Article

Muxerista agency in North Carolina: Intentional acts of resistance towards access to higher education

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Abstract

This study outlines how the mother/daughter duo's (participant groups of a mother and daughter) leverage *muxerista agency,* or intentional acts of resistance to (re)shape inequitable and anti-immigrant educational policy structures, in alliance with immigrant-serving community-based organizations to navigate access to higher education. Engaging in *muxerista agency,* the mother/daughter duos disrupted anti-immigrant and racist policies while also drawing from their collective power as sources of strength. Alongside community partners, participants offered a liberatory and transformative practice for undocumented immigrant students and students in mixed-status families who are navigating the restrictive access to higher education in North Carolina that is rooted within anti-immigrant legislation. The significance of this study shows how organizations can be a powerful resource in a politically conservative state and hostile anti-immigrant climate. Implications from muxerista agency show that educational practitioners and community-based organizations must name the already limited resources for undocumented communities, acknowledge that they are being even more restricted in this environment, and engage in their own measures of resistance and advocacy to continue supporting undocumented students and families.

Introduction

Me dijo todos los por qué no debía hacerlo [aplicar a la universidad]. Pero ahí fue donde me quedó muy claro que estaba yo sola en esto…Soy yo y mi mamá. – Victoria, undocumented college senior

He told me all the reasons why I should not do it [apply to the university]. But that is when it became clear to me that I was alone in this. . . . It is me and my mamá. – Victoria, undocumented college senior

Across the United States, undocumented students face restrictions when navigating their postsecondary options. In "locked out" states—those that have banned undocumented students from

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receiving in-state resident tuition or enrolling in public post-secondary institutions—the options available to undocumented students are even more limited (Nienhusser, 2018). Further, as evidenced in Victoria's case in the excerpt above, many high-school counselors and post-secondary admissions staff are unaware of resources for these undocumented students (Castrellón, 2021; Nienhusser, 2018) or lack the knowledge that undocumented students can enroll in higher education (Nienhusser et al., 2016).

As she recalled her process of applying for college, Victoria recalled that her high-school advisor did not know how to help her and that she and her mother faced the college application process alone. However, like other participants in this study, Victoria and her mother eventually leveraged the support of immigrant-serving community-based organizations. Research has shown that such community-based organizations can play an important role in immigrant communities to address access to services, fill in educational gaps, and more (Gast & Okamoto, 2016). These organizations can be a powerful resource in politically conservative states where undocumented immigrants have limited access to education and other resources. The purpose of this research is to uncover how undocumented immigrant families may leverage CBOs to navigate educational and political systems that systemically exclude their participation.

This study occurred in North Carolina, a locked-out state that bans undocumented students from receiving in-state resident tuition rates and state funding. The participants included Latina students (recent high school graduates through college seniors) who were either undocumented or in mixed-status families, as well as their undocumented mothers (see Table 1), who worked alongside them to advocate and search for educational resources. The findings revealed how, in alliance with immigrant-serving community-based organizations, these participants leveraged *muxerista agency,* or intentional acts of resistance, to (re)shape inequitable and anti-immigrant educational policy structures to navigate access to higher education. Many of the participants relied on their involvement with these local immigrant-serving community-based organizations to navigate the college application process. While the participants exhibited agency in their educational trajectories, they clearly argued that undocumented students and parents should not have to search for basic information; rather, educators should be knowledgeable and possess the tools to inform these students of their options.

Literature Review

Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Students

An estimated 408,000 undocumented students and DACA recipients are enrolled in higher education, and the number continues to increase, with an estimated 100,000 undocumented students graduating each year (Zong & Betalova, 2019). While the 1982 *Plyler v. Doe* Supreme Court ruling provided access to a free K–12 education for these undocumented students, the court did not develop a federal policy providing undocumented students access to higher education (López & López, 2009). Rather, each state creates its own policies regarding access to higher education for these students, and thus, varying policies that grant, deny, or limit access to higher education, in-state tuition, and/or state funding for undocumented students exist among states (Higher Ed Immigration Portal; Olivas, 2012). Currently, 24 states and DC provide access to in-state resident tuition for eligible undocumented students, and 18 states[1] and DC grant access to state or private financial aid. Six states[2] provide in-state resident tuition to eligible Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients only, six

[1] California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington
[2] Arizona, Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oklahoma

states[3] ban undocumented students from receiving in-state resident tuition, and three states[4] completely ban undocumented students from enrolling in public colleges and universities (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2025). As of February 2025, Florida rescinded its in-state resident tuition policy for undocumented students (Weissman, 2025).

Undocumented students may hold different statuses. For example, some undocumented students are recipients of the DACA program. Implemented in July of 2012, this program allows eligible undocumented individuals temporary access to work formally in the United States while also receiving protection from deportation (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2024). "Temporary" translates to two years, after which individuals are required to pay $555 (if filed online) or $605 (if filed on paper) to renew their application (United We Dream, 2024). Those currently eligible must have been in the United States since 2007 and be no younger than 16 years (fwd.us, 2024). Because of this restrictive eligibility, DACA pertains only to a small number of eligible undocumented people across the nation. Those eligible do not include many young people in high school today, as a majority were born after 2007. Additionally, DACA has faced an ongoing legal battle in the courts and has been in limbo since the first Donald Trump Administration of 2017–2021, as several lawsuits against DACA claim the program to be unlawful (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2023). This limbo has continued for 7 years, and no new applications are being accepted—only renewals (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2024). Because of this legal pause and the outdated eligibility markers, undocumented high school students are currently graduating without access to DACA.

States with the largest populations of undocumented students include California, Texas, Florida, New York, and New Jersey; these states also enroll the highest number of undocumented students in the nation (American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education, 2023). Although the majority of undocumented students reside in states where higher education is accessible (American Immigration Council and Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education, 2023), they still face many immigration- and policy-related barriers to higher education, even more so for those that reside in a restrictive state. Additionally, many existing policies that grant access to higher education are at risk of being rescinded. For example, in February 2025, Florida revoked a decades-long policy that allowed for eligible undocumented students to apply for in-state resident tuition (Weissman, 2025). Thus, due to the restricted and uncertain resources, educators should focus on college access and how undocumented students strategize to apply, enroll, and graduate from higher education.

Given the varied approach to college access for undocumented students across states, educators in high schools, such as counselors, are rarely prepared to support undocumented students in their college application processes (Castrellón, 2021; Nienhusser et al., 2016), particularly when these students do not have DACA (Macías, 2022). Nonetheless, some educators work diligently to learn how to support their students (Parkhouse et al., 2020). Indeed, students often find themselves educating their educators on the resources and policies for undocumented students, and they connect with outside resources (such as immigrant-serving community-based organizations) to help them navigate the college application process (Yasuike, 2019).

The New Latino South

Since 1990, the demographics of Latina/o/x/e immigrants have increased drastically in Southern states, with scholars arguing that "the economic boom of the 1990s was accompanied by an

[3] Indiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin

[4] Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina

immigration boom" (Weiner, 2006, p. 139). Not previously seen as immigrant destinations (Salas & Portes, 2017), these states include Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia (Salas & Portes, 2017). Odem and Lacy (2009) stated that the changing demographics have impacted the social, economic, and cultural life of the area, creating a new era in the South.

Across this New Latino South, states have engaged in a multitude of recruitment strategies to bring Latina/o/x/e laborers to work in agribusiness, meatpacking industries, and the service industry (Gill, 2018; Weiner, 2006). Employers have targeted Latina/o/x/e communities by touting the low cost of living and availability of jobs, and strategies include word of mouth and printing news articles in cities with large Latina/o/x/e populations, among others (Gill 2018; Weiner, 2006).

Like many other states, North Carolina is experiencing the labor-migration phenomenon that has incentivized immigrants from Latin America to work in industries to which U.S.-born Americans typically would not be inclined (Gill, 2018). Specifically, the demographics of Latina/o/x/e in North Carolina have grown because of agribusiness, such as agriculture and the meatpacking industry, primarily poultry processing, hog farming, and the service industry (Gill, 2018). However, these positions are often underpaid and non-unionized, leading to difficult working and living conditions.

Education for Undocumented Students in the New Latino South

While the demographic and cultural changes have occurred quickly across the New Latino South, they have had an undeniable impact on schools and educational opportunities. While changes to racial demographics can occur rapidly, school systems and pedagogical practices take a long time to adequately develop the tools needed to serve and meet the needs of the new demographics of students, and many school leaders are also resistant to these changes, espousing deficit practices schoolwide (Diem & Welton, 2020). This is apparent in the New Latino South, where the majority of states have restrictive access to higher education for undocumented students.

While not all Latina/o/x/e students are undocumented, and not all undocumented students are of Latina/o/x/e backgrounds, the largest population of undocumented students in the United States are Latina/o/x/e. Therefore, it is important to consider how policies and practices have changed, if at all, to accommodate these students' access to education. At the time of this writing in 2025, the seven states in the New Latino South restricted access to higher education for undocumented students: Three states, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina, banned undocumented students from enrolling in public higher education institutions; two states, North Carolina and Tennessee, were considered restrictive with no access to in-state resident tuition or state funding; Kentucky offered in-state tuition for undocumented students; and Virginia offered both in-state resident tuition and state financial aid to eligible undocumented students (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2025). Supporting Latina/o/x/e immigrant students is complex when the students are undocumented and must navigate educational structures that systematically exclude them—such as in the example of undocumented students applying for college in a "locked out" state.

In North Carolina in particular, the Latina/o/x/e demographics have grown 40% since 2010 (Tippet, 2021), comprising 10.5% of the population (Census.gov). As such, schools in North Carolina, particularly rural schools, have experienced an increase in their Latina/o/x/e racial demographics (LatinxEd, 2023). Additionally, around 4–6% of North Carolina's total state population has at least one family member who is undocumented (Mathema, 2017), and immigrants make up 8% of North Carolina residents (American Immigration Council, 2020). These changing demographics have left many North Carolina school districts unsure of how to support recent Latina/o/x/e immigrant students and their families (LatinxEd, 2023).

Undocumented Students in North Carolina. Access to higher education for undocumented students and students in mixed-status families is nested within a multitude of anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric in North Carolina. Ultimately, besides from local policies and practices that undocumented students and their families must navigate, they encounter additional state and national policies.

North Carolina is a state with complex anti-immigrant policies. During the time of data collection for this study, the bill HB 10 was being considered in the legislature. HB 10 would require sheriffs to cooperate with the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement—the prospect of which created fear in the participating families and communities (Dreier, 2024). This bill had been previously introduced twice but had not been passed and was now on its way to becoming a law (ACLU of North Carolina, 2023).

Bills like HB 10 make families feel unsafe and afraid to reach out to authorities when needed, and they have also left children feeling "discouraged and unsupported by their schools in regard to their academic achievement" (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016). Indeed, research has shown the impact that anti-immigrant bills can have on undocumented students and their families, including emotional, economic, and social mobility effects, among others (Chavez et al., 2012; Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Consequently, students may disengage from school, feel fearful on campus, not trust educators or other state employees, and may be targeted by peers with racist comments (Bernal-Arevalo et al., 2021; Muñoz & Vigil, 2018; Perez, 2015; Rubio-Hernandez & Ayón, 2016). In some instances, mothers may ask their children to limit their involvement in social movements for fear of attracting attention from authority, such as the police (Chavez et al., 2012).

Mobility in North Carolina is also classified as restrictive, as driver licenses and state identifications are not accessible to undocumented individuals unless they are DACA recipients (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2024). Not having access to these identifications can cause further impacts, such as the inability to complete the Residency Determination Service (RDS) application required from all students in North Carolina who are seeking financial aid or applying to pay in-state tuition. Despite not being eligible for federal or state financial aid, undocumented students are still required to complete the RDS application for the determining paperwork that states their status (LatinxEd, 2023).

RDS requires students to have "an eligible immigration status." To complete the application, caregiver(s)' (i.e., parent, legal guardian, caregivers, etc.,) information is typically utilized, which can create an issue if the parent(s)/caregiver(s) do not have a Social Security number. This issue can occur for both students who are and are not citizens; students living in a mixed-status household also have trouble completing the RDS, as their parent(s)/caregiver(s) may not have access to an identification document (LatinxEd, 2023). Therefore, students who are U.S. citizens and members of a mixed-status family may be denied residency status, and in such cases must appeal (www.ncresidency.org). First-generation college students may not know that they can appeal or how to go about the process and are left assuming that they do not have access to in-state resident tuition. Moreover, the daunting process of paperwork and finding documentation can lead many mixed-status families to not pursue seeking in-state residency (LatinxEd, 2023). With such daunting processes within the education system, parents/caregivers often turn to places outside of the school system such as community organizations for support.

Latina/o/x/e Parents/caregivers in Education and Community Organizing

Educators tend to perceive Latina/o/x/e parents/caregivers as not being "involved" in their children's education (Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995; Valencia, 2010). However, perceptions of what parent involvement means have been challenged by many scholars over time, as traditional perceptions of parent involvement disproportionately exclude the ways in which minoritized populations are

engaged in their children's education (Fernández & López, 2017; López, 2001; Lowenhaupt, 2014; Paredes Scribner & Fernández, 2017). For example, Fernández and López (2017) argued that the ways in which parent involvement is defined can erase and discourage acts of parental engagement:

> We posit that the problem of involvement is a discursive one where very specific/discrete understandings of involvement are recognized and privileged in school settings while other forms of involvement have been marginalized, rendered invisible, or discouraged altogether. (Fernández & López, 2017, p. 113; López 2001; Young 1999)

Because traditional parent involvement revolves around structured, school-defined activity (López, 2001), the multifaceted ways that parents support and engage in their children's education can go unnoticed (Anderson et al., 2020; López, 2001; Paredes Scribner & Fernández, 2017). Additionally, by limiting parent involvement to pre-existing school-based activities, the narrative and structural barriers that prevent parent "involvement" become largely ignored, leading to continual dismissal of the ways in which historically minoritized parents are engaged in their child's education.

Existing language barriers, coupled with immigration status and low economic resources, correlate with how involved a Latina/o/x/e parent/guardian may be (Chávez-Reyes, 2010; Johnson et al., 2016). What educators fail to recognize are the home-based activities that Latina/o/x/e parents are most likely to engage with, including providing motivation and emphasizing the importance of education (Anderson et al., 2020). For example, literature shows that when Latino students were asked about their parents' educational involvement, instead of describing academic-related activities, the students discussed things like asking about their day, providing general encouragement, and other emotional support, which the students emphasized were more important than their parents' volunteering at the school or attending a Parent Teacher Association meeting (LeFevre and Shaw, 2011; Zarate, 2007). Additionally, parents may be involved in community-based activities, which also go unseen by educators (LeFevre and Shaw; 2011).

Because Latina/o/x/e parents are not recognized for their educational involvement or leadership, they are labeled as being "uninterested" in their student's education (Alexander et al., 2017; Marshall, 2006). However, this assumption is mistaken, as structural barriers can impede the opportunity for Latina/o/x/e parents to be involved (Alexander et al., 2017). For example, parents may not be involved because they know there are no translators available at the school, they do not have access to childcare or transportation, or events are held during hours the parents/caregivers are working. Because some of these parent(s)/caregivers work jobs that require long working hours and are inflexible, if they were to attend an activity after school, they might have to reduce their work hours, resulting in a reduction of wages (Rodriguez, 2016; Zarate, 2007).

Another often-ignored factor that impedes parental involvement is the ways in which anti-immigrant political climates may inform how parents are involved in schools (Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2020). Indeed, schools often do not foster a culture that is inclusive of or considers the needs/safety of Latina/o/x/e immigrant parents (Alexander et al., 2017). Additionally, other elements may hinder why Latina/o/x/e parents do not get involved. For instance, school personnel should presumably know how to support all students. When students with marginalized identities, such as those who are undocumented, learn that their educators do not know how to support them (Rodriguez, 2016), the Latina/o/x/e parent(s)/caregiver(s) must attempt to understand the education system. When they become vocal and advocate for their child's needs, their concerns are often dismissed (Flores Carmona, 2010). Therefore, the perception of parent involvement that is restricted to physical on-campus visits, meetings, and volunteer hours, excludes the multifaceted and strategic layers of engagement in which many Latina/o/x/e parents engage.

Furthermore, when schools do not foster a welcoming and inclusive space for Latina/o/x/e parent(s)/caregiver(s), many turn to community organizing as a means of advocacy and support for their children. Auerbach (2011) described these means as "invisible strategies" because they are often not seen by educators. Community-based organizations and non-profit organizations are pivotal to Latina/o/x/e communities and can serve as sites of mobilization, advocacy, learning, empowerment, and leadership development (Gast & Okamoto, 2016). However, while they may be pillars in Latina/o/x/e communities, these organizations also operate on minimal resources and cannot stop the political targeting that Latina/o/x/e communities and undocumented immigrants face (Gast & Okamoto, 2016). Nonetheless, within these organizations, many Latina/o/x/e immigrants find much-needed resources for survival as well as other community members to whom they can relate and connect.

Community-based organizations can serve as intermediaries between communities and schools. Research has shown the ways in which parent organizing can occur in a multitude of spaces, from schools to community-based organizations (Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2020; Gil, 2019). In this way, community-based organizations, schools, and families can transform the ways in which parents/caregivers advocate for the educational experiences of their young ones. Auerbach (2011) encouraged schools to view Latina/o/x/e families as assets and allow them to contribute to the cultural bridge between school and families.

Methods

This qualitative study was part of a larger study focused on test-optional policies and their influence on college access and the college application process for undocumented students in three states—California, Colorado, and North Carolina—with data collected between spring 2023 and spring 2024. The larger study comprised three Co-PIs (one of whom oversaw data collection in each state), and the participants included community leaders, higher education institutional agents, K–12 school practitioners, parents/caregivers, and undocumented high school students applying for college, as well as undocumented college students.

Although the larger study is focused on test-optional policies, when we collected data in North Carolina, we came across findings that were relevant to parent, student, and community leadership. Additionally, North Carolina is a locked-out state, and because of this, it had unique findings regarding how undocumented students and students in mixed-status families navigated the higher education system. Thus, for the purposes of this manuscript, we focused on one set of participants in North Carolina. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do undocumented students and students in mixed-status families navigate the college application process in the locked-out state of North Carolina?
2. In what ways have undocumented students and students in mixed-status families and their parents in North Carolina been involved in community leadership, and how does this change when they are faced with structural educational inequities?
3. What role do immigrant-serving community-based organizations play in supporting undocumented and mixed-status families throughout the college application process?

Participants

The dataset for this study was collected in May of 2024. Participants in this study included three sets of mothers and their daughters (see Table 1). The daughters in this study were either seniors in high school preparing to enroll in higher education or were currently enrolled in higher education.

While we initially searched only for undocumented parents and their college-aspiring or enrolled students, we found one family (Mónica and Martiza) eager to participate with a student who was a U.S. citizen. Given the context of North Carolina and the complexity of the RDS as well as the effects of the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) on students in mixed-status families, we felt it important to include the experiences of Mónica and Maritza. Therefore, two of the mother–daughter duos had both an undocumented mother and daughter, and one duo included an undocumented mother and a daughter who was a U.S. citizen.

Data Collection

Table 1: Participants

	Duo Group #1		**Duo Group #2**		**Duo Group #3**	
Name	Victoria	Sara	Mónica	Maritza	Patricia	Diana
Daughter/Mother	Daughter	Mother	Daughter	Mother	Daughter	Mother
Grade/Community-based organization	College Senior	Church	Recent High School Graduate (graduated a semester early)	La Colectiva de Mujeres Para la Justicia (Collective of Women for Justice)	High School Senior	Comunidad Empoderada de Carolina del Norte (Empowered Community of North Carolina)
Immigration Status	Undocumented	Undocumented	U.S. Citizen/ Mixed-Status Family	Undocumented	Undocumented	Undocumented

Initially, we aimed to interview parents and students individually. However, toward the end of our data collection, one student participant, Victoria, decided she wanted to be interviewed with her mother, who was also her biggest advocate. The interview went so well, we decided to hold other interviews in this same manner. In all, at the end of our data collection, we were able to interview three sets of mothers and daughters. All three interviews were held in Spanish, with some English sprinkled in by the students and interviewers. The interviews were held in the space most comfortable for the participants. For example, for Victoria and Sara, the interview was held at their church. For Maritza and Mónica, the interview was held at their community-based organization. Due to distance, the interview with Patricia and Diana was held via Zoom, where the two women joined together from their home.

Data Analysis

The data were transcribed via Rev.com and later checked by either the first author or the second author for accuracy. Once the transcripts were clean, both authors reviewed the data. Individually, both authors completed two rounds of coding using NVivo 11. In the first round of coding, we themed the data categorically (Saldaña, 2021) and developed a codebook. The second author then performed an overview of all the data to ensure we caught every theme. Subsequently, the second author engaged in a round of focused coding (Saldaña, 2021), which incorporated a closer look at the categories within the themes to search for those themes that were most frequent throughout the data. The first author then completed a second round of focused coding to ensure validity. The first author also analyzed content that was specific to the North Carolina context—for

example, when students or parents mentioned specific policies. Both authors then discussed the overall findings and selected the most pertinent quotes that encompassed the findings.

After completing a draft of the findings and discussion section, we sent the draft to our participants, along with their full transcripts. We asked them for feedback to ensure we had interpreted their comments correctly. This member-checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) process added to the validity of our interpretation of the data.

Positionality

When conducting research with a critical framework, it is important to not only be reflexive but also to consider the role of power between the researcher and participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Doing so is even more crucial when working with minoritized populations, who may often feel exploited by researchers (Campbell et al., 2021). Particularly, undocumented communities are often exploited and not ethically represented (Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021):

> Frequently, it is non-undocumented immigrant scholars who establish themselves as both the knowledge holders and producers of this research, which is extremely problematic because it further silences and positions undocumented immigrants as perpetual subjects. … I am often enraged by how most researchers rarely include undocumented immigrant voices as fundamental to their projects (MigrantScribble, 2017; Reyes, 2017). And by fundamental, I do not just mean central to the findings section of a manuscript but central to the theoretical conceptualization, literature review, and analytical framing of a discussion. And let me be clear, the virtual absence of undocumented immigrant voices as theorists in the literature is not due to their non-existence (MigrantScribble, 2017). It is rather due to a deliberate dismissal, as there are many examples of brilliant "illegalized persons" (Sati, 2017, para. 14) creating and sharing knowledge every day about many issues concerning and expanding beyond immigration (Reyna Rivarola & López, 2021, p. 734).

Reyna Rivarola and López (2021) argued that, too often, undocumented scholars are not embedded as active contributors throughout the research process. We acknowledge that not incorporating undocumented scholars in the research process is a form of epistemic racism, as it continues to silence undocumented communities. Indeed, scholars must name whose voices are involved and not involved in the research, analysis, and theorizing processes of academic scholarship. For this reason, we share our positionalities in this manuscript and specify that we also shared our positionalities with our participants prior to each interview. The purpose of our sharing was to build rapport and provide participants with knowledge about us and our intent with the research. Reyna Rivarola and López (2021) warned researchers to be mindful and critical of their roles in the research process. In this research project, we aim to center our participants, to amplify their voices and experiences, and to continuously ensure that their knowledge and experiences are fundamentally brought forward.

We are not from the North Carolina area where this research occurred. Thus, we spent ample time building relationships with community partners, schools, students, and families prior to conducting interviews. Together, we attempted not only to connect with the community but also to be present when asked, as part of relationship building is being there for the participants. For example, when asked to present in person to high school students or attend a conference, at least one of us would attend. Additionally, we held our interviews in Spanish and maintained the Spanish quotes here in the findings to bring forward the depth of the quote.

Castrellón: I am a first-generation college graduate and daughter and granddaughter of Mexican immigrants. Both my parents came to the United States as children and overtime received their green cards and residency. I grew up in an area of Los Angeles County, CA, that was primarily Latina/o/x/e

and a plethora of mixed statuses. I entered college in the early 2000s at the height of the DREAM Act[5] and H.R. 4437.[6] During this time, I began to understand the inseparability of immigration policy and education policy—and the effects that these policy sectors had on the experiences of undocumented students and students in mixed-status families.

Entering graduate school and engaging in qualitative research, I participated in continuous reflexivity about my role as a U.S. citizen focused on immigration and education policy. I often wrestled with the question of how we as researchers could use someone's lived experience as "data" (Castrellón et al., 2018). Learning to use critical theories like critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Latino critical theory (LatCrit; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), and tools like member checking, reflexivity, and others supported my understanding of how to conduct research *with and alongside* immigrant communities—not research on immigrant communities. Thus, in this research, I leverage these tools to connect and inform the way in which these experiences are presented. Further, I employ the tools to critically challenge my positionality and the role that I play as a researcher with and alongside undocumented families.

Rendón Guzmán: I am a current undocumented, first-generation graduate student in school counseling. I came to the U.S. at a young age and grew up in the Central Valley area of California. Because of my lived experiences, I am committed to educational equity and access for undocumented students and students in mixed-status families. Outside of academia, I am highly involved with supporting mixed-status families through immigrant-serving community-based organizations.

Although I share similarities with some of the participants in terms of immigration status, I have lived as an undocumented woman in California, which has a different reality than living in North Carolina as an undocumented person. Therefore, key actions were taken when conducting the research to understand the local context of North Carolina and the lived experiences of the participants. Because cultural mistrust exists among minoritized communities and researchers, as they might not understand the research or our roles as academics/researchers (Campbell et al., 2021), being vulnerable and transparent is crucial when attempting to build rapport with participants and foster trust (Mangal et al., 2022). I took several approaches to develop such trust with the participants, including sharing my immigration status as an undocumented student with participants before and during the interview; conducting interviews in the participants' native language; maintaining communication with the participants via in-person visits, meetings, and text messages; and continuously explaining the purpose of the research and the research process to the participants to build relationships and gain trust.

Theoretical Framework

To answer our research questions, we combined the theoretical framework of agency (Chang et al., 2017; Morales et al., 2024; Nelson, 2024; Schlosser, 2019) and a muxerista framework (Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2020; Revilla, 2004; Oliva & Alemán, 2018) to explore how the mother-daughter

[5]Originally introduced in 2001, the DREAM Act or the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act is a series of proposed laws that would allow for eligible undocumented people to enter a pathway to citizenship. Despite several iterations and being introduced to Congress on several occasions, as of the time of this writing in 2024, the DREAM Act has not yet passed.

[6] H.R.4437 was known as the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005. The purpose was to strengthen immigration laws and border security. The act spurred nationwide demonstrations in protest of the bill. Ultimately H.R. 4437 did not pass the Senate.

duos leveraged their agency to understand, resist, and transform policies that denied them the opportunity to attend higher education.

Agency

Philosophers define agency as agents (or individuals) taking intentional action, with a focus on the intentionality of the actions (Schlosser, 2019). These intentional actions are, as Marx states, within individuals' capacity and "will to think, act, reflect, and re-create our world and ourselves" (Nelson, 2024, p. 60). While an individual's actions can be intentional or unintentional, there is human agency behind the decision-making process to engage in their actions, and "an agent's power to initiate action cannot be reduced to the capacity to act intentionally and for reasons" (Ginet 1990; O'Connor 2000; Lowe 2008 as cited by Schlosser, 2019). While some scholars explain agency through the intentionality of an agent's actions, and Marx centers agency on an individual's will to re-create their world, others specify that the focus is on the agent's initiation to act and that there is not always an intended outcome associated with the action. For purposes of this study, we define agency as actions that are intentional with the purpose of re-creating or (re)shaping the individual's world/reality.

Chang et al. (2017) drew from Holland et al.'s (1998) notion of figured worlds to determine how undocumented students "figure—or take agency in making meaning of—their world" (Chang et al., 2017) and their educational trajectories. Chang et al. (2017) showed how undocumented students can leverage their agency to engage in liberating themselves from oppressive systems. Similarly, Morales-Hernandez et al. (2024) explored how undocumented students have the agency to engage in acts of resistance. They defined "acts of resistance" as actions taken to resist structural inequality, focusing on the ways in which undocumented college students use acts of resistance to resist socio-legal practices that shape exclusion and illegality (Morales-Hernandez, et al., 2024). Additionally, Morales-Hernandez et al.'s (2024) notion of "acts of resistance" connects to the early work on resistance by Solorzano and Solorzano (1995) and Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001). Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) refer to human agency as having the "confidence and skills to act on one's behalf" (p. 315–316). Thus, resistance and acts of resistance would not be possible without human agency. Aligning agency with acts of resistance to oppressive policies brings forward an agent's power to initiate actions that push back on liminal legality. When connected with other critical frameworks, such as a muxerista framework, the concept of agency can support minoritized populations in understanding, challenging, and liberating themselves from oppressive systems.

Muxerista Framework

To situate the leadership roles that the Latina undocumented students and their mothers assumed to guide the process to ensure the student had access to a higher education, we drew from a muxerista framework (Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2020; Revilla, 2004; Oliva & Alemán, 2019). A muxerista framework honors the lived experiences of Chicanas/Latinas and puts them at the center of the research and policy sensemaking process (Oliva & Alemán, 2019):

> A muxerista politics of education offers a transformative approach to engaging with the policy actors of a school, the countering of majoritarian narratives of "parent engagement," and a centering of the values and interests of mothers in the (re)making and implementing of educational policy (Oliva & Alemán, 2019, p. 68).

A muxerista framework has been used to explore concepts such as how Latina mothers are political actors (Dryness, 2011; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2020), and how Chicanas/Latinas college students challenge oppression and inequity (Revilla, 2004). Due to its critical underpinnings that centralize and challenge race, racism, and sexism in education and lead to a call to action for social

and structural change (Revilla, 2004). Utilizing CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Solorzano, 1998) and LatCrit (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), as well as Chicana/Latina feminism, Revilla (2004) conceptualized a muxerista pedagogy. By drawing from CRT and LatCrit, a muxerista theoretical framework centers the experiential knowledge of participants and challenges dominant ideologies (e.g., deficit thinking, meritocracy, etc.). The support of Chicana/Latina feminism (Anzaldúa, 1987; Moraga, 1983) allows for centering Latinas in the work, as well as how gender, sexuality, and class often intersect with race and racism.

A key framework within muxerista pedagogy is transformational resistance (Delgado Bernal, 1997; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) stated that transformational resistance "refers to student behavior that illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice" (p. 319). As such, transformational resistance can be seen as a form of resistance in which the individual understands and challenges oppressive structures and moves toward social justice. For example, Revilla (2004) found that the students who engaged a muxerista pedagogy in her study taught others about social justice through their activism.

Drawing upon all the theories that develop a muxerista pedagogy was useful for this research, helping us to understand how the actions that the mother/daughter duos engaged in were much influenced by challenging/resisting racist, nativist, and often sexist limitations and sharing their experiential knowledge with others to provide pathways to resources. Indeed, using a muxerista framework allowed the lived experiences and leadership roles of the mother/daughter duos to be seen as transformative practices to change policy and deficit ideologies held by educators.

Uniting the foundations of these muxerista frameworks in our research and connecting them with agency and acts of resistance shape how we conceptualize muxerista agency. We define *muxerista agency* as the intentional acts of resistance taken by Latina women to (re)shape their world and the inequitable and anti-immigrant educational policy structures that minimize educational access. Muxerista agency allows Latina women to draw from their experiential knowledge to name oppressive practices and offer liberatory and transformative solutions to combat anti-immigrant educational inequities and restrictive practices.

This definition supports our arguments of how the participants leveraged their agency to liberate themselves from oppressive systems (to the extent that they could, given the liminal legality of holding an undocumented immigrant status) that restrict their navigation of higher education systems. Together, the mother-daughter duos in this study leveraged their agency to name and challenge oppressive educational practices, speak from their lived experiences, validate their experiences as sources of knowledge, question and push back on educational inequities, and leverage resources to which they had access to uplift and practice their agency toward paving a way to higher education, even in a locked-out state.

Results

While there were several key moments throughout the interviews, three main results ground this study: experiences with high school educators, pride in the educational trajectories of the daughters, and community-based organizations as key resources and spaces of trust and leadership. Drawing from the data, we title each finding as follows: "Soy yo y mi Mamá" (It is me and my mama): Experiences with High School Educators; Orgullo y Tocando Puertas (Pride & Knocking on Doors); "[Ella] nos metió como *la courage"* (She gave us the courage): Community-based organizations as Spaces of Resources, Trust, and Leadership. Each of these findings conceptualizes how muxerista agency was leveraged.

The three results exhibit how the women found ways to resist oppressive systems (e.g., not having access to higher education) and find spaces in which they could exist to reshape their realities. Regarding "Soy yo y mi Mamá," the experiences the students had with their high school educators left them needing to seek outside networks, and despite being told they could not/should not apply to college, they found ways to do so. Pertaining "Orgullo y Tocando Puertas," the mothers in this research were not only proud of their daughters, but they also found ways to help create pathways for them by reaching out and "knocking on doors" to grow their resource and support networks. Last, for "Ella nos metio como la courage," the women specifically identified the trust they established with the community-based organizations, the empowerment they developed, and how the partnership created opportunities for access to educational resources.

"Soy yo y mi Mamá" ("It is me and my mama"): Experiences with High School Educators

All three sets of participants expressed the varying relationships they had with high school educators. In each case, there was a pivotal moment when the mother/daughter duos realized they could not obtain the support they needed from the schools and were prompted to seek resources within their community. Victoria recalled that she was silenced by her high school counselor when looking for resources to apply to college:

> No me dejó decir ni media palabra. . . . y me cortó y dijo "pero tú, ¿para qué quieres aplicar? O sea, porque no te casas como cualquier otra mexicana . . . por qué no vas si te casas y ya los ya asunto, arreglado." . . . y me dijo que [la universidad] no era para mí . . . Recuerdo que me empezó a hacer una lista de todos los contras que tenía. . . . me dijo todos los por qué no debía hacerlo. Pero ahí fue donde me quedó muy claro que estaba yo sola en esto . . . Soy yo y mi mamá. (Victoria, undocumented college senior)

> He didn't let me say, not one word. . . . He cut me off and said, "But you? Why do you want to apply? Why don't you get married like any other Mexican woman . . . why don't you go and get married and get everything fixed." . . . He told me, that [the university] was not for me. I remember he began making a list for me of all the things I had against me. . . . He told me all the reasons why I should not do it. But that is where is where I realized, very clearly, that I was alone in this. It is me and my mama." (Victoria, undocumented college senior)

Victoria decided that she should be honest with her counselor and confide her status so he could help her find the resources she needed. Instead of supporting her, the counselor racially microaggressed (Solorzano & Pérez Huber, 2015) her by telling her college was not for her and that she should get married to obtain citizenship. Not only was the trust broken between her and her counselor, but from that point forward, her counselor, who played an important role in the college application process, confirmed that she could not rely on him or the education system; it was just her and her mother on this journey. Victoria shared her experience with her mother, Sara, who was furious and turned to the pastor and church community for support. Side by side, Sara and Victoria utilized their agency and researched resources for college. They also relied on community members to help them learn about the college application process. At the time of this data collection, Victoria was in the process of submitting her final senior project at a private university in North Carolina.

In North Carolina, not only do undocumented students not feel like their educators can help them, but due to the RDS process, students in mixed-status families also face many barriers in the college application process and are often denied residency until they appeal—despite their U.S. citizen status (LatinxEd, 2023). Maritza, an undocumented mother to a U.S. citizen daughter, noted that the education system has failed to include or consider families who are in mixed-status households when

making changes to core procedures, such as RDS and FAFSA. Difficulties for students in mixed-status families were amplified in spring 2024 with the rollout of the "Better FAFSA," which disproportionately disadvantaged students in mixed-status families (Hoover, 2024). In the 2023–2024 school year, FAFSA released Better FAFSA, which was simplified with fewer questions and requirements. However, for children who are citizens and have undocumented caregivers, difficulties arose such as the inability for students' undocumented caregivers to create a FAFSA account due to not having an SSN. Without creating an account, caregivers are unable to sign and provide consent – leading to an incomplete student application and students not having access to financial aid (Camhi, 2024; Kentor, 2025).

This was Mónica's experience; upon not being able to seek support at school to complete her FAFSA, she and her mother, Maritza, turned to the local community. Maritza voiced how educators prefer to help students who have no problems with the application—those who have a legal documentation status—because they are unsure how to help a student whose parents are undocumented:

> Entonces ahí está la barrera, ¿verdad? . . . lo que hemos visto nosotros . . . hay maestros que no saben cómo ayudarle cuando un padre no tiene un número de seguro social. ¿Cómo le va a hacer para aplicar, verdad? Ellos [los maestros] no saben . . . se enfrentan a la barrera de que los papás son indocumentados, que van a poner, que se debe de poner, que no se debe de poner, ¿verdad? Y entonces siempre con un temor . . . Porque te dicen a ti que si pones esto, es una información federal y que tienes que tener mucho cuidado. Entonces ya estás con miedo. (Maritza, undocumented mother)

> And that is the barrier, right? What we have seen . . . there are teachers who do not know how to help when a parent does not have a social security number. How are they going to apply, right? They [the teachers] do not know . . . they confront the barrier that the parents are undocumented, what are they going to put, what should they put, what should they not put, right? And so there is always that fear. . . . Because they tell you that if you put this, it is a federal document, and you have to be careful. And so you already have fear. (Maritza, undocumented mother)

Here, Maritza displays distrust in the education system, as well as fear due to the uncertainty of how to support students in mixed-status families. In Maritza and Mónica's circumstance, because Mónica is a U.S. citizen, she should have been able to receive help from educators at her school to ensure she received financial aid. However, she had not received a financial aid package due to the "Better FAFSA" discrepancies. Instead, Mónica graduated high school a semester early and decided to work as many hours as possible to save money to attend higher education. At the time of data collection, spring 2024, Mónica did not know where she would be enrolling in the fall semester and had not yet received a financial aid package. Nonetheless, she and her mother continued to strive for information and resources.

Of the three students, Patricia, a high school senior at the time, was the only one who felt she received support from her school educators. She had a reassuring experience completing her financial aid application with the support of her teacher, sharing,

> El primer día que entré, dijo la maestra aquí, "vas empezar a llenar una FAFSA y si algunos de ustedes es indocumentado y no pueden hacer una FAFSA por cualquier razón déjeme saber". Y yo le dije oh, "pues yo soy indocumentada." Y dice 'okey. No te preocupes, yo he trabajado

> antes con estudiantes indocumentados.' Y ahí fue donde empecé y le agarré mucha confianza porque me quedaba con ella después de clases.
>
> The first day I entered, the teacher said, "You are going to fill out the FAFSA and if one of you all is undocumented, or you cannot fill out the FAFSA for whatever reason, let me know." I told her, "Well, I am undocumented." And she said, "Okay. Do not worry, I have worked with undocumented students before." And that is where I began to gain trust with her, because I stayed with her after classes.

Patricia was able to reveal her immigration status to her teacher in part because the teacher showed that she knew how to support undocumented students. The teacher's inclusivity in approaching the FAFSA and those who are not eligible to apply allowed Patricia to disclose her status and continue to reach out to that teacher for support.

Orgullo y Tocando Puertas (Pride & Knocking on Doors)

Another important finding is the pride that the mothers had for their daughters' navigation through the educational system, while at the same time remaining mindful and critical of the changes that need to happen in the educational system to ensure that other students in similar positions can pursue higher education. As each mother spoke about her daughter and her education, their faces lit up with pride. For them, the journey their daughters took while applying for college was also their own journey in learning about higher education. The mothers shared how they took it upon themselves to learn about the education system to support their daughters' pathway. For example, Sara expressed that, when her daughter was applying to college,

> Aprendí junto con ella. . . . Y después de eso, siempre buscando la forma de que ella se sintiera segura de sí misma y de tratar de que tuviera los recursos necesarios para lograrlo tanto económicos como emocionales.
>
> I learned with her. . . . And after that, I always looked for her to feel secure in herself, and I tried to make sure that she had all the resources necessary to succeed, from the economic to the emotional.

Sara knew her daughter had the strength and ability to complete her higher education. She showed her pride in Victoria by continuing to find ways to push and motivate her. In this way, her pride served as a form of resistance as she acknowledged the restrictions and injustices that undocumented students face yet continued to search for resources to support Victoria's economic and emotional needs.

When Maritza described Mónica's graduating high school early, she explained that she felt "bien, contenta y orgullosa porque ella siempre ha sido una muchachita que ha echado muchas ganas a la escuela"—she felt content and proud of her daughter, who had always worked hard at school. She encouraged her daughter that her grades enabled her to apply to any university she wanted to, especially as Mónica is a U.S. citizen. However, the reality of the situation continued to put forth challenges: even if Mónica was accepted to a college, she might not receive the necessary financial institution because of the issues for mixed-status families regarding the "Better FAFSA."

Similar to the other mothers, Diana expressed her pride for Patricia:

> He andado en sus escuelas y hemos tratado de andar detrás de ella en todo . . . Pues me siento orgullosa de ella y quiero que vaya a la universidad. Quiero que sea la primera de la familia en ir a la universidad. Y quiero que le demuestre a muchas personas porque también nos

> encontramos muchas personas que nos dijeron . . . que no iba a poder, que no lo iba a lograr, que iba a ser muy difícil y que era más fácil buscar una alternativa . . . Pero ella luchó bastante.
>
> I have been in her schools; we have tried to be behind her in everything. . . . I am very proud of her, and I want her to go to the university. I want her to be the first in our family to go to the university. I want her to show everyone, because we have had a lot of people tell us that . . . she will not be able to, she will not succeed, that it will be very difficult and that it would be better to find an alternative. . . . But she fought a lot.

Diana knew just how much Patricia had fought against, with so many people not believing in her and telling her she would not go to higher education. At the time, Patricia was about to graduate high school and was enrolling in a private university in the fall semester. Moreover, Diana named and challenged deficit thinking. Educators repeatedly told Patricia that she would not be able to succeed; they encouraged her to find alternatives. With resolve, she continued to move forward as her mother advocated and supported her education.

Despite the pride each mother felt for her daughter, the mothers were also critical of how educators in North Carolina can improve their practice working with undocumented students and students in mixed-status families. Their daughters were only a small sample of many students in the state who needed such support. Sara and Victoria shared how many educators do not know how to support students in their positions, but must learn. When asked about what recommendations they would give to educators, Victoria stated,

> Que se pongan las pilas . . . Siempre va a haber gente llegando a un lado al otro . . . siempre ha existido y nunca va a terminar especialmente aquí. Entonces siempre va a haber estudiantes nuevos, muchos . . . creo que el primer paso para entender cómo pueden ayudarlos es saber en qué situación están. Me refiero al estatus migratorio porque de ahí . . . tus posibilidades son muy diferentes.
>
> For them to get with it . . . There will always be people moving from one place to the other. . . . There has always existed and there will never cease to exist, especially here. Therefore, there will always be many new students. . . . I think that the first step to understand how to help them is to know their situation. I am referring to their immigration status, because from there the possibilities are very different [based on immigration status].

Sara agreed with her daughter: Educators must work hard and be informed on how to support immigrant students. There will always be students of immigrant backgrounds; therefore, educators must be prepared and know how to support immigrant students of various statuses because immigration statuses can determine access to various opportunities, such as in-state resident tuition, scholarships, financial aid, and more.

Maritza and Mónica were also aware of the educational inequities that continue to exist for undocumented students and students in mixed-status families. Maritza suggested that educators need to keep searching when they do not think there is a solution for helping a student: "Siempre hay una puerta, y tienes que tocar esa puerta," she said; "There is always a door; you have to knock on it." Similarly, Mónica believed in the power of leveraging resources and community networking to develop pathways; this was how she and many others navigated the educational system—by searching for answers and opportunities among their networks. The women in this study, all utilized different reasons for tocando puertas, knocking on doors, to find educational resources and support systems.

Diana highlighted another example of educators being unfamiliar with how to support Patricia and instead told Patricia she would not go to college because educators did not know any better: "[Y]o creo que hace mucha falta información, ¿verdad? Hace falta más apoyo del gobierno más aquí en North Carolina." She identified a lack of information among educators, as well as a lack of support from the government for undocumented students. Patricia built on her mother's comment by expressing that this is even more crucial when students are first generation. For these students, who do not know how to fill out any of the FAFSA, RDS, or college application paperwork, guidance and support from educators they can trust are essential. Like others who believed that educators did not know how to support undocumented students, Mónica added that educators should go out of their way to support students, whether that includes researching different immigration statuses, learning another language, or teaching someone who is bilingual about resources to communicate with families who do not speak English. In a state like North Carolina, Mónica's comment can be seen as challenging both the educational system and restrictive and conservative political structures that minimize access to individuals who do not speak English, are undocumented, or are in mixed-status families. Indeed, the notion to *tocar puertas* (knock on doors) is a call to action to educators to keep learning about resources for undocumented students. Simultaneously, it is a call for parents/caregivers and their children to collaborate and network to learn about and/or advocate for more resources.

[Ella] nos metió como *la courage* (She gave us the courage): Community-based Organizations as Spaces of Resources, Trust, and Leadership

In many ways, all the participants, both mothers and daughters, found ways to leverage community-based organizations as resources and sources of strength. Sara, Victoria's mother, sought out her pastor and church community for support about how to apply to higher education; Maritza, Mónica's mother, accessed other mothers involved in La Colectiva de Mujeres to see whether they were experiencing the same circumstances with the RDS and FAFSA process; and Diana, Patricia's mother, reached out to a community leader and shared her daughter's undocumented status to see whether the community leader could help. Thus, the mothers responded to barriers by searching for answers from community-based organizations.

The community organizers referenced by the women all exhibited a practice that allowed the women to trust them. For example, Pastor Miguel had rapport with Victoria and Sara, as he had daughters who went through college as undocumented students. He openly shared this with them and spoke from his own experiential knowledge. Mónica and Maritza connected with La Colectiva because it did more than merely send them to a website for more information. Last, Patricia and Diana discussed the ways that Diana, the director of Comunidad Empoderada, created a space of acceptance for Patricia's undocumented status and supported their journey to becoming empowered. For the women to trust the community organizers, intentional actions and layers of vulnerable connections were required.

Victoria and Sara

One day, while Victoria was doing community service, she encountered a woman, Gina, who was heavily involved in the church. Victoria confided in her about her struggles in navigating the education system as an undocumented student. Victoria talked to Gina about her and her mother's journeys as recent arrivals to the United States, the difficulty of their living situation, and the deportation of her brother. Gina listened and offered her support in any way that Victoria needed it. Soon after, Victoria and Sara moved in with Gina, began attending Gina's church, and quickly became active members in the church community. Victoria continued to be involved in community service activities, now alongside other church members, while Sara began building relationships with others in the church and assumed leadership roles. Whenever she needed support, she knew she could rely

on the church. For example, at one time, when Victoria's work was accepted for presentation at a conference, she turned to the church to help her fundraise to afford attending the conference.

As members of the church, Victoria and Sara developed a close relationship with their church pastor, Miguel, who gained the families' trust by connecting with their experience. Pastor Miguel, a father of undocumented daughters, was pivotal to their journey in understanding the pathway to higher education. Sara stated, "Definitivamente, la experiencia que tuvo con sus hijas fue determinante para nosotras. Qué hacer, qué no hacer y cómo enfrentar [los problemas] [For sure, the experiences he had with his daughter were pivotal for us. What to do, what not to do, and how to face the problems]." This sharing of experiences, relationship building, and vulnerability allowed for the mother–daughter duo to trust the new church community and the pastor and build a foundation of support for others in similar positions. The trust built with the congregation also allowed the women to develop leadership positions within the church; Sara actively shared her knowledge, expertise, and guidance with others in her congregation with similar circumstances.

Mónica and Maritza

Leaning on her community and other mothers in the Colectiva, Maritza connected with multiple organizations. In her group, which she described as a leadership and activist group for women, she and others advocated against certain bills at the state capital and the embassy, connected with recently arrived immigrants, and built networks with other Latina/o/x/e parent groups across North Carolina. These connections and advocacy empowered Martiza and Mónica to continue navigating the educational system and help others as well. Maritza stated, "es algo que me apasiona y que me gustaría en un futuro, hacer un grupo para apoyar a los padres [It is something I am passionate about, and I want to eventually create my own parent support group]." Such a group would help break down common barriers she had identified, similar to the experiences she and Mónica faced.

In her role, Maritza connected recently arrived immigrant families with local community-based organizations. Maritza found that when she was first connecting with community-based organizations, many only pointed her to websites, but she argued that this is inadequate. Thus, she met with families and directly introduced them to local resources. She explained that she regularly calls community-based organizations to introduce recently arrived families to them. While on the phone with families, she takes advantage of the fact that she has them on the phone and asks her own questions. She simulated making her phone calls to various community-based organizations: "'oye, fíjate, mi hija se va a graduar, estamos teniendo este problema aquí'. Me dicen, 'mira aquí está esta organización que te puede apoyar' ['Hey listen, my daughter is about to graduate; we are having this problem.' They tell me, 'Listen, here is an organization that can help you'" (Maritza, undocumented mother). She made sure to share the struggles families face and determine who can help overcome these challenges. Then, she shared this information with her daughter and continued to pass what she had learned to others in her networks. Therefore, as she connected one family with resources, she leveraged those resources to then connect to other resources that can support her own family. Given the difficulties that she faced, Maritza found ways to make services more accessible for recently arrived families.

Patricia and Diana

Diana was always engaged at Patricia's school. She took pride in saying that Patricia always has participated in different activities, for which Diana was present to support her daughter. However, when Patricia applied for college, Diana was saddened that she could not help her daughter. Through another parent, she learned about Comunidad Empoderada. Before introducing her daughter to the community-based organization, Diana spoke with its director, Marlene. She discussed the resources the organization could offer, and then she openly asked, "ella es indocumentada, ¿es algún problema o un impedimento? [She is undocumented, is there a problem or impediment?]" Marlene responded,

"Está aceptada [She is accepted]." With that, Diana stated, "Ya no nos hizo preguntas. . . . Y empezó a apoyarla al 100% y yo detrás de ella [She did not ask any more questions, and she began to support her 100%, and me right behind her]."

In many ways, the response of "está aceptada" [she is accepted] meant more than that Patricia was accepted into the program. It meant that she was accepted as an individual, which was apparent in the support Marlene offered Patricia, and it facilitated the trust built between the family and Comunidad Empoderada. After trust was gained, both Diana and Patricia became involved with the organization. Patricia joined the youth group, and Diana connected with the other parents. Patricia described doing community service; going to Washington, D.C., for protests; and more. She stated that being involved in the community and working closely with the director of Comunidad Empoderada, Marlene, allowed her and her mother to feel courage to stand up and fight for change: "siento que con la ayuda de [Marlene] . . . [Ella] nos metió como la courage [I feel like with the help of Marlene...she gave us like the courage]." Patricia attributed the development of their courage to Marlene; however, both Patricia and Diana held their own agency to develop their strength and speak back to oppressive systems.

Diana built on her daughters' comments by further discussing scenarios in which she and other parents attended school board meetings and talked with board members and legislators to find ways to create change in their communities. Diana further discussed the ways in which Patricia and the other youth continued to empower the parents as well: "Pero sí [Comunidad Empoderada] está trabajando muy bien. Hay personas muy jóvenes. Porque sí hay que recalcar que todas las miembros de [Comunidad Empoderada] son jóvenes, pero están muy empoderadas esas niñas y nos empoderan a nosotros también [The program is working really well. They are young; we need to acknowledge that they are youth. The girls are empowered, and they empower us too]." Here, the women acknowledged the overall empowerment that they and the members of the group gained in the program. This empowerment was an intentional act of resistance and provided the women with the agency to (re)shape their lived realities by engaging in advocacy and activism.

Discussion & Conclusion

The results of this study showed how the mother/daughter duos leveraged their agency to find answers and support to navigate the college application process in the locked-out state of North Carolina. More so, they show the ways in which the women grounded their lived experiences and experiential knowledge to understand and challenge educational inequities, through moment of agency. These moments of agency can be interpreted as acts of resistance (Morales-Hernandez et al., 2024) in which the mother/daughter duos pushed back on the structural anti-immigrant policies that limited their access to higher education. When the agency of the mother/daughter duos is aligned with a muxerista politics of education, their practice becomes *as muxerista agency,* or how Latina women engage in intentional acts of resistance to (re)shape their world and the inequitable and anti-immigrant educational policy structures that minimize educational access.

Fernández and Paredes Scribner (2020) wrote, "It is important to note that muxerista forms of Latinx parent organizing and leadership are influenced by the current context of xenophobic rhetoric and anti-immigration legislation" (p. 396). The overarching anti-immigrant political environment of North Carolina and the New Latino South pushed the women to engage in organizing and leadership. While they may not have intentionally sought out community advocacy and leadership, for them, the way to build the path toward higher education access amid anti-immigrant policies meant organizing and networking. As such, the mothers and daughters decided to intentionally (re)shape

their circumstances by connecting with community-based organizations and continuing to advocate with and alongside newcomer families.

In this section we will discuss how the mother/daughter duos leveraged community-based organizations to (re)shape their world, the ways in which they challenged deficit thinking through their organizing and educational advancement, how they contextualized muxerista agency, and conclude with implications for leadership and practice.

Community Organizing & (Re)shaping their World

The mother/daughter duos realized they were unable to find answers in the school system and that they were facing anti-immigrant policies that restricted the daughters' access to higher education. They therefore turned to other leaders, who often were other immigrant parents/caregivers, within the community-based organizations for support. While Patricia was able to find an educator at school who could help her, she still was not getting the tools of leadership and empowerment from the school that she gained from Comunidad Empoderada. Thus, assuming leadership in community-based organizations not only developed the agency of the mother–daughter duos but also empowerment and strength to speak back, push back, and aim for a more just North Carolina for undocumented immigrants and mixed-status families. This was evident in the activist work in which the duos participated, whether it was demonstrations at the capital, school board meetings, church support group meetings, or supporting recently arrived immigrants.

Community-based organizations are important in immigrant communities, as they can supplement resources to which families may not have access (Gast & Okamoto, 2016). The relationship between the community-based organizations and the mother–daughter duos in this study provide a glimpse into the roles that community-based organizations can play in developing leadership and agency among youth and undocumented immigrant mothers/caregivers. However, to assume this role, each community-based organization and their leaders had to build trust with the families. As noted by the participants in this study, prior to their engagement with each organization, they were vulnerable, asked difficult questions, only connected with community-based organizations based on the recommendations of a trusted friend, and so on. This in itself is a practice of agency—making the intentional choice in whom to trust, in what community-based organizations to get involved, and how to be involved. The intentional choice to trust and be involved led to the women working toward reshaping their worlds and circumstances. Patricia emphasized that being supported by a community member allowed her to "hacer algo y no tener miedo" [to do something and not be afraid]." She recalled the time when she, along with other Latina/o/x/e community members, collected signatures to put an end to immigration checkpoints. This resulted in the termination of checkpoints and the sheriff that executed those checkpoints. Thus, the community-based organizations not only formed a sense of community but also empowerment, and in turn, Patricia embodied a muxerista agency by which she intentionally took action to dismantle oppressive anti-immigrant practices. The intentional actions of the participants in speaking to legislators, demonstrating against racist-nativist (Perez-Huber et al., 2008) bills, attending school board meetings, supporting recently arrived immigrants, and more show the ways in which they leveraged their agency and collective power to make change within a conservative state.

Challenging Deficit Ideologies

Another key discussion point is the way in which all three mothers challenged deficit ideologies of Latina/o/x/e parent engagement. They were heavily involved in their child's education, whether high school, like Maritza and Diana, or higher education, like Sara. This is a significant finding, as the literature has described the ways in which educators perceive Latina/o/x/e parents as not being "involved" (Fernández & López, 2018; Valencia, 2010). As noted by scholars, discourse of parent

involvement must move beyond traditional expectations of parents/caregivers being in schools and doing busywork (Fernández & López, 2018). The mothers in this study were engaged in their daughters' education by being involved in the community, seeking resources for their daughters' education, and actively challenging educational and systemic inequities—even when presented with anti-immigrant laws, policies, and deficit practices. In this way the undocumented immigrant mothers utilized muxerista agency to ensure their daughters' educational success despite restricted access to higher education, which often was exacerbated through the lack of information and training of educators.

Educators' knowledge and awareness about policies regarding access to higher education for undocumented students can influence an undocumented students' educational trajectory (Castrellón, 2021; Macías, 2018; Nienhusser et al., 2016). While some educators are supportive of undocumented students' educational trajectories, like Patricia's teacher, many others, like Victoria's counselor, are underprepared to support undocumented students and assume all undocumented students are a monolith. When educators do not know how to support undocumented students, it can lead to mistrust and a lack of confidence in the educational system.

Further, some educators, like Victoria's counselor, are uneducated on the immigration system and can enact racist and sexist comments—such as the assumption and racial microaggression that Victoria should just get married to gain citizenship. Racial microaggressions are subtle verbal or non-verbal assaults aimed toward people of color, can be based on immigration status, and are a form of systemic racism (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Not only did this microaggression exhibit racist behavior toward Victoria, but it was also riddled with the myth that receiving citizenship is as easy as getting married. Such comments only harm relationships between educators and students further, perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and reify systemic racism. As noted by Victoria, the comment made her realize it was just her and her mom, or, as she noted, "soy yo y mi mama." She could not rely on the school or her educators for support.

Similarly, Maritza and Mónica continued to feel ignored and pushed aside by educators. While the 'Better FAFSA' and RDS process were out of the hands of the immediate educators with whom they were working, these were still processes of the education system, and her educators seemed uninterested in helping her, which reinforced educational restrictions. In these examples, the mother–daughter duos did not discontinue their search for educational support. Instead, they encapsulated muxerista agency by understanding these deficit ideologies and oppressive systems, resisting them, and intentionally seeking support outside of the educators. In their actions, they found a community that not only validated their lived experiences but also offered liberatory practices toward change.

Muxerista Agency

Engaging in muxerista agency, the mother–daughter duos disrupted anti-immigrant, racist policies and practices while also drawing from their collective power and experiences as sources of strength. Together with their community partners, they offered a liberatory and transformative practice for undocumented immigrant students and students in mixed-status families who are navigating the restrictive access to higher education in North Carolina that is rooted within anti-immigrant legislation. Thus, future research could explore what it might look like if educators, community leaders, and politicians leveraged these intentional acts of resistance by undocumented community members to influence liberatory and transformative educational policy change.

Implications for Leadership & Practice: Muxerista Agency in a Second Trump Era

At the time of this writing in May 2025, Donald J. Trump had completed the first 100 days of his second presidential administration. Throughout this period, he had targeted undocumented communities and aimed to deport a multitude of undocumented immigrants. As such, this section

focuses on what the implications of muxerista agency are within the second Trump Era. Primarily, the focus is the context of the second Trump Administration regarding immigration, how muxerista agency may manifest, and how educational practitioners can support undocumented communities.

Throughout the 2024 election, Trump ran for president on an anti-undocumented immigrant platform. As president, he rescinded a "protected areas" clause that previously prevented Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) from having a presence in schools and other "sensitive areas" (Pearson, 2025). He also invoked the "Alien Enemies Act" of 1798, which allows for the deportation of "national enemies." This enforcement has caused many undocumented immigrants from countries such as Venezuela to be deported under the guise of the immigrants' being gang-affiliated (Treisman, 2025). The urgency of deportation within this act has meant that many have been deported without due process, even though, according to the U.S. Constitution, every person on U.S. soil has a right to due process, regardless of citizenship. Several judges have sought to pause deportations or demanded the return of these deportees; however, the Trump Administration has actively evaded these orders (Treisman, 2025).

Similarly, on April 29, 2025, North Carolina passed H.B. 318: The Criminal Illegal Alien Enforcement Act, a bill that makes it easier for undocumented immigrants charged with crimes (including class A-1 misdemeanors) to be deported (North Carolina General Assembly) without due process. This bill is considered to expand cooperation with ICE, as it requires sheriffs to notify ICE when an undocumented person is in custody for any reason (ACLU of North Carolina, 2025). North Carolina is not alone in passing such a hostile anti-immigrant bill. Across the nation, several state-level bills target undocumented communities, many of them thriving within this political context.

The implications of this pervasive anti-immigrant climate for undocumented communities and the educators and community leaders who serve them must be discussed. These regulations and policy threats have instilled fear and uncertainty and have caused many undocumented community members and their allies to pull back from activism. In the *New York Times*, Levitsky et al., (2025) stated, "When citizens must think twice about criticizing or opposing the government because they could credibly face government retribution, they no longer live in a full democracy." With the undeniable fear that communities are facing of being involved in activist measures and political discussions, attention must be given to how agency, community involvement, activism, and more may look different because in 2025 democracy looks and feels different. The ways in which this political anti-immigrant rhetoric and hostile racist-nativist climates impact the engagement and activism of undocumented communities must be explored. Simultaneously, literature on undocumented Latinas and parent engagement/community organizing has shown that Latinas are political actors and that in times of anti-immigrant sentiments, they mobilize, organize, and work to transform systems (Dryness, 2011; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2020; Oliva & Aleman, 2018). Thus, there are multiple ways that muxerista agency could take shape in this political environment.

The muxerista agency allows Latina women to draw from their experiential knowledge to name oppressive practices and offer liberatory and transformative solutions to combat anti-immigrant educational inequities and restrictive practices. This does not mean the women need to physically be on the frontlines of protesting or doing a form of action where they might feel they may be targeted by legal authorities. An underlying aspect of agency is intentionally choosing how to (re) shape one's reality (Nelson, 2024) and having the confidence to make that choice (Solorzano & Solorzano, 1995). Thus, if a choice is to not be physically present because an individual's experiential knowledge tells them it may make them or their family a target given the rampant emphasis on deportation, this choice should be seen as agentive and as a liberatory practice.

The ways in which undocumented Latinas and Latinas in mixed-status families engage in muxerista agency are driven by their experiential knowledge and cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Thus, the women can engage in muxerista agency by naming oppression and actively

challenging it in ways that they define as liberatory, whether that is publicly demonstrating, organizing behind the scenes, solely passing on information learned about resources available, or through other "tempered" measures. Alston (2005) suggested that tempered radicals are women who are "radical in their ideals but tempered in the fact that they work within the confines of their organizations" (pp. 677–678). The notion of tempered radicals is an important contribution to muxerista agency in a second Trump era, as it is a more localized and opportunistic form of leadership (Alston, 2005; Meyerson, 2001) that can be encapsulated within muxerista agency and the liberatory practice of reshaping an individual's reality.

Educational practitioners and community organizers must be attuned to the rapid changes and executive orders being passed on a daily basis. Staying up-to-date on these changes can support educators and community organizers in being prepared for how to respond, as well as prepared for how the local community may react (e.g., fear in attending events, speaking with educators, etc.). For example, the rescinding of the "protected areas" policy immediately impacted schools across the U.S. In this current anti-immigrant political period, the trust that immigrants have in schools may diminish, particularly considering that ICE can now have a presence in schools and local areas. Therefore, educational practitioners must work harder to gain the trust of immigrant families and collaborate with community-based organizations to support families.

Levitsky and colleagues (2025) argued that this administration has caused many Americans to reconsider how they engage in political discussions and how they speak up about opposition to the government. This has meant that politicians and organizations who would normally speak up have found themselves silenced and not taking a hard stance due to fear of being reprimanded by the government. Educational practitioners or community organizers cannot be excluded from these conversations, as they may also be experiencing fear and silencing, and some whose positions are grant funded may be at risk of being terminated. However, this overarching fear cannot take away from advocacy for undocumented communities. Implications from muxerista agency show that educational practitioners and community-based organizations must name the already limited resources for undocumented communities, acknowledge that they are being even more restricted in this environment, and engage in their own measures of resistance and advocacy to continue supporting undocumented students and families.

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