switch to academic writing conventions, to "throw it to them in a way that *they* are going to listen."

Lastly, these internalized claims about smartness traveled with them throughout their education. The participants felt pressure to meet the expectations their friends, family, and teachers had of them as "smart." Cecilia talked about the pressure to do well in college as a result of being seen as "smart" in high school. She didn't want to tell her parents about failing an exam because of the identity of smartness they had already constructed of her:

> I didn't know how [my parents] were going to react about it because they're always like, 'Oh my God, she's so intelligent. She did really good in high school and she's really good in college.'

Claudia described how her educational experiences in the DR related to "smartness" impacted her in college.

> Not feeling smart or exceptional enough has been with me for longer than I had realized, and it was greatly reinforced by many of my teachers growing up. In Dominican schools, regardless of the grade, you are strongly discouraged from participating or voicing your opinion if you don't have the 'correct answer.' …Now, nearing the end of my junior year in college, I'm still highly anxious when it comes to presenting material in a class.

Claudia felt anxious around risk-taking in college and presenting information as a result of her childhood experiences in school in the Dominican Republic, which further evidences the lasting effects of smartness. This shows how smartness is a transnational phenomenon that is deeply ingrained in education, and that has long lasting social, emotional, and material effects.

Looking across pláticas highlights the tensions in the work of educators who aim to be culturally responsive on a practice level while fighting against a system that's not culturally responsive. In an educational context that continues to be characterized by high-stakes exams at the high school level and literacy practices that prioritize assimilation to white, eurocentric

academic norms through college, the ways in which smartness was mobilized and interpreted must be more closely and critically examined in both secondary and post-secondary spaces. In particular, the data brings out the complexities of college readiness work and students' perceptions of this work, and how imperitive it is to develop critical consciousness that helps both educators and Latinx students challenge constructions of smartness.

Theme 2: The role of Latinx mentorship

Another theme that I identified in looking across the pláticas when looking across pláticas was the important roles of Latinx mentors in the college transition and how an ethic of care was central to those relationships. The data from this study adds to the extant literature on the importance of Latinx mentors in the college transition (Garcia et al., 2012; Hoon 2013) and provides further insight into how Latinx mentors (in the form of family, friends, and classmates, high school teachers, and counselors) participate in first-generation Latinx students' college lives. The data highlighted how mentoring happened both in and out of school spaces, through new media, and relationships of mutual learning and community care.

Latinx teachers going above and beyond

It was apparent in Claudia's comments about her teacher, Ms. Martinez, that she acted as a mentor and college advisor who provided support in a humanizing and culturally appropriate way. In addition to speaking the same language as her family, there were things that Claudia didn't have to explain to Ms. Martinez (about the tensions of staying close to home or going away to college and choosing financially feasible options) that helped Claudia and her family navigate the application and decision-making process. As mentioned, Claudia explained how Ms. Merecedes, also a Dominican, first-generation college student, "understood things…She got where we were coming from, and it's just nice because it's like I don't have to explain things to

her, like the cultural stuff." Ms. Martinez helped Claudia fill out FAFSA and get the tax documents she needed from her parents; she would call her parents and talk them through the process. Ms. Martinez was also influential in Claudia's decision to go away to college:

> Martinez was also like the reason why I decided to go away because she was like 'Go away! Don't stay in the city, go away.' And it was a good decision because I don't think I would have made it this far if I would have decided to stay home. It would have been cheaper but I don't think I would have made it like academically. Because I can't do work from home. It would have been high school 2.0. That was not gonna fly…I remember I applied to [Upstate College] because Martinez had told me that Melissa had made it there and like you wouldn't be alone if you make it there.

This mentorship continued even after Claudia graduated from high school and was at college: "Ms. Martinez helped a lot. I called her freshman year of college too to figure out how to do FAFSA again." The community cultural wealth model (Yosso, 2005) describes the "cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged (p. 69)." Here, for example, we see the mobilization of social capital, the "instrumental and emotional support via networks of people and community resources that helps people navigate through society's institutions," (p. 80) as Ms. Martinez connected Claudia with another student at the college, and helped Claudia naviage the financial aid process. These networks of access extend beyond high school. The work of Kleyn et al (2018) brings forth the important role of college counselors in secondary contexts, however, what remains under-represented in the literature is the role Latinx teachers play in the process. When resources and time with college advisors are limited, teachers are on the "front lines" of the college application process. They are writing letters of recommendation, organizing college

trips, talking with students about colleges, and connecting students to alumni at colleges; they are listening and caring, helping students go through the emotions of college acceptances and rejections. We can see how in these pláticas Latinx teachers in particular were helping the participants navigate bureaucracy, making phone calls to parents to help fill out FAFSA, and providing mentorship and guidance in ways that were more attuned to the students and their family's experiences. They provided mentorship in culturally affirming ways that often carried into college. Estrella also shared about Ms. Perez, a bilingual science teacher, who helped her with the application process. She noted, "Ms. Perez gave me the information. She helped me create my FAFSA account."

From my positionality as a teacher at STAR, I can attest to the work of my Latinx colleagues to support students in the college transition. Many of the teachers at my school are taking on roles that go beyond the expectations of their teaching position in order to support bilingual immigrant youth with the college-going process. However, Latinx teachers, like Ms. Martinez and Ms. Perez, have a very special role and a commitment to student success and well-being. While I was collecting data, I observed both Ms. Martinez and Ms. Perez working late with students on setting up college application accounts, revising personal statements, calling parents and caregivers about FAFSA, working one-on-one with students after school hours,in addition to their regular preparation.

Yessi described her relationship with Ms. Rojas, the school guidance counselor, who checked on her throughout the pandemic and as she moved out of the shelter. "She would check on me during the pandemic, and she'd call or message me like 'Hey, Yessi. What's going on? Where you at? How are you doing? Are you up yet and in your classes? And stuff like that. I had

to read a book for English class and I liked it so she read it too so we would talk about it." She continued to check on Yessi after graduation.

> When I was going through it at [large public city college] she was like 'Oh I can do this for you, maybe if we apply to scholarships and stuff and blah, blah blah and maybe you can make your way through.' But I know that wasn't her job anymore. Her job already was done with me once I graduated, you know. And it wasn't enough. I was like I need somebody here that I can go to the office with and solve the...well not solve the problem, but tell me what to do, like guide me through the stuff.

Yessi's comments point to how more support was needed for her to navigate her financial aid situation. The guidance counselor continued to take on this responsibility, suggesting, "maybe if we apply to scholarships." Her use of "we" here signals a sense of shared responsibility for Yessi making it through this process. It emphasizes that she is not alone in the experience, though Yessi noted "it wasn't [Ms. Rojas'] job anymore."

Almost all participants described working directly with the college advisor, noting a variety of interactions, some that were helpful, and some that were strained or constrained by limitations of time and circumstances. For Yessi, when the college advisor told her she would have to ask for a letter from her parents that they no longer supported her, she was distraught. "I didn't even want to reach out to Mexca because I already knew." In trying to help Yessi navigate a barrier to financial aid, the college advisor was put in a position of asking Yessi to do something that was painful. Cecilia, on the other hand, described her experiences with the school-appointed college advisor as very helpful:

> [The college advisor] was really, really helpful. She gave us like so many videos. And we also had like one-on-one sessions so she could explain. She'd be like 'let me see your TAP' and we would share screen and she was guiding us through the process.

Claudia had a hard time making appointments with the college advisor because she would often have to leave right after school to pick her little brother up; As she noted, "I tried to make appointments but it was always busy in there [the office], and, you know, I can't stay after school." Estrella did not mention the college advisor and instead explained how she learned about college in Ms. Merecedes' class, talking with Ms. Martinez after class and hearing other students in the class talk about extracurricular college prep programs and their college acceptances. When college supports provided by the schools' college advisors were not as helpful as intended or were inaccessible to students, Latinx mentors, teachers and students, became de facto college advisors. The variety of the participants' experiences regarding college advising showed the diverse forms of mentorship that were happening throughout the school and their communities.

Mentorship as mutual learning among Latinx students

Literature on mentoring and peer mentoring has typically been conceived of mentorship relationships through dichotomies of expert/nocive, knowledge holder/knowledge receiver, or of experienced/inexperienced. (Messiou & Azaola, 2018; Thomson & Zand, 2010), however, studies have also signaled how mentorship relationships center on reciprocity, mutual trust and respect, mutual learning, and community care (Jackson et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2012). I argue for the reframing of mentorship relationships from a dichotomous relationship of knowledge holder/knowledge receiver to one of mutual learning, of shared exchanges of information, in the community. The data from this study showed how the participants themselves took on mentoring

roles to their peers and shared knowledge they had learned gained from their experiences navigating the college-going process with friends, family, and former classmates.

For example, in her last semester of college, Estrella interned and then was hired at STAR as a technology support person. She described how one of her main motivations for returning to work at STAR was to show other students how they can go to college, to show them opportunities and possibilities that they might not know exist. Her work in supporting newcomer students at STAR and sharing her experiences about college demonstrates a commitment to community care – a sense of responsibility and solidarity with immigrant students, like herself. Estrella shows a desire to demystify access for her peers, paying forward the mentorship she had received or knowledge she had learned along the way. Outside of school spaces, Estrella met with her friend who was applying to college and struggling with navigating the paperwork related to documentation status, and she showed her how to register for classes. She noted, "So now she's going almost like two or three times a month to my house so I can help her. I helped her to do her last semester's schedule. I helped her to file TAP." Estrella described at length the importance of being an example for her niece in high school: "I want her to be proud of me. And I want to finish college."

Cecilia also showed mentorship through community care by helping another student who had just been admitted to the college. Aliana reached out to Cecilia through social media and they connected. During our walking plática, Cecilia described how she advised Aliana about the orientation and gave her a tour of the campus herself so she wouldn't get lost. She also explained to her more experiential knowledge of navigating the campus and planning classes. In particular, there was a building that had a very long line to enter as a result of having to swipe in and having only one elevator. Since the building was around 20 stories, it often took more than 30 minutes

to enter, making it extremely difficult to arrive on time for back-to-back classes. Cecilia experienced this firsthand, recounting how she had to rush from one building to the other and run up numerous flights of stairs just to get to class on time. In light of this, she advised Aliana to take into account the extra time it would take to get to a class in that building. The specificity of the information shared between Cecilia and Aliana points to how mentorship partnerships are needed in local contexts. Cecilia noted the benefits of helping Aliana get oriented on campus.

> It was good to help Aliana with the orientation stuff and like we went around [the college] and I showed her, 'Okay, like here is where you can print, and yes you got these print credits, and here they have the computers in the library.' And I showed her where the financial aid office is because she had a similar problem I had with the financial aid like at first they had my name wrong and it was *un lio.* And they put her as an international student when she's not so yeah I told her she had to go talk to them. So that was nice because I know someone else here now and I feel like 'Oh wow I know a lot now.' Aliana is more social too so it helps me talk to people when we are together.

The issues with financial aid that Cecilia and Aliana described to each other, (where Aliana was listed as an international student and Cecilia's name was written incorrectly on formal paperwork) is one example of what transnational Latinx youth encounter as a result of whiteness, and the homogenization and misrepresentation of their identities; it also shows an example of Latinx students forming networks and sharing information to navigate the white bureaucratic practices of attending college. College-related mentorship happened outside of college and career readiness programming (Marciano, 2017), outside of school spaces, and often involved new media. Claudia, Cecilia, and Estrella described being part of WhatsApp groups with their cohorts or friends to share information about deadlines, assignments, and other college-related

information. Claudia and Cecilia also used Snapchat to share information with college classmates. Claudia mentioned Snapchat particularly during the pandemic as a way to stay connected with her friends when they were sent home from college. Cecilia and Yessi described how they relied on YouTube videos of campus tours to see campuses in New York as they were unable to do college tours in person during the pandemic.

Moreover, consistent with the research on family involvement in the college-going process that expands notions of family beyond White, middle-class, heteronormative conceptualizations limited to parents (Knight, Norton, Bentley, and Dixon, 2017), the families of the participants of this study were involved in many ways, giving *consejos* and emotional support. The data from this research extends the notion of 'family' even further to include adopted parents, sisters, teacher-mentors, guidance counselors, partners and their partners' families, and friends. Many Latinx immigrant youth travel to the US and stay with relatives, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, or older siblings, and they may be staying with family members they have never met before coming to the US, as was the case for Yessi and Estrella. Yessi did not have her parents with her during the application process, however, she sought support from her boyfriend and his family. Cecilia called her sister on her first day of college when she couldn't find classes to help calm her down and talk her through the experience. Claudia's mom drew from her college experiences in the Dominican Republic and held high education aspirations for her daughter. Even when the families of the participants did not have familiarity with the college application process in the US, they held high educational aspirations for their children; they were active and supportive in the process. Having a broader understanding of 'family' that encompasses the diversity of relationships of Latinx youth

counters deficit views of family involvement in the college going process and highlights the dynamics of community, care, and giving.

Politics of care in mentoring relationships

At the heart of the mentorship relationships described in this section were a palpable ethic of care (Jackson et al., 2014; Nieto, 2005) and community responsibility. The Latinx mentors in this study centered their guidance around the participants' emotional and physical well-being, acknowledging their humanity while promoting critical consciousness around college that did not obfuscate the dynamics of power and systems of oppression at play in the college-going process.

This ethic of care was less visible in the descriptions of support that the participants described at the college level. Yessi recounted her experience at college feeling like her professors and instructors did not care about her, which was a stark contrast to how she felt cared for in high school.

> …every teacher makes sure that you know the first day that they don't care about you. Every teacher was like with the same, same lines: we don't care if you have something to do, we don't care if your homework is late, we don't care if you are slower as others. You have to do this and do that and do blah blah blah. So I felt like it wasn't like a safe environment like I used to have in school. At least I knew my teachers would be thinking about me or maybe wanted to plan something to help me. But in college it was like, Okay, I don't trust nobody here. Even though I paid more money for this. So yeah. That's one hard take- that nobody cares. Even your advisors. I had 2 months over there, I never met my advisor.

Yessi speaks to not being known in her new context, to feeling like no one cared. What some would characterize as "independence" in undergraduate study, the participants experienced as an anonymity, as not caring. Cecilia also described feeling like college professors did not care about her or her learning. She noted, "So that's challenging for me because I don't feel like the teacher pays attention to us, to every student. They just don't care if you're learning; if you're not, that's your problem. So I think that's the most challenging." Yessi and Cecilia's words bring up the repeated messaging from professors of not caring about their situation or other reasons why they may be struggling in the class. Yessi described how this messaging made it feel like college "wasn't a safe environment" and inhibited trust which is central to relationship building and learning- "I don't trust nobody here." What contributes to some professors and instructors at college as being perceived as "not caring"? It has been documented how competing responsibilities such as research and publishing pressures, and low pay for adjunct instructors and professors, pull educators at the college level away from their students and advisory roles. Given these constraints and demands, the experiences shared here call for educators in higher education to reflect on what they can do, what is in their locus of control, in order to strengthen and develop relationships with students so that they feel cared for and seen. Although colleges talk about affirmative action and diversity, equity and inclusion, what are they actually doing for their students? This points to the high dropout rates specifically amongst communities of color.

Theme 3: The variety of supports in college

The data from this study also shed light on the diverse range of supports available for first-generation college students. In their pláticas, the participants described receiving either financial aid, academic support, or a combination of both. They also expressed a desire for more academic advising at the college level. While financial assistance is undoubtedly critical, first-

generation bilingual students also require being seen, known, and cared about alongside specific academic supports. Academic supports alone, in the absence of relationships of care and of being seen, become more like discrete interventions (which are often tied to a deficit characterization of what students are lacking), than a means of demystifying access and power, and being a true relationship of support.

Variability in academic support

Cecilia, Estrella, and Yessi, for example, described finding it hard to get college advisement. They had to use a website to schedule a virtual appointment with an advisor, and each time they would have a different person. At the time of data collection, all advising was done virtually. They commented on appointment times being too short and too hard to come by. As Yessi said, “I had 2 months over there, I never met my advisor. They don’t even want to see your face, you like do it online. They give you like the number and stuff.” This lack of personal connection left Yessi feeling unsupported and disconnected from the college. Her words (“They don't even want to see your face” and “I didn't even know if they would notice that I was going to classes”) suggest the frustration and dehumanization she felt in her advising experience.

The participants also highlighted the challenge of building relationships with advisors and especially feeling uncomfortable sharing personal information with a new advisor each time. They noted that this was very different from their high school experience and a challenging aspect of the transition to college. For example, Cecilia shared her experience of being unable to secure an advisement slot, which made it so that she could not drop the calculus course she was failing until the end of the semester.

> Every time it's a different advisor, it's not the same one. And I don't like that we have different advisors. I want one like [high school counselor]....It’s really hard to get

appointments with the advisors so I was trying almost every single day to make an appointment, and the appointments open at 9 a.m. So I was like waiting for it every single day until I got one, but it was almost at the end of the semester.

In contrast, Claudia had the benefit of a consistent advisor throughout her four years of study, with whom she met at least once a semester, and sometimes even more frequently, to discuss her course selection, majors, and minor. Estrella spoke positively about the academic support and mentoring she received from the Accelerated Study in Associates Program (ASAP). However, she also acknowledged that having access to advising became more challenging after the program ended, as the program was only for the first two years. Estrella described having a close relationship with her freshman-year advisor, who helped her make her course schedule and navigate the campus on her first days:

> When I started my freshman year, my advisor, I still remember him, Jay, he was like, Okay Estrella. He knew that my English wasn't that good, and I would get lost easily, so he was like, 'Okay you are going to this building, and then you go into the main one and then after this, you walk and then you ask the security officers where is this room located.

ASAP provided both academic, financial, and emotional support for Estrella; by taking the time to give Estrella step-by-step instructions for finding her first class, Estrella felt more confident and seen. Programs Estrella realized that not everyone knew about the ASAP program, so she helped connect her friends, peers, and current students at STAR to the resource.

> It's really helpful to have the ASAP program. That's what I've been telling everyone, even the high school students and the new students that are coming from high school to college. I tell them 'You have to get ASAP.' ASAP is the best program because they give you free Metro cards for 2 years, free textbooks for 2 years, and a free advisor for 2

years, and the advisor helps you with making your class schedule and everything. It's only for two years. After that, you're on your own.

Recognizing the importance of the program and the potential benefit it could provide to her peers, Estrella took it upon herself to inform others about it, so that they could access the resources that had helped her. In sharing information about ASAP and helping connect others to the program, Estrella demonstrated a strong commitment to community and a desire to support others in their academic pursuits. The contrast of experiences of the participants speaks to how programs specifically for students of color or other affinity groups can produce guidance and a sense of belonging. By providing individual mentorship and creating spaces for forming a community, these programs and groups not only provide academic support but also encourage relationship building which is essential for feeling welcomed and supported.

Sources of Financial Aid

Particular to the New York context, the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), and Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) are other sources of financial assistance that are not dependent upon documentation status. These programs attend to the specific challenges related to migration status in terms of college access. DACAmented and undocumented students in face stress and uncertainty around securing sources of financial aid. The participants of this study shared information with their peers, in particular with peers who were navigating documentation status, regarding how to apply for and renew TAP and EOP.

In order to more effectively address the academic and financial challenges faced by first-generation bilingual students, it is critical that these channels of support continue to recognize and account for the unique experiences and circumstances of first-generation bilingual students that might get lost under broader labels of "first-generation" and program selection criteria. The

findings from this research indicate a need for revisiting structures of support that provide financial aid without academic support and advising; as the experiences of the participants bring forth, financial support without academic advisement perpetuates the illusion of a meritocratic system.

This research also brings up questions about how first-generation bilingual students are finding and sharing these sources of aid, and the advocacy work they are doing in sharing their resources with one another. Given the variety of possible supports, teachers may have limited familiarity with sources of funding. Who and how are we having conversations about money with students applying to college? The specifics of financial aid are often not talked about in college for all programs, and they are often not a part of the day-to-day classroom discourse around going to college. Teachers or counselors may not know or have access to this information. Finding out how to help students with financial aid often requires disclosure of documentation status, which is sensitive information that not all teachers have access to or that students may not feel safe disclosing. Local grassroots networks have formed to figure this information out for themselves, demonstrating navigational capital; they then share this information with the next generation of students, building a community network of support, which draws on social capital (Yosso, 2005 p. 80).

Reasons for inconsistent enrollment in college or dropping out

As highlighted by this dissertation, the reasons for inconsistent enrollment in college or dropping out vary based on the individual. Two of the participants in this study had inconsistent enrollment in college. This study pointed to some general reasons that first-generation Latinx bilingual students may have for not completing a degree or for taking longer to complete.

One factor that may contribute to limited engagement with college and career supports or inconsistent enrollment in college is the financial responsibility of paying off their migration journey. When Estrella was in high school, for example, she felt the responsibility to prioritize work over her studies in order to pay back the family members who had funded her journey to the US. Students may often leave or stop school for work or other family obligations. Another possible reason for inconsistent enrollment or dropping out of college is being out of tune with the rhythm of college. This came up in conversations with Estrella's friends, who were also former students of STAR. Estrella was helping her friend Gaby who was navigating documentation status, work schedule, and unfamiliarity with the bureaucratic demands of the enrollment process. The academic calendar and deadlines for registering for classes or financial aid are unfamiliar and may be confusing or overwhelming. Similarly, Yessi expressed how she felt confused by the bureaucracy and scared to speak up at first:

> Nobody tells you like, 'Oh, maybe if you go to this person or that person and you do bla bla bla you will have a better experience.' So maybe a lot of people they find the educational system hard because they don't know how to communicate or express themselves with the professors or advisors because maybe they're scared like I was before.

Navigating the bureaucracy of the college system can be challenging and is even more so for those who do not have guidance and do not know who or where to go for academic support. When Yessi was struggling to pay the tuition at the first large, public college she had enrolled in, she reached back out to her former high school guidance counselor. The guidance counselor tried to give her words of encouragement and told her to keep trying.

> I did talk with [the guidance counselor]. She was like 'Ay mi'ja' Like she already knew because she has the experience from past students. She already knew, but she was like, 'Oh you have to try. You already have like a hard history.' I was like 'Miss, I'm tired of trying. This shouldn't be this way.' But she was like 'No, you *have* to try because if you want that…' That's not the point! I was trying! I work. I was trying.

In the absence of institutional supports at the college level, Yessi was able to reach out to the guidance counselor from her high school as a means of leveraging her existing resources to navigate college. Yessi's narrative presents the challenging dilemmas that surface for both students and counselors/educators as they attempt to address such persistent structural gaps in support. The guidance counselor is called to step in and does so, despite the additional labor this entails, and acknowledges the realities of what Yessi is experiencing. The guidance counselor wanted to be affirming and encouraging, but the framing of "you have to try" was taken by Yessi in a way that made invisible the work she already was doing. Yessi's response reflects the frustration of working and studying despite the systemic factors working against her. These dynamics have no easy resolution. The experiences of the participants show how educators, counselors, and students are faced with untenable situations regarding college access, given the unique challenges of maneuvering a social institution historically not designed for communities of color.

Economic factors

Economic factors

Money was a significant common thread woven throughout the participants' narratives. For all of the participants, financing college was a significant obstacle and stress they had to navigate.

For example, Yessi's economic situation in the DR was a significant factor in her move to the US. At college, she experienced the trauma of being escorted out of her class in front of her classmates because she could not pay the tuition. Due to her financial situation, Yessi had to stay at her half-sister's house taking care of her half-sister's children longer than she wanted to until she eventually moved into a shelter. Yessi described relying on the food and services the school and shelter provided: "I would just eat the shelter food…I would get the breakfast they gave and lunch. And even feminine products I used to pick up over there because I didn't have the money." Yessi's educational experiences bring forth the real, material, economic obstacles and inequities that are undergirding discussions of college access.

The participants also spoke about work obligations or pressure to make money during college. Claudia described having to balance the demands of her work-study position and her academic studies. Cecilia mentioned also helping her mom with her work of delivering groceries after school and on days she didn't have classes. She described the anxiety she felt to keep her grades up to not lose her scholarship. Estrella expressed feeling pressure to work during high school to pay off her migration journey. She continued to feel competing tensions between wanting to work to make money and wanting to focus on her studies at college.

Cecilia, Yessi, and Estrella brought up the unexpected expenses of studying in New York City such as having to pay for metro cards and the cost of textbooks. They spoke about the ASAP and TAP programs being some of the most significant factors that helped them financially. Given the financial challenges in the college-going process, the experiences of the participants point to how college can be inaccessible even when some degree of financial support is provided. Discourses that position college as *the* pathway to success are harmful as they overshadow and do not account for the economic factors of attending college. As Yessi

commented, “Education and the financing, that's the last thing that you should be worrying about if you want to pursue your dreams here. So maybe I think that's why a lot of people quit because they don't make it easy for you to pursue that career.” The participants’ narratives show how the financial aspect of attending college undergirded many of their experiences in the college transition and impacted their well-being, belonging, and academics.

Participant insights and actions for reforming college access

In addition to individual pláticas, I also convened the participants for a group plática. In the group plática, they talked with each other about their experiences in high school and college, shared their insights, actions, and recommendations for reforming college access, and talked about their experiences of the individual pláticas and of this research. After some time had passed from the initial individual pláticas, the goal of the group plática was to open a space for reconnecting and learning from and with each other. I first shared excerpts of quotes from the individual pláticas with identifying information removed related to the initial themes that I was finding in the data. I would share 3-4 quotes at a time and the theme I thought they connected to. The participants would read the quotes, and then we would discuss what was coming up around them. These discussions led to their experiences being validated by their peers, and offered the potential for healing, as the youth were seeing they were not alone in some of their experiences. Also, by putting participants’ quotes and experiences in conversation with each other, the group plática brought forth the differences and variety of experiences; this led to further insights into the college-going process and the ways in which discourses of college readiness had impacted them. In our group plática, the participants shared recommendations for educators at the high school and college level for them to be able to better support first-generation Latinx bilingual

students. They also shared about actions they were already taking and that they planned to take to support the next generations of students who were coming up behind them.

In what follows, I share and summarize their insights, actions, and recommendations to educators. In giving these recommendations, Latinx youth are in conversation with the decisions and practices that impact them, centered in the creation of knowledge. They are engaged in advocacy work geared at interrupting inequities and helping other students like themselves who are navigating bureaucratic college-going processes. Their recommendations reflect their strong commitment to community. As Claudia said in the group plática, "I hope when people read it, it does some changes."

Recommendation 1: Open spaces to support peer-to-peer mentorship

One recommendation the participants gave was for schools to create or formalize peer-to-peer mentorship within local contexts. In our group plática, we discussed how peer mentorship was already happening in many ways informally with students of STAR, as the participants connected with and mentored their former classmates and friends. Information was shared outside of school and through social media (Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp). While some high schools may already have days when alumni are invited back to the school to talk to students about college as part of the school's college readiness work, the participants noted that these conversations were too general and missed opportunities for sharing resources with their peers. At STAR, for example, former students would come back to the school to visit and sometimes they talk to the students about college. The participants noted how this work needs to go on a deeper, more personal level, as there was specific knowledge and experiences that could be shared regarding individual colleges and student circumstances.

Claudia: I came back to STAR at Thanksgiving like in my first semester at [college] to help with the potluck Ms. Martinez always puts on, you know. And I went to meet up with Odalis and Brittany. And we talked to the kids a little like 'Yeah college is *actually* difficult,' but I think it would be even better if we got to talk one-on-one with the seniors, like if they already applied or got accepted in my college, so I could tell them like 'you gotta do this and you gotta do that' you know. Give them the inside information. Like when I was applying Ms. Martinez told me 'Oh Melisa is going to [my college], so y'all can link up.' And we did.

Cecilia: Yeah, Aliana messaged me and was like 'Hey, can I ask you some questions?'... And we ended up walking around the campus and I got to show her stuff. It was so nice.

Claudia: If we had it more organized at STAR, we could talk to more students individually about the process and application stuff. And we could make like a network of buddies [laughs] for when we are at college. At least you would know someone on campus.

Claudia felt it would have been helpful to make more personal connections and create a "network of buddies" with students at STAR when alumni returned to visit. Estrella described to the group how she was doing this work in her current position at STAR as the school technology specialist. In the 2022-2023 school year, there was a rapid and significant increase in new students from Central and South America. While Estrella worked with the new students to help them access school technology, she also slipped in ways to talk to them about college.

> Estrella: A lot of the new students they don't know about college. Because they are new here, so they don't know how it's like. I say 'here there are opportunities. You can go to college. You have to study and learn English but you can do it.' I put pictures from my college, from travel, and I put the careers in technology behind my desk so maybe they can see it and ask me questions.

Because Estrella had specific information about sources of funding and support programs from her recent experiences and hard-won knowledge, she felt she could share more relevant advice attuned to the new students' experiences and the available resources.

Supporting mentorship in local contexts also involves tapping into social media as a tool for information sharing. All of the participants used various forms of social media to share information about college with their peers. In the introduction to the third edition of *The Dreamkeepers* Ladson-Billings (2022) says, "In the new world of New Century students, email is an "old technology" and they would prefer to communicate through instant messaging and tweets. While email may be the stock and trade of schools and workplaces, it is a dinosaur among New Century students. Teachers who do not understand the way to reach their students through text message or their Instagram pages are likely to regularly miscommunicate with them" (p. xxiv). How can educators support community connection in ways that are meaningful and supportive to students, harnesses the power of social media (Whatsapp, Instagram, Snapchat), and strengthens the advocacy work that is already happening?

Educators should build on students' existing relationships with their peers and facilitate the process of sharing information. They can find ways to open spaces for creating alumni networks within high schools.

Yessi: I would recommend schools help set this up, they can invite us back in and we can talk to the students about our experiences. And if I go to [college] and you go to the same college, we will be in contact, so maybe you don't have to go through some of what I went through.

Claudia: Yeah, that's actually something that can work in a lot of schools *me imagino*. Because it doesn't require money and you know *dique* nobody has money these days so they won't be paying.

Marciano (2017) noted that often existing programs for peer-mentorship related to college and career readiness "were constructed by teachers and administrators rather than built upon youth's existing peer relationships" (p.177). Having teachers and administrators determine who participates (and how they participate) can send a message of who is "college bound" through who is selected and who is excluded from participating in mentoring opportunities. The recommendations of the participants instead underscore the importance of opening spaces for youth to build on the already existing mentorship work and community connections that are happening and that are grounded in community care and reciprocity.

This particular recommendation for schools to support peer mentorship in a local context led to action. The participants planned a day in May when they would come back to STAR to meet with the seniors who had made their college decisions and talk with them about their experiences at specific universities. They planned to share the event with alumni using an alumni Whatsapp group so that more colleges and experiences could be represented. Their goal was to ensure that they could make individual connections with the students going to their specific

colleges, to start to build and strengthen communities, that would support them in the college transition.

Recommendation 2: Develop supportive relationships with students

The group plática also brought up how college had at times felt isolated and lonely for the participants. They shared strained or limited relationships with their professors and inconsistent advising once at college. This led to their recommendation for educators (in high school and college) to build relationships with their students. The importance of relationships, of being seen and being supported, was emphasized in both the group plática and throughout the participants' individual pláticas. Estrella, for example, in the group plática, underscored the power of encouragement from teachers and professors. Reflecting back on her experiences at STAR, she called on teachers and college professors to be more encouraging of students' growth and efforts.

> Estrella: I got a lot of support from all of the teachers when I was here [at STAR]. I think you [teachers] should, even if you don't know the student, to just tell them to really keep doing a great job, what they're doing, even if they're not doing a great job! I mean you don't know what's going on in their life. In college the professors can do this too. They need to encourage the students. You can tell them 'I know you're doing something here. I see it.' You can tell them, 'You're doing great, and I know you can do more, just try your best. And I believe in you.'
>
> Cecia: Yeah, it's like they don't really see the efforts of the students enough. I feel like the professors, it's like what we said, they make it so if you don't learn, okay that's your problem. It's on you. Some of the classes are so big so it's like okay, who do you even talk to for help?

As the participants shared their struggles with finding advisement and forming relationships with their professors, they saw they were not alone in these experiences. They discussed ways that would make college more welcoming and a more comfortable environment. Yessi emphasized how advisement was crucial in helping make students more comfortable, and recommended that colleges provide advisement in order to have a "successful environment."

> Yessi: Like every student, if they get in, they should have advising because you don't know if the person has anxiety, depression, and you don't know if they know how to communicate, to express themselves. If you want a really successful environment for your students, [public college], you should have advisors for your students; minimum you should provide that! So they feel comfortable in their classes or comfortable in their career or comfortable. Period.

Cecilia brought up how small actions that educators could make that have a big impact.

> Cecilia: It's the little things. My professors in college, I think only some got to know my name. And the class where they did that, I honestly felt more relaxed. My English professor, he made us present in front of the class, where we would have to say your name and where we're from, and we have to say our major, and something funny. He was the only one who did that that semester. It was good because I got to know the people in my class more, and I felt like I could talk to people.

> Claudia: Some of the classes that I got to know, almost all, if not, all of my classmates and like, we bonded at the end of the semester and we still talk to each other on social media or whatnot, were like my black studies classes, my Latin American classes, my Spanish classes because my professors made an effort to like engage us all. They

understood that's what's important for like discussion to happen in the classroom. So basically, professors, you need to get to know your students.

Their words lift up the importance of continued work around culturally responsive and sustaining education at all levels of education, of getting to know your students and their identities, and forming trusting and caring relationships (Muhammad, 2020).

Recommendation 3: Support student organizations in college for Latinx students

Claudia particularly recommended that colleges further support Latinx student organizations through funding and making spaces more accessible. As a result of her work-study position in the student union building, she had familiarity with events and activities that were taking place on campus that helped her build community. Claudia was the only participant who had participated in various student clubs and organizations at college and shared with the group how it was a significant part of her college experience.

> Claudia: Open up spaces, like actually make stuff available for students. So many students have to fight to have a room booked for a meeting. To get approved, it's a nightmare. And then if you want to put on an event, you have to like fight with the Student Association for them to give you like a decent budget so that you can put up something nice. I met a lot of friends through this.

> Cecilia: I haven't done any activities or clubs like that. I go to the library. Actually it's funny because when I was walking with McCoy we went past the Student Center and I was like okay but I never go in there. [laughs].

Claudia: Once you're with more people either from your background or trying to understand the same topic, you start creating some sense of community. You're like 'I'm not the only one here.' In the Spanish club, I met people who were immigrants and had 5 years, 6 years here. So it's just like 'Okay, you get me a little more.'

Many studies have highlighted the importance of community and Latinx spaces in college (Flores and Garcia, 2009) as a way to combat erasure and isolation and in order for Latinx students to feel seen and in community.

Recommendation 4: Present students with options other than college

This recommendation came out of a discussion around the pressures of "being smart" and "doing good" in order to go to college. The participants shared a very loud and unanimous message that the messaging they had received in high school positioned college as *the* pathway to success and that it overlooked factors such as student interest and personal and financial circumstances.

Claudia: Presenting college as the only option is almost as bad as saying nothing. College is not for everyone. Maybe they don't have the financial or the emotional capacity to go at certain times in their life…There were so many times I considered dropping out. Especially during covid. Luckily I had a good support system, my family, friends and I have advisors. But as we see, not everyone has that.

Cecilia: Our family and teachers expecting us to go to college, is a lot.

Yessi: Even if you don't have your parents behind your back, sometimes you think that's the only way. I was depressed because I thought that college was the only way. It became

> a detriment to how I see myself. Then I took a different way with my program that's like a trade school and it was so much better….

> Yessi: Present different options other than college. You don't go to college, maybe try a 3 month course. *Te gustan los carros*, okay take a 2-week course. Try those free online courses. See different options.

> Estrella: I agree. Understand where [students] are coming from and what are their goals. Actually talk to them and find out what they want to do, and if they don't know, present the options.

Research has pointed to how knowing and caring about students is a central part of culturally responsive (Gay, 2013), relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994), and sustaining pedagogy (Paris and Alim, 2017). The participants' recommendations speak to how feeling seen and cared about is indeed a significant factor in humanizing educational experiences. Their recommendations challenge educators to think critically about the messaging students are receiving about going to college and how hierarchies of post-secondary pathways get reified in college readiness work in schools. Even when the discourse of going to college comes out of an asset-based pedagogy that aims to be culturally and linguistically affirming, more caution must be given to how conversations around college overshadow and erase other pathways and post-secondary options. Their recommendations call for educational spaces that support the work of Latinx youth's community care and that support the collective work of navigating through systemic obstacles in education and career pathways.

A space of healing

During the group plática, after greetings and introductions, and (re)getting to know each other, as mentioned, I shared quotes from the individual pláticas connected to initial themes. Participants read the quotes, and then we would discuss what was coming up. One of the first themes we talked about was related to the notion of smartness. I shared a couple of the participants' quotes about dropping or failing a course or exam. I also shared 3 quotes where participants mentioned smartness. I present this exchange as an example of the critical conversations that came out of shared experiences.

Claudia: Ooooh I'm not the only one. This is helpful! [laughs]

Cecilia [laughing] Yeah, that one [referring back to the quote] was me. I cried. Literally, I cried when I saw my calc exam. It was like *okayyyy* now what. Because I studied! I really studied! And that had never happened to me before.

Claudia: It's good to know we all kinda went through this, but also like we said, it's this pressure that we all have to deal with because well we were "good" [uses air quotes] in high school and did all the things, and now it's like, you want to live up to that.

Yessi: Well *you* all maybe were good in high school. Ask Ms. McCoy, I was gone in Covid. [laughs]. Ms. [Guidance Counselor] *me llamaría para despertarme como 'Yessi, ¿estás en la clase de Mr. Piños!?'*

Claudia: ¡Ay Piños!

Yessi: But yeah, I'm agree. There is a lot of pressure from your family and even your teachers. You don't want to let them down because they want the best for you so you do your best.

In many ways, the group plática was also a space of healing, seeing that they were not alone in some of these experiences and talking back to them. We began to dig into how discourses of going to college and college as *the* pathway to success were problematic. It created a collective space where they could speak back to the hurtful and exclusionary practices and be critical of socially constructed norms and measures of success. When Yessi talked about her struggles with financial aid and getting kicked out of her first college for not being able to pay the tuition, the participants offered their support.

Cecilia: I'm sorry that happened to you.

Claudia: That was so not right. That's messed up. Actually, I've been hearing a lot of bad stuff about that place. Lesly just started there and she said the same thing about not having advisors, and now she switched to [another college].

At the end of our plática, the participants also expressed how this had been helpful and healing to hear each other's experiences.

Yessi: I'm really glad we got to do this. I didn't get to know you guys so much in high school. But it's nice to know we're making it, with the bumps and all.

Estrella: I liked this because *podemos ver como muchas perspectivas, no sólo una perspectiva de qué es la educación.*

Claudia: It was a good experience talking about our experiences after some time. Some things you don't realize until you're out of high school.

The participants made sure to add each other on social media and we committed to staying in touch. The group plática shows the importance of including youth in discussions with educators and researchers, and it shows a need for sharing stories in a community. In the next chapter, I will further detail the implications of this study.

Chapter 6: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conversations around equity and access that are common in NYC public schools, increasing access to college readiness supports is often casted as synonymous with increasing equity. However, as this study has demonstrated, simply offering access to college through college readiness initiatives is not enough to achieve equity. The existing systems and norms that prioritize assimilation to the dominant white culture must be challenged and changed (Ladson-Billings, 2022; Solórzano & Yosso 2000). Moreover, the voices and experiences of marginalized youth going through the college transition must be amplified to create more equitable and humanizing educational experiences.

The experiences, knowledges, actions, and recommendations that have been shared in this study have meaningful implications for theory, practice, policy, and research.

Implications for theory

To begin, by amplifying the voices of bilingual Latinx youth, this study shows the nuances and complexities of their experiences, disrupting the homogenization of identities. The experiences of the participants counter dominant narratives about Latinx immigrant youth and their families' involvement in the college-going process. This work highlighted how their funds of knowledge and cultural wealth played a role in the college-going process; it showed how Latinx youth, their families', and communities were sharing resources and information for navigating social institutions and the advocacy work that was already taking place. Theoretical implications of this work are to expand the notions of 'family' support in the college-going process to account for the range of mentorship relationships in their lives, including friends, relatives, teachers, and counselors, and to expand our understanding of the networks of support and advocacy work that Latinx youth participate in.

This study also provides a sociological and systemic critique of how smartness is operating in schools. This critique of "smartness" calls for educators and researchers to look more closely and more critically at how "smartness" is tied to discourses of "college readiness," how it is being experienced differently by students, and how it is being mobilized by schools. As such, this study brings up the complexities of college readiness work and students' perceptions of this work. An implication for research is the need to support programs, policy, practice that help educators, students, and scholars develop the critical consciousness around the social construction of smartness and the pervasiveness of college as a marker of a "good education." Moreover, scholars and educators need to consider a more expansive notion of the transition to college that sees the ability and the decision to go to college as part of the broader landscape of people's lives.

This research is particularly relevant to the fields of TESOL, applied linguistics, bilingual education, curriculum and teaching, and adolescent literacies. My work contributes to these various fields as it underscores the importance of continued research that centers the experiences, voices, and agency of bilingual transnational youth. As this study has shown, research must look at students' experiences and foreground their agency and resistance in order to bring to light issues of equity and the shortcoming of existing program supports, instructional practices, and notions of success. Disciplines that are concerned with the languaging practices, literacies, and identities of transnational youth must be committed to amplifying their voices and their agency and include them in the research process in order to better understand their experiences and attend to the issues that they are telling us are important. Moreover, this dissertation pushes forward the work in the fields of TESOL, applied linguistics, and bilingual education around academic and linguistic supports for bilingual youth; academic supports that are detached from

their experiences and an ethos of care become experienced as discrete interventions (which are often tied to a deficit characterization of what students are lacking), rather than a means of demystifying access and power. Lastly, as a teacher-researcher (Lytle, 2000) working with my former research, this research is in conversation with collaborative research practices and partnerships.

Implications for policy and practice

Given the insights, experiences, and recommendations that participants shared, this study can be used to build more supportive practices and policies around experiences of the college transition. The findings from this dissertation study can be used to contribute to creating more culturally responsive approaches for programs targeting first-generation college students. Educators need to see their students, and open spaces for critical dialogue about practices in high school and college. Pedagogy and policy in high school and college must support students' being in conversations around decisions and practices that impact them the most. Rather than just making sure that first-generation Latinx students get accepted to colleges, educators need to hear their students' experiences of college readiness support. This research showed how Latinx bilingual youth benefit from being seen, known, and cared about throughout their educational journeys; an implication of this is that these qualities must be central to education in high school and college.

This study also calls for critical consciousness-raising dialogue where college readiness initiatives and practices of tracking are pervasive and deeply ingrained in the fabric of schooling. Educators must take action and take up inquiry around how to counter the deleterious effects of "smartness" and tracking, and invite youth to "draw on their own rich experiential and cultural knowledge to critique and navigate inequitable conditions in the process of self-determination"

(Simon & Campano, 2013, p. 28). As Simon and Campano (2013) say, “resistance is an ongoing process: a working ideal rather than a state of arrival, an aspect of a critical inquiry stance. This process invariably takes place in the messiness of the everyday” (p.33). This dissertation highlights the messiness of that work, as educators and students attempted to navigate and critique persistent structural inequities.

Another implication of this work is for educators to make connections and have sustained conversations with alumni. High school teachers and administrators should find ways to reach out, invite in, and check-in with their former students to learn about their experiences in high school and after high school. These conversations must be centered around respect, trust, and shared vulnerability. The end goal of these conversations should not be to measure “success” or “achievement” at the school or individual student level. Rather, in the spirit of a pláticas methodology, conversations with alumni can inform educators and administrators of the work that needs to be done for their students to have more positive experiences in high school and throughout college.

The teachers in this study in many ways went above and beyond their role as educators, helping students with applications, letters of recommendation, speaking to parents. This support continued after high school. There were a wide variety of mentorship relationships in the school community and outside of the school (not limited to high-school based college advisors). Thus, another implication of this study is for schools to think about how they can tap into and support already existing community networks of support and mentorship. How can schools set up systems that lessen the load on teachers? How can schools develop partnerships with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and private organizations?

The economic aspect of the college-going process that was highlighted throughout this research has implications for policy and practice in institutions of higher education. For example, when Yessi started at the smaller, private college she felt more welcomed and supported, with smaller class sizes and more personal attention from her instructors. At the same time, she recognized that she would have to take out more loans as the tuition was higher. Yessi weighed the cost and potential material benefits of attending college. How can larger, public universities, create smaller, more closely-knit classroom spaces (that are typically associated with small private colleges and higher tuition)? This research charges educators and policy makers to consider the pedagogy and teaching strategies employed by college instructors that can build communities in the college classroom. Moreover, given that the financial responsibilities of first-generation students can make it harder for them to participate in activities and experiences at college that help create a sense of belonging, institutions of higher education must continue to develop affinity programs and provide opportunities for students to build community. For example, in our walking plática, Estrella pointed out the student center building that frequently had dinners and free food as well as mental health resources. She enjoyed going there to meet people and get food. These activities have a significant impact on opportunities for creating community and must be sustained and institutionally supported. Lastly, an implication of this work is for policy makers and institutions to continue to provide (and increase) financial support to low-income students to help students overcome financial barriers to college.

Implications for research

My methodological choices also have implications for research. Given the history of exploitative and extractive research that has been done on minoritized people (Morrell, 2006; Smith, 1999; Souto-Manning & Winn, 2017), my methodological commitments are significant as

they intend to disrupt the legacy of harmful research practices. A pláticas methodology disrupts the tradition of Eurocentric research that assumes objectivity and neutrality. By inviting bilingual youth to author their own stories about their experiences in the transition to college, including their voices and perspectives in the research, this dissertation presents possible ways to research *with* rather than on (Lukes, 2015) that also opens spaces for possible healing. An implication of this work is that it shows the power of the collective space and the power of pláticas. The group plática offered a space of healing and critiquing educational practices. Through the group plática, the participants were also engaged in critical consciousness-raising around "smartness" and other systemic inequities that they had experienced in the education system. The structure of the pláticas and the group plática can contribute to participatory and collaborative research.

In *Care-based methodologies: Reimagining qualitative research with youth in US schools,* Veena Vasudevan (2022) describes how "just as teachers and students can cultivate dialogic relationships rooted in love for people and the world, researcher-participant relationships can emulate this openness and vulnerability that suggest each person in the relationship has something to offer and something to learn (Freire, 1970)" (p.61). By engaging in pláticas with my former students, while still teaching in the school that participants had attended, I was pushed to critically revisit the structures, systems, and practices that I was a part of. These practices were at times harmful to my participants and call for transformative actions in my teaching and in research.

As a teacher-researcher working with former students, I approached my work from an "ethos of care," and "reciprocal love" (Jackson et al., 2014) while engaged in dialogic exchange.

Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2014) describe an "ethos of care" as "an intangible spirit of personal interest in and responsibility for others [that] rests at the center of united communities that actively pursue the individual and collective well-being of their members" (p. 399). At times throughout this journey, I have asked (and been asked) how might a white educator/scholar, like myself, take on a pláticas methodology and Chicana feminist lens? How might a white person take up decolonizing research practices? I offer up some of the considerations, frameworks, and things I was thinking about while conducting research.

Love (2019) emphasizes the importance of white people being co-conspirators in the fight against racism. In order to be a co-conspirator (Love 2019), working actively against white supremacy in education, educators must have a deeper, richer understanding of structural and systemic forces that keep racist nativist hierarchies in place. This project was designed with the goal of attending to intersectional social justice as it brings up the variety of experiences of Latinx youth that often get reduced and erased by broad identity labels.

As mentioned, employing a pláticas methodology required a shared, mutual vulnerability, trust, respect, and reciprocity with my participants, who were my former students. As a care-based research methodology, this research "recognize[s] the youth who participate in research not as subjects, but as people first — whose full selves must be considered, taken seriously, and prioritized at each stage of the research process" (Vasudevan et al, 2022, p. 2). There were times when my participants were going through difficult moments during data collection. At one point in data collection, a participant talked about how she was dealing with mental health challenges and having a hard time meeting a deadline for a larger writing assignment. We agreed to check in with each other at least once a week. She would send me drafts of her writing and I would give feedback. Another time, one of the participants was trying to get a job in a store; she had

submitted her resume many times and never heard back. I contacted a friend who worked in the store, and he listed her as a personal recommendation to get an interview. I share these anecdotes as reminders of how we (researcher and participant) are human first. These examples also bring up the importance of research methodologies of reciprocity, attuned to the lived realities participants and to my relationality to them, as an ally.

Moreover, my work in self-reflection has been guided by Yolanda Sealey Ruiz's Archeology of Self™ and my developing and ongoing racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Sealey-Ruiz calls us to get to know and recognize how our personal understandings of and about systems of oppression affects our ability to engage in social justice efforts (e.g., Mentor & Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Throughout the research, I was attentive to the dynamic of power and privilege in the relationships with my participants and as a white teacher-researcher. I had to be critical of my positionality and the ways in which this work can quickly become exploitative when power and privilege are not attended to. Picower (2021) describes the work white teachers who are reflecting on their racial identity, knowing "there is never a point of arrival" (p.15); "[they] still wield institutional power, but they will do so with reframed understand of race and with the desire to work toward anti-racism rather than uphold structures of White supremacy. (p.167).

A pláticas methodology pushed me to face and be critical of the ways in which I was upholding (and challenging) systems of oppression by the work I'm doing in schools. I confronted ways that my efforts to get students to graduate hindered opportunities to make more meaningful connections with them. I also had to confront how the positioning of college as a marker of academic success had been detrimental to how some of the participants saw themselves. It also gave me the opportunity to reconnect with former students, who I did not get

to know as well when they were my students. Because of the open nature of pláticas, when our conversations veered from the research question, we could continue to explore those topics. There was shared vulnerability which was also healing for me. The participants shared about aspects of their identities that had changed, evolved, or that I had missed from when they were my students.

One of the things I had to attend to in doing this kind of research with former students was my tendency to want to jump in to help. I had to attend to being a listener, not a helper. I think this stems in part from my positionality as a teacher and, in particular, as a former teacher to my participants. When a participant was describing missing deadlines for her classes and feeling particularly unmotivated, I had to resist the teacher-helper urge in me to jump in and help her make a plan for getting the work done. I wanted to ask: Did you make a to-do list? Have you asked for an extension? What assignments are they? I did end up asking how I could be supportive, and the participant asked if I could check their papers. While I gave this anecdote previously as an example of reciprocity, and I think what helped me be in reciprocal relationship with this person was through listening. That is, I recognize what was even more important in that moment was listening to what was going on in the participant's life, hearing how she was feeling and what she was experiencing, and staying present and connected, rather than trying to find immediate solutions.

Another implication of this study is that it calls for an expansion of the artifacts of data collection, such as social media, photos, and through walking pláticas or of significant spaces, as openings into students' experiences. One of my favorite parts of data collection was the walking pláticas because I felt like we really got to connect while walking and talking. After touring the spaces that were significant to the participants, I invited them to dinner. Dinner conversations

weren't recorded as data, they were just fun and another opportunity to connect for the sake of connecting. At another point in data collection, Estrella invited me to her birthday party in a park. It was an honor to be invited, not only because of the significance of the day, but because I had the pleasure of meeting her family and her friends. Another moment outside of "official" data collection that brought joy to the work was when I met with Yessi for a celebratory ice-cream as she had finished her degree and got a job working in a medical office. The methodological approaches I was taking up in this study required these kinds of relationships and activities because they strengthened our connections and trust. Developing these kinds of trusting and caring relationships are necessary for rigorous and ethical research practices. This research also views "human relationships as ends in themselves rather than an instrumental means to an end" (Campano and Ghiso, 2016).

As I close this dissertation, I am thinking about the participants and their experiences of major, minor, and multiple transitions, how so much can change in a short amount of time. Yessi just graduated from her medical assistant program and found a job assisting with echocardiograms. Cecilia is taking a semester off and is visiting Guatemala. Claudia is graduating this May. Estrella is also graduating and is working as a technology specialist at STAR. My hope is that other educators can take up this kind of work that values developing human relationships for the sake of being in relationship with another. Being with students in their full humanity, opening spaces and being present to sharing experiences.

Conclusion

Given the need for continued research that reflects the diverse thoughts, experiences, and perspectives of bilingual students, the main goal of this study was to document and explore the experiences of Latinx bilingual students making the transition from high school to college. My

analysis disrupted homogenizing and oftentimes deficit perspectives about first-generation bilingual students that get reproduced in media and in education. Beyond disrupting, this study informed college and career readiness programs and college-level supports to be more attuned to the variety of needs and experiences of first-generation bilingual youth. It showed the variety of experiences relating to the participants' educational journeys to and through college and the complexities of those lived experiences. Lastly, this study joins the growing body of scholarship that is committed to community-based and collaborative research (e.g., Campano, Ghiso, & Thakurta, 2022). Framed within a Latina feminist epistemology that challenges dominant conceptions of knowledge and knowledge creation, the pláticas methodology used in this study offers researchers and educators a way of conducting collaborative research that opens spaces for community and healing, and for engaging in critical conversations around the work we are doing in schools and in colleges.

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Appendix

Questions Used for Pláticas

Questions taken and adapted from Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) study of first-generation women in the academy:

(1) Take me back to your first day of college and reconstruct the events of the day, the decisions you made, the people you interacted with, how you were feeling?

(2) What or who was influential in your decision to go to college?

(3) What tensions have you experienced between the culture of your upbringing and the culture(s) in college?

(4) What were some of the most difficult experiences you have had so far in college?

(5) What are some of the most pleasurable experiences you have had in college so far?

(6) Is college life what you expected? If not, how is it different? Did you know what to expect?

(7) Are there any parts of yourself you put away or keep hidden in your personal relationships? In your relationships with students at college? With professors? With coworkers?

(8) What do you want teachers and other education researchers to know about your experiences as a Latina woman and as a first-generation college student?

(9) Is there anything I should have asked but didn't?