

"So Much Potential:" Latino/a Immigrant Emerging Adults, Legal Status, and Educational Participation

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Abstract

Immigrant young adults without permanent legal status face a complicated set of issues as they try to integrate into adult society in the U.S. In this participatory research study, Latino/a emerging adult participants ($n = 7$) shared their perspectives about what it was like to live with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), with temporary or unauthorized legal status, or in a mixed immigrant-status family within communities in central North Carolina. Specifically, participants were asked how those experiences impacted their educational pathways as a key marker of the ease or difficulty of community integration and adult role taking. The study was a qualitative participatory action research study, and the interview data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). Relational cultural theory (RCT) was utilized to illuminate participants' contexts and experiences, and how they encountered connection/warm welcome or disconnection/chilly welcome. Three key themes emerged from participants' narratives: The first, self/identity, encompasses both experiences of belonging and backlash from the local community. The second, descriptions of context, details the supports and barriers to integration that were present. The third theme, responses to context, highlights how the participants engaged in self-advocacy at times, but also noted how the lack of basic rights was an obstacle for themselves and their peers. Together, these insights present critical considerations for understanding and supporting young adult immigrants and their integration/participation in U.S. communities.

Youth who came to the United States as immigrants when they were children face a complicated set of issues as they try to integrate into adult society. Some of the issues immigrant youth encounter include the economic prospects and political attitudes in their communities, the degree to which they reside in an established or new immigrant enclave, their racial/ethnic distinctiveness from those around them, and the perceptions of the ways they may or may not add value to the community (Fix & Passel, 2002; Fussell, 2014; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The phrase *local context of reception* refers to social/cultural/political attitudes held by the established community members as well as policies and procedures for how immigrants are received (Rodriguez et al., 2018; McDaniel et al., 2019). Even if national policies and rhetoric are hostile to immigrants, local communities can work to create positive reception. For some immigrants, their legal status is a critically important factor influencing their reception in U.S. society (McWhirter et al., 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011), one that will be examined in the current study.

Legal immigration status is more nuanced than typically portrayed in public discourse. Some people have temporary statuses like work visas or

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), some people are in the process of adjusting their immigration status, some people have unauthorized status, and many live in families that have a mixture of several of the above. (McWhirter et al., 2013). These immigration statuses have implications for individual and familial integration into society in terms of adult role taking, mental health and wellbeing, educational and economic opportunity, and rights to protections under the law (Bjorklund, 2018; Terriquez, 2015). The misperceptions of legal status that are held by established community members can also create barriers to immigrant integration. The bottom line is that emerging adults without documented legal status in the U.S. are placed at risk, constrained by their environments (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010), and barred from integrating with society and participating in meaningful ways (Fussell, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2018).

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals was a political effort to address the needs of undocumented youth. DACA was an executive action by the Obama administration with the goal to generate school and work integration opportunities for undocumented emerging adults (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, n.d.).

Because there is no overarching federal policy that addresses young people brought to this country without authorization as children, states have created a patchwork response on their own (Bjorklund, 2018). While youth with DACA status in certain states can apply for a driver's license and a social security number, DACA is tenuous at best and does not confer any permanent legal status. Since its inception in 2012, DACA has been tied up in divisive political battles "that criminalize unauthorized immigrants and exacerbate perceptions of threat and conflict, contributing to a heightened sense of in- and out-group differences that inform prejudice" (Fussell, 2014, p. 495). DACA has been challenged almost continually in courts (see Figure 1), as various groups seek to limit or expand its parameters (American Immigration Council, 2021). Being the holder of a temporary status that is legally and socially contentious also generates difficulty in the path toward social integration and participation.

Based on previous studies, the overwhelming desire of immigrant youth is to help their families, earn wages, pay taxes, be productive members of their societies, and improve their prospects through post-secondary education (Borjian, 2018; McWhirter et al., 2013; Terriquez, 2015). However, youth in mixed-status families struggle to participate formally in the educational, occupational, and civic life of their communities under such politicized and legally restrictive conditions. Education and career are important contexts for immigrant integration, as they can contribute to a sense of purpose and identity, in addition to generating possibilities for engagement and connection with segments of the local community (García et al., 2022; Rodriguez et al., 2018). Depending on local/state policies, however, educational and career roles and subsequent opportunities for social integration may not be readily available to youth without permanent legal immigration status (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2019).

Figure 1. Timeline of Legal Battles Over DACA

June 2012: The Obama administration created the DACA program by executive order. • The Department of Homeland Security agreed not to prioritize deportations of young people brought to the U.S. as children. Over 700,000 people applied for the program.
September 2017: The Trump administration rescinded DACA.
January 2018: A federal judge in California blocked the repeal of DACA. • Renewals were allowed to continue, but new applicants could no longer apply.
March 2018: A federal judge in Maryland found the rescission of DACA valid. • The ruling was overturned on appeal.
May 2018: Texas and six other states filed a lawsuit challenging DACA (<i>U.S. v. Texas</i>) • The case was sent to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas.
January 2019: DACA was a central issue in the longest government shutdown in history. • The shutdown ended with no border-wall funding and no legislation on DACA.
November 2019: The Supreme Court heard oral arguments on the termination of DACA.
June 2020: The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that the rescission of DACA was "capricious." • The ruling allowed DACA to continue, but the Supreme Court noted other ways for the Trump administration to end the program, pending adequate reasoning for doing so.
July 2021: The U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas ruled DACA was unlawful.
September 2021: The Biden administration appealed the decision to the U.S. Court of Appeals.
October 2022: The U.S. Court of Appeals affirmed that DACA was illegal and sent the case back to the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas.
June 2023: The same judge from the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas heard oral arguments for the DACA case. • The judge ruled DACA was unlawful in September 2023. The case will likely go before the Supreme Court in 2024 or 2025.

Note. Sources include MALDEF (n.d.), the Arizona State University Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law (n.d.), Informed Immigrant (n.d.), and the National Immigration Law Center (n.d.).

Thus, the goal of the current exploratory study is to (a) gather qualitative narratives of Latino/a adolescents and young adults in various legal immigrant statuses (i.e., DACA, undocumented, mixed-status families, status adjustment) and (b) organize and amplify their narratives to inform practitioners and leaders who could support their educational engagement and opportunities for integration. The current participatory action research project was undertaken in collaboration with a local county-level Latino Community Coalition (LCC). The LCC included approximately 130 individuals from a variety of immigrant-serving organizations in education, healthcare, law, banking, housing, and more. The first author (Dr. Gonzalez) participated in the LCC, where she had longstanding collaborations with Latino/a community advocates who were invited to participate as co-investigators in the research project. The research team (including university and community members) and qualitative methodology will be described more fully in the methods section, followed by the themes that emerged from interviews with the young-adult participants in which they discussed their experiences navigating education and early career without permanent legal status. This provides grist for readers to consider supports and barriers to immigrant integration.

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT)

The article is framed conceptually with relational-cultural theory (RCT), which focuses on the importance of relationships to provide empowerment and emotional support, but also to supply information and advocacy (West, 2005). RCT is a postmodern approach that proposes that humans progress and grow through genuine connections, or growth-fostering interpersonal relationships, within the context of their culture (Lenz, 2016; Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2017). Thus, it acknowledges the importance of interdependence, culture, connection, and context (Frey, 2013; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Ruiz, 2012). RCT proposes that growth-fostering relationships and connections are basic and elemental needs for human development and social integration; even more so for communities that are minoritized or subjected to growth-inhibiting relationships (West, 2005). The present study's focus on immigration status and community reception is aligned with RCT's ecological approach, which proposes that connection (growth-fostering relationships) and disconnection (growth-

inhibiting relationships) transpire on individual, socio-cultural, and systemic levels (Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2017).

Growth-Fostering Relationships

The basic premise of RCT is that growth across the human lifespan occurs in the context of growth-fostering relationships and community, through experiences of authenticity, mutual empowerment, and empathy (Jordan, 2008; Jordan, 2017). Authentic caring is clear-eyed, acknowledging culture and forming meaningful interconnections that acknowledge our differences, but also our mutual humanity and shared destiny (Rector-Aranda, 2019). RCT acknowledges that power, oppression, and marginalization impact the ability of some individuals to cultivate these connections, which relates directly to the goals of our study (i.e., experiences of immigrant youth without permanent legal status trying to integrate into society) (Jordan, 2008).

Growth-Inhibiting Relationships

Disconnection, or growth-inhibiting relationships, can happen on both the individual and systemic levels as well (West, 2005). Jordan (2017) indicated that there are two distinct types of disconnection: (1) acute disconnections, which emerge in all relationships at times, and (2) chronic disconnections, which are the result of repeated negative interactions in a chilly or unwelcoming climate. As a result of chronic disconnections or growth-inhibiting relationships, individuals may feel abused, excluded, or humiliated (Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2017). On the societal or systemic level, chronic disconnections may be caused by imbalances in power and privilege, including inequitable policies and practices that result in marginalization (Jordan, 2017; Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2017). Disconnection then relates to social receptivity. Per Fussell (2014):

While it is difficult to predict the overall direction of public opinion, there is ample evidence that the formation of attitudes toward immigrants is dynamic and context-dependent, and these attitudes will shape the context of immigrant reception and the future of inter-group relations. (p. 495)

The current participatory action study sought to explore the meaning of varying immigration statuses for Latino/a immigrant emerging adults, and how such statuses might influence their

educational participation and social integration. The word *liminal* will be used in this study to express the idea that immigrants without permanent legal authorization to be in the U.S. are caught in a gray area in between two cultures, states, or statuses.

Methods

This qualitative study employed participatory action research in the conceptualization and data-collection phases (McIntyre, 2007). This method was chosen because of the potential for amplifying the participants' voices to local leaders in advocacy efforts related to educational and workplace integration of immigrants without permanent legal status. The research team incorporated members of the local Latino Community Coalition as decision makers and co-creators of knowledge (Rodriguez & McDaniel, 2019). In this way, the project grew in an organic and community-engaged fashion, based on shared experiences and conversations that grew from the LCC.

Recruitment Procedures

There were five members from the LCC who volunteered to be part of the research team in response to an open invitation from Dr. Gonzalez. The five volunteers included four Latinas and one Latino, all of whom had a role working or volunteering with immigrant-serving entities and were in direct contact with community members who met the criteria for inclusion in the research study. The five LCC members on the research team represented a faith-based immigrant service center, a grassroots educational collective of immigrant youth, an after-school program at the YWCA, an advocate for immigrants with legal issues, and a healthcare advocacy group.

The community-based members of the research team completed human subjects training and then signed confidentiality statements. The research team members met for approximately 18 months during the study (2016–2017) to come to consensus on goals and procedures. The team contributed to the implementation of interview protocols, guided data-collection strategies, conducted participant recruitment, and reflected on the findings together. Due to the sensitive nature of liminal immigration status, the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) stipulated that the university researchers should not have in-person contact with any participants nor gather identifying information (e.g., age, country of origin). Thus, the community-based members of the research team shared the purpose

of the study and a telephone number with potential participants, who could then opt to call and consent to participate in a phone interview.

Participants

The criteria for inclusion in the study was direct personal knowledge of how immigrant status can impact engagement of youth or young adults with post-secondary educational pathways (with data collection in May–August 2017, before DACA was rescinded). Of the seven Latino/a participants, four had received DACA, one had received a status adjustment, one lived in a mixed-status family, and one had overstayed a visa. After DACA was rescinded in September of 2017, community members no longer responded to outreach messages, and recruitment ended. Six of the participants were male identified (selecting their own pseudonyms of Jack, Jay, John, Alex, David, and Will) and one was female identified (choosing the pseudonym Amanda). The female was also the only participant who was a high school student, and had parental consent as well as assent; the other participants were either current college students or young adults who had recently completed a post-secondary credential and were working. All participants were offered the option to communicate in Spanish or English, but all opted to complete the phone interview in English. All participants were living in North Carolina.

Authors

Dr. Gonzalez is an educator and a bilingual White woman whose research has focused on educational access for youth in Latino/a immigrant families for 13 years. Dr. Ong Gaffney is a bilingual Asian woman and a licensed professional counselor who has worked in a community setting with Latina clients for two years. Dr. Mejia is a bilingual first-generation Mexican American with a doctorate in clinical psychology. The LCC research team members are described above.

Data-Collection Procedures

Young immigrants responding to recruitment contacts were instructed to leave their return phone number (but not a name) on the study's bilingual voice message system. Dr. Mejia then returned the call, completed verbal informed consent on the phone, and audio recorded the interview. The semi-structured interview explored supports and barriers to education pathways with a focus on how legal status issues can impact educational participation and integration for young adults.

The full interview was comprised of the following prompts:

1. What have you observed about living with a temporary immigration status?
2. What are your hopes and dreams for your future life (educational, career, personal, social)?
3. How do you think someone's hopes and dreams could change when immigration status presents a barrier to them?
4. How might getting into college be easier if immigration status were not a barrier?
5. Is there anything you think would be important for key decision-makers in our community to know? Anything else I haven't asked that you want to add?

We also asked the participants to describe an image that summed up how they felt about immigration status and education, which we hoped would add to the impact of the study in terms of its participatory action research advocacy goals with local leaders. The visual metaphors that are shared in this article were provided by the participants in response to that open question.

At the conclusion of the interview, the recorder was turned off and the participant could indicate whether they wanted to pick up their research incentive (a \$10 gift card) from a community-based research team member, or if they wanted it to be mailed directly to them. The address was written on an envelope but was never part of the research records. The audio recording was saved in a password-protected folder that was only accessed by Dr. Gonzalez, Dr. Mejia, and two transcribers (bilingual research assistants). The interviews were de-identified as the audio files were converted into word documents. The word documents were saved to the same folder and all audio files were deleted. Dr. Ong Gaffney and the community-based research team members were given access to the transcriptions after they were de-identified.

Data Analysis

Analysis and coding were done via interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), a descriptive qualitative approach with the goal of exploring how participants make meaning of their experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2009). Phenomenology in general is appropriate when the goal of the study is to explore how a phenomenon is experienced and described by those who live it directly (Smith & Osborn, 2009). The focus of IPA research

is exploration of participants' personalized perceptions and narratives of an object or event (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2009), which, in this case, was the experience of liminal immigration status and educational pursuits. IPA has been validated in prior studies with legally vulnerable immigrant populations and is a good match for this study because it allows for small samples ($n = 3$ to 15), highlights a phenomenon, and amplifies the voices of various participants as they describe how they experienced it. In all aspects of research, care was taken to interact in an ethical fashion with the population (Hernández et al., 2013).

Within IPA, the researcher engages in a dual interpretation process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In the interview, participants describe phenomena in their world and make sense of them. In analysis, researchers try to identify themes and similarities/differences across participants' descriptions from their subjective lenses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2009). The goal in descriptive qualitative research is to stay as close to the participants' words as possible, and to use the different vantage points of the research team members to organize and group the participants' words and to shed light on the phenomenon.

IPA also is idiographic in its theoretical orientation, meaning it is a discovery process based on the individual participants' narratives or cases. Dr. Gonzalez and Dr. Ong Gaffney conducted detailed scholarly analyses of the seven cases and explored the subjective perspectives based on their unique contexts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In this individual in-depth investigation of each case, the researchers gave special attention to each participant—understanding them in their own right—followed by comparisons and generalizations across cases (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

For the present study, the coding team members were guided by IPA analytic procedures suggested by Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), and Smith and Osborn (2009). In the first stage, the coders read the first interview transcript closely several times. They annotated their observations in the margins, endeavoring to stay close to the participants' content and context. Subsequently, the coders convened to discuss their initial impressions with each other and confer with the community-based team members (when available) before returning to the transcript to transform their annotations into emerging themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

In the second stage, coding notes (e.g., discouragement, anger, hopelessness, frustration, and mistrust) were subsumed into emerging themes (e.g., negative feelings). During this stage, researchers conferred with each other to check interpretations against participants' actual words. Emerging themes for each transcript were identified and given interpretive labels. Small segments in the transcripts that occurred only once or twice and were more surface in nature were not considered to rise to the level of themes (e.g., stating which year of college they were in, or counting the number of friends who participated in DACA).

The analysis conducted for the first case was repeated for the other cases, with consensus-building exchanges after each case (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In this way, the researchers sifted out novel and distinct themes while reinforcing existing themes (Smith & Osborn, 2009). Thereafter, the researchers worked on consolidating the superordinate themes in a logical fashion. Saturation was reached, as born out in the breadth, depth, and repetition of themes in consensus meetings.

Trustworthiness

Methodological integrity was maintained through three strategies: (1) consensus between coders (as described above), (2) bracketing of assumptions, and (3) external audit (Amankwaa, 2016). Bracketing procedures were applied throughout. Bracketing promotes accountability prior to and during coding by having researchers

journal about their assumptions and perspectives relevant to the research topic, and then discuss the influences of personal experience on interpretation to limit researcher bias (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The external audit was conducted by a Latino male academic with expertise in post-secondary diversity and inclusion. He reviewed the final coding product and the original interview data, sharing his observations about how well the analysis attended to the transcript data. Based on the auditor's feedback, the coders re-organized and renamed some of the superordinate themes. The auditor also suggested that the themes be described with greater clarity (e.g., bringing some similar themes together under one superordinate label, and letting the emergent themes show the details with greater granularity). Both coders agreed with the auditor's feedback and made the suggested changes. Finally, we provided examples and thick, detailed descriptions so readers can form their own perspectives.

Findings

Narratives clustered around three superordinate themes: (1) understanding of self; (2) description of context (environmental supports and barriers); and (3) responses to context (see Table 1). Within each superordinate theme, several sub-themes emerged and will be described.

Understanding of Self

The first superordinate theme was defined by the researchers in terms of psychosocial awareness, particularly regarding how immigrant identity and

Table 1. Themes Related to Liminal Immigrant Status and Educational Pathways

Superordinate Themes	Emerging Themes
Understanding of Self	Identity and sense of belonging
	Backlash due to identity
	Positive traits
Description of Context (Environmental Supports and Barriers)	Support systems
	Systemic barriers
Responses to Context	Empowerment and advocacy
	Positive feelings about context
	Negative feelings about context
	Layers of opportunity
	Cautious or limited responses due to lack of rights

Note. *n* = 7 participants

liminal immigration status were understood by the participants and received by others in their context. It included three subthemes, which were (a) identity and sense of belonging, (b) backlash due to identity, and (c) positive traits.

Identity and Sense of Belonging. All participants (quoted with their self-selected pseudonyms) shared perceptions of how their identities were received by others. For example, John's account noted how his status impacted his identity and his family. He indicated that even though his country of origin was not the United States, he and his family wanted to contribute economically and integrate socially. John stated:

Even though I'm not from here, I do feel like I am from here in a way, and that my family, whether they were or weren't born here, I know they would rather be here and would love to contribute to this country, whether it be buying stuff, making their own business, even working for a factory, anything like that.

John described how his DACA status and blended identity gave him a sense of belonging to both Mexico and the United States, a duality where "you kind of feel like you are from both places at the same time, and you can't really go without one." This sense of integration also was reflected in John's use of the visual metaphor of a tree:

There was a picture that I saw a while back where there is a tree growing, and it has its roots that are painted green, white, and red and they have an eagle within it, and at the top it has the rest of the tree, the trunk and the limbs, and they are red, white, and blue, and then it gives the point that your roots were within Mexico, but you were born and raised in the U.S.

Each participant reflected on the duality of their existence—the person they understood themselves to be and where they felt they belonged, and the ways that was complicated by their legal immigration status. John's metaphor was one of the most direct and resonant in that regard.

Backlash Due to Identity. Participants also shared how their identities were buffeted by external forces reacting to their status. Some participants reported experiencing discrimination and marginalization due to how others perceived their identity and group membership (i.e., chilly reception). Will gave an

example of how one's nationality might impact the extent of help one receives:

It's hard. Especially when you try to do the right things the right way and you know society really looks at us, you know like we come here and take whatever they think we take away. You know as far as immigration status, it breaks down to where you come from. You might be able to get more help due to your different nationality than others.

Will reported feeling exhausted with the process of help-seeking, which was hard and laborious even though he did have DACA. His metaphor included the image of chains:

To be honest, if we are talking about immigration, I think a lot of it—especially when people don't have any sort of, um, status—it'll be tied up in a chain, 'cuz you can't do anything. You might, you know, might be the brightest person in the world, but eventually without a social security here and the right help you can't do anything and it's frustrating.

Many participants shared these feelings of exhaustion and frustration due to growth-inhibiting relationships and the difficulties they encountered in integrating with the local community.

Positive Traits. Participants also shared the ways they had relied upon some personal traits that allowed them to attain their goals. Internal mindsets such as determination and behaviors like hard work helped them to navigate challenges that stood in the way of their educational and career goals. This in turn enabled them to move closer to their hopes and dreams. For example, Will shared how persistently asking for help and talking with different people despite encountering roadblocks were important in his help-seeking process:

Even for, you know, for people that don't have a status, um, even with DACA, there is, there are some scholarships out there that don't require you to be a citizen. You just kind of have to, you know, kind of have to look for them and just kind of, you know, keep persisting, keep trying. Not just give up on the first try.

David, who had DACA status, shared a visual metaphor of people as gifts:

A bunch of gifts, you know, buried deep, because you know all these different people with different immigration status are gifts waiting to be opened. A lot of these people have talents that they could bring to the United States, in our state, in our community. However, we do not allow their gifts to be unraveled just because of their immigration status. I believe all these people have a lot to offer if they're just given a chance to.

This indefatigable spirit and optimism are admirable at the individual level, but importantly, the participants were met with many systemic barriers that usurped their goal-directed energy.

Description of Context (Environmental Supports and Barriers)

The researchers defined the second superordinate theme to include supports and barriers in the environment, as noted by the participants when considering their legal status and goals. It included two subthemes, which were (a) support systems and (b) systemic barriers.

Support Systems. Participants touched on the various forms of support that provided them with some limited opportunities for integration in their communities. David described the support and growth-fostering relationships he experienced with his mentors throughout high school, saying, "Towards the last two years it was really difficult. I was really fortunate to have positive mentors in my life. If it wasn't for them, it would have been nothing, my four years of high school."

For other participants, such as Will, the support system consisted of friends or family members who could either share information and resources on how to navigate financial barriers, or provide encouragement. Integration with the educational systems that should have been positioned to help was not as easy to achieve. Will said:

I had to kind of bull around, I didn't know. I had a few people that tried to help me, you know, gave me some good information about how I can get, um, not financial aid, but, uh, I can get in-state tuition. I've been able to finish school, find a job.

Others cultivated a network (mostly peers) that provided the information and resources needed to apply to and pay for college. Alex, whose family had applied for a status adjustment, shared how

individuals from his social network enabled him to make an informed decision on higher education:

So, like I said, I had done a lot of extra-curricular activities in high school and I met some people, they were college students in that group. Because I was already acquainted with them, they started guiding me, little by little. Although I couldn't apply for financial aid or in-state tuition, I could definitely look at some scholarships that, they would be called undocu- or DACA-friendly. They started to explain to me the difference between what a public university is, and what a private university is, then that some private universities are very friendly to those with limited status, and they can help with their funds.

Whereas support systems may be icing on the cake for students with more social capital and privilege, they were essential growth-fostering relationships for these participants who were navigating so much on their own.

Systemic Barriers. Participants were also invited to consider obstacles that lay in the way of attaining their hopes and dreams. All seven participants shared stories about the systemic barriers that were in their pathways, in the form of immigration laws, policies, and other obstacles. While participants reported that DACA was of benefit to them, these supports were sometimes paired with local limitations. For example, participants reported that misinformation or lack of information amongst school personnel about immigrant legal status made it challenging for them to access resources. Alex stated, "Yes, my counselor did try to help me, but he wasn't trained to help me. He never expected to encounter a student that had limited to no status, and he didn't know what to do." This growth-inhibiting relationship was a difficult one for Alex to navigate.

For Amanda, a member of a mixed-status family, not having a permanent status meant that she had to work hard to find a school that she would be able to afford:

So, I provided those papers to the community college, and I was able to get in-state tuition. Now, unfortunately, I cannot do that with a university, because I tried. So right now, I'll take my bachelors [degree] with out-of-state tuition. For them, I don't have a status.

Individuals with an undocumented status or with DACA are also blocked from accessing financial supports that are available to others, as Alex explained:

I know that there's the scholarships for [name of group], which is supposed to help a lot of students from high school get into college or pay some of the amount. I'm really not sure, don't know the full logistics, um, but I know they—DACA and undocumented students—are not part of that group.

John explained how immigration policies created significant financial disparities between U.S. citizens and those with liminal status, which created obstacles for his access to college:

One example would be being able to go to school, or college mainly, without having to pay so much more money. People who are born here can pay a lot less compared to me, I have to pay four or five times more than the normal tuition. That has been one of my biggest problems, trying to find the money and trying to get around it.

Jay, who had DACA, also used the metaphor of a maze to describe his feelings while seeking to participate in a system that was full of structural barriers:

You take one way, thinking that's the way out, and you follow it until you can no longer get through anymore. Then you have to get through it backwards, take another route, and you advance a little bit more, but then there's another road blocking, you know what I mean? I guess I picture like a maze where you never know when it's going to be the end and you're really not going to be able to not do anything for yourself anymore.

These descriptions of the systemic barriers encountered by the participants have enormous importance for the goal of achieving greater immigrant social integration in the U.S.

Responses to Context

The researchers defined the third superordinate theme in terms of the feelings, actions, and thoughts that participants had as they interacted with the context described above. There were five subthemes, which were (a) empowerment

and advocacy, (b) positive feelings about context, (c) negative feelings about context, (d) layers of opportunity, and (e) cautious or limited responses due to lack of rights.

Empowerment and Advocacy. Almost all participants communicated their need to advocate, as well as counteract stereotypes, as they continued to seek social integration and educational access. Participants reported advocating on the individual, community, political, and legal levels. Will stated:

You just gotta keep insisting. I never gave up, I always, um, I went to several places looking for ways not to pay out-of-state tuition. I was able to provide those papers, like I said, I had the right people that told me the right information. I had to prove I was in the process of working to my citizenship ... and I was able to get in-state tuition.

Alex's status adjustment opened new opportunities for him, and he wanted to use his newly earned privilege to help others in his peer group by guiding and mentoring them. He said:

Yeah, I have a lot of friends, like, that I went to high school that are still in the same boat, they didn't have that opportunity to, to adjust their status and they are still struggling. I feel kind of privileged to, uh, to have this status adjustment. ... I still can, I can still help others that were in my shoes.

Participants engaged reciprocally with their communities by providing growth-fostering relationships for others in similar circumstances. When Alex was asked what he saw himself doing in the next three to four years, his desire to empower immigrant families was aligned with the help he had received through the community:

I am working for this non-profit in [place] and I sort of do case management there. They think they can't have access or resources, or they can't see doctors, stuff like that, and I'm there to educate them. You're not only assisting individuals who have limited to no status, but you're also informing them about their resources that are out there in the community that they wouldn't know about, that they can take advantage of and use when they need it ... I have a passion for helping immigrants and refugees.

Participants consistently expressed a desire to help others integrate with educational and social systems. They not only sought to build their own capacity, but to engage with their peers in an effort to bring everyone together and foster their collective growth as a community.

Positive Feelings About Context. Participants also shared the positive feelings that fueled their aspirations, dreams, and hopes that they experienced through DACA status. Some of these feelings included appreciation, hope, gratitude, resiliency, respect, and self-reliance. A case in point was David, who described how DACA inspired hope and optimism in the future for himself and others around him:

Honestly, it was almost a dream come true when the program started. Before DACA I did not know how I was even going to be able to go to college at all. Uh, definitely the financial barrier is still huge but at least there is a chance for me to go to college, and I've known many people that have been able to be successful simply because DACA came out. I definitely think DACA is one of the best programs to help immigrants.

Negative Feelings About Context. For Alex, his experience—as well as that of other emerging adults with liminal status—was marked with feelings of discouragement, despair, and hopelessness. He shared:

We have dreams of accomplishing big things and being professionals in the future, but um, it's really hard when, like, the system is fighting against you. It's putting all these limitations on you and, um, you have to be really, really lucky to find a good support group or else you feel very discouraged. I have known a lot of people that just give up. They are like, 'there is no point on me to continue,' and they have so much potential.

In sharing her visual metaphor, Amanda described a gray transitional space, someplace between two cultures:

I would just show on one side of it like an immigrant family coming in. And just like despair on their faces, because a lot of times immigrants move because of the situation that they are in previously.

It's not safe, or it's not a situation where one can sustain a family or provide for a family. A lot of times families have to come, not necessarily because they want to, but because it's a need. And they have no other choice. But I would also show that there are like, a lot of controversy in the United States and like, the feedback that people give, people don't welcome a lot of immigrants.

In both of these reflections, the participants showed the stressors on individuals, the fears experienced by families, and the tension of living between cultures. This exemplifies how growth-inhibiting relationships can be structural and systemic as well as individual.

Layers of Opportunity. Support offered by DACA provided the participants access to some level of education and the ability to drive with a license, as well as access to employment and financial benefits that allowed them to work legally to support themselves and their family. Jay mentioned that DACA status created opportunity for positive changes to accumulate, stating:

Oh yes, definitely. I was able to go to school. Now I'm a nurse, I work in one of the best hospitals in the state, and I'm contributing more to the economy. I was able to buy a vehicle, I was able to get a house, you know, it helps a lot. ... I mean, it just changes everything. Education changes everything, a career changes everything. It changes your life, it changes your views, it changes everything.

Jack, who had arrived with his family with a visa and then overstayed the exit date, noted that the added access to things like a driver's license and work permits through DACA were helpful:

I think that regardless of what some people think, it's good or bad you know, it helps a lot of people that needed the help and were able to actually continue, to be able to drive and go to work and stuff like that. Just little things like that, you know, make a big difference.

Even though getting a driver's license is a milestone that many in the U.S. take for granted, these small steps forward opened the door to more opportunities for the participants in this study.

Cautious or Limited Responses Due to Lack of Rights. On the other side of the coin, participants indicated that applying for DACA created vulnerability, in that identifying information needed to be shared with the federal government. Amanda shared how fear dissuaded some people from applying for a temporary status when that disclosure could threaten them or their families, stating, “They already know that you are here, you know, they know your address, um, so I think that’s primarily the fear. If something happens, um, we might be able to get deported.”

Both federal and local policies place limits on immigrants. Jack used the metaphor of an imaginary line to illustrate how he was similar to every other student in his school, except for the line of legal status that separated him from the others and inhibited his growth and possibilities:

Okay. To make it very simple, we can see it as two blocks. A square on the left, and a square on the right, and there’s an imaginary line in between them to separate them. At the end of the day, the blocks are still the same. The only thing that separates them is that imaginary line, which people can’t seem to get past.

The participants’ narratives call for us to move past the imaginary separating line and work to create opportunities for immigrant integration in our local and national communities.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Latino/a immigrant young adults with liminal legal statuses who were pursuing educational pathways. The ultimate goal was to better understand the impact of status on their social integration and participation in adult roles. The participants in the current study vividly painted a picture of themselves as emerging adults with strengths and commitments in a complex and difficult context.

The idea of social integration and participation necessarily locates people within a particular community context; Table 1 delineates the context experienced by the participants. These young immigrant adults identified people as context (mentors and friends, advocates and advisors, support systems, uninformed gatekeepers) and systems as context (government, DACA and related policies, practices, laws, ineligibility for assistance). Per relational cultural theory (West, 2005), individuals, groups, and

systems all can contain both growth-fostering and growth-inhibiting aspects.

Perhaps not surprisingly, systems were less responsive and welcoming to the participants overall. This finding is of central importance to generating greater immigrant integration, as the efforts of individual community members to create a growth-fostering or welcoming environment can only go so far. The experiences of these seven young adults underscore that their efforts to launch themselves into meaningful participation in educational and occupational spaces were stymied by pervasive systemic impediments. Indeed, the metaphors of chains, a maze, a gray in-between area, and two separate boxes speak volumes about the structural barriers to integration and participation.

Growth-Fostering Relationships

Participants showed how individual relationships can be a source of empowerment, even along an educational pathway that was not linear (e.g., starting and stopping to earn money, taking incremental steps with community college on the way to a four-year college). When the participants found growth-fostering relationships that facilitated information sharing and networking, they were able to use that momentum to advance toward their goals of participation and integration in the local context (e.g., earning degrees, purchasing cars and homes, serving others). Some of these growth-fostering relationships emerged organically (e.g., connections within the immigrant community, friends and family who were a few steps ahead). However, in some cases, growth-fostering relationships were only identified after diligent and persistent outreach by the participants. Indeed, some participants voiced the belief that they had to be very lucky or very tenacious to find a mentor at all, which is echoed in other research with unauthorized immigrants (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010).

Thus, the provision of support was uneven—some individuals enacted welcoming behaviors while others did not (Rodriguez et al., 2018). Mentors, friends, and advocates were treasured when found, illuminating how people can create a welcoming context. The participants themselves also engaged with their communities, demonstrating collectivism and agency by reaching back to provide assistance to others on the same pathway. However, the essential problem with individual growth-fostering relationships is that they are accessible to some and not to others.

As Alex said, “I have known a lot of people that just give up. They are like, ‘there is no point on me to continue,’ and they have so much potential.” A welcoming environment must extend beyond individuals to programs, practices, and policies (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018).

The current study also explored the impact of some growth-fostering policies and structures (e.g., DACA, immigrant serving nonprofit organizations). These policies and structures were early steps toward improved integration. Some of the basic items that are taken for granted by many citizens (e.g., a driver’s license, a work permit) were made possible by DACA and received with deep appreciation by the participants. Locally, however, the participants showed that the communities they lived in did not yet have the established features of a welcoming community (Rodriguez et al., 2018). For example, helpful strategies were more often ad hoc and not embedded in the foundations of community services, and channels to connect immigrants and existing community members in dialogue were only minimally present.

Even educators whose jobs included mentoring and guiding young people often did not have the tools needed to work effectively with these participants. For example, an informal asset map that locates welcoming individuals, organizations, and spaces would be a more systematic way of identifying effective immigrant-serving structures in our own communities. The LCC that supported this study regularly updated a list of all participating immigrant-serving entities in the county, which allowed both providers and immigrants to see where resources were located and promoted greater systemic access. Another example is a website of curated resources that was created to equip school personnel so they could be more effective in their efforts to support youth in educational planning regardless of status (see SoMuchPotential.org).

Growth-Inhibiting Relationships

Young adults facing adversity must search continually for opportunity and growth-fostering relationships as they are trying to build the foundations for their family and their future lives. In the current study, growth-inhibiting environments were characterized by the absence of advocates and resources, the lack of readiness of educators and community members, the presence of biased and discriminatory practices, and structural barriers to integration. For example, the participants noted that without the

good will and advocacy of the single mentor they had found, their pathway forward in education may have been stymied. As unauthorized immigrants, their social networks often did not include the powerful and well-positioned in local educational systems. The participants’ narratives also showed that some of the people and many of the structures in their local communities were not prepared to welcome immigrants with liminal legal status or support their integration. In some cases, this was due to lack of relevant perspective and information, and in other cases, it was due to negative stereotypes about them that created social distance as opposed to connection. The participants described how painful it was for emerging adults to experience backlash for an aspect of who they are, and to feel blocked from engaging with structures and opportunities that were available to others.

Finally, the growth participants had been aspiring to and working for was inhibited at times by structures, policies, and gatekeepers; that is to say, it was blocked by power dynamics that did not favor them. This included lack of financial aid, lack of some basic necessities, risk of deportation of family members, and training programs that did not prepare educators and other key helpers to respond to the young adults’ unique situations. In the words of Alex, “The system is fighting against you.” Upon experiencing these frequent roadblocks to integration, some young immigrant adults may withdraw into isolation or despair (Jordan, 2017; Rector-Aranda, 2019).

Thus, for immigrant integration to be encouraged, community members and service providers must acknowledge the way that some groups have been placed at risk by systemic and structural inequities. Immigrants without permanent legal status are left in a space where their goal-oriented behaviors can be stymied, their adult dreams can seem hard to reach, and potential social integration for self, family, and community is placed in doubt (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). As individuals, the participants and many of their peers experienced chronic disconnection from growth-fostering systems, which can generate frustration and hopelessness. Even the two-year renewal framework of DACA conveys the message that long-range planning and stable adulthood in the U.S. is tenuous (García et al., 2022). Thus, even though DACA was helpful in the policy context, it also included some important limitations and constraints.

Responding to Disconnection

How then can communities respond? The participants' voices and relational cultural theory (West, 2005) can help us think more effectively about the dynamics of growth-inhibiting relationships (both acute and chronic disconnection), as well as our responses as educators, mental health workers, social workers, policymakers, or advocates. In terms of individual responses, we can and should challenge ourselves to provide instances of connection for vulnerable emerging adults, but we also should acknowledge that it is not sufficient. We can create resources, train more effective advocates, and address discrimination, but that will only be a starting place, a small and local ripple. For community-wide integration, we need to think at the systems level (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018).

The current study demonstrates how policies, systems, and structures can be powerful influences on welcoming (growth-fostering) or chilly (growth-inhibiting) climates. Even a groundbreaking national policy like DACA was just a first step, providing some access but not all of the resources that recipients needed to feel safe and thrive. Thousands of young adults will have a harder path toward social integration if DACA is torn down through continual legal battles (García et al., 2022; National Immigration Law Center, n.d.). Although unauthorized immigrant youth are raising their voices in protest on social media and in some public spaces, there is also direct risk to doing so in a fiercely politicized environment (Borjian, 2018). The ideals of democratic participation should motivate citizens toward more vocal advocacy to bring these young adults out of liminal status and give them full ability to integrate with and contribute to their communities, as they desire to do.

At the local community level, the participants' stories provided examples of near-peer mentors, supportive immigrant community organizations, and connection to social networks. Rodriguez et al. (2018) point out that there are always pockets of warm or chilly reception in a given locality, but advocates and community members can come together across sectors (education, healthcare, law, etc.) to create and maintain growth-fostering systems and structures where they have leverage. A network of welcome creates a stronger support system, just like the cross-sector Latino Community Coalition that was integral to this participatory research study.

The participants' narratives also highlighted the dangers of acute or chronic disconnection, whether from well-meaning individuals or from those with discriminatory intent. In the context of hierarchical power manifesting itself in any form of oppression, disconnection is imposed by the dominant group (Ruiz, 2012). At the societal or systemic level, chronic disconnections result in lack of integration, experiences of disempowerment and marginalization, and stratification of opportunity (Jordan, 2017; Pompeo-Fargnoli, 2017). This is the opposite of growth-fostering relationships in RCT, or the welcoming community described by Rodriguez et al. (2018). We should instead be seeking to create productive nested contexts of community reception (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018) that can create alignment toward social integration.

Limitations

Due to the rescission of DACA and subsequent fear in the immigrant community, recruitment ended earlier than anticipated in this study. Thus, one limitation is a sample that is smaller than we hoped for (although still within suggested size for a phenomenological study). Due to participants' liminal statuses and IRB guidelines for the protection of a legally vulnerable population, permissible demographic questions were very limited, and no follow-up data collection was possible. Additionally, data were collected through phone interviews, which may have limited participants' ability to extend and reflect on their initial responses. Data came from North Carolina, due to the importance of the local recruiting network, but other states and communities around the country may have experienced this historical juncture in a different way, and thus produced different themes. The participants also skewed male, so future studies with greater freedom in recruitment could learn more about females without permanent legal status. The male auditor helped to balance any blind spots present with the all-female authoring group.

Implications and Future Research

Social integration is a bidirectional process, with a need for reciprocal participation on both sides (Rodriguez et al., 2018). The participants clearly described their interest in becoming more integrated with their host communities and culture. Yet, they were often met with barriers, social disconnection, and systemic exclusion (e.g., lack of rights, financial resources, information, access,

and integration). Through the lens of relational cultural theory (West, 2005), we should counter discrimination and systemic disconnection with integration and systemic connection.

Interdependence and mutual empowerment are key to this process within RCT, which means not “doing for” someone, but “doing with” them and fostering their growth. The sense of optimism and empowerment that participants reported when DACA was first approved is one piece of evidence that growth-fostering policies and practices can be effective. Such practices must be assessed and revised according to the suggestions of those most impacted by the disconnection, which requires us to be in community and attend to each other’s voices with respect.

Future researchers are encouraged to work with their IRBs to find ways to include legally vulnerable populations (e.g., those without permanent legal immigration status) in studies, so they can contribute to knowledge production as well (Hernández et al., 2013; Jach et al., 2020). We encourage expansion of similar research efforts to immigrants without permanent legal status from other parts of the world (not only Latin America), as well as those who live in sanctuary communities or more xenophobic communities in the U.S., those who arrived in the U.S. as very young children or babies as opposed to adolescents or youth, and those who may have come without adult family members or unaccompanied. Participatory research agendas would focus on centering the voices of disenfranchised groups so they can identify their own pathways to a productive and collective sense of emerging adulthood, and researchers and practitioners can work to clear obstacles out of the way. The participants were simultaneously resourceful and determined, while also constrained by the external barriers they encountered in their environment. Our society can benefit from the contributions of all, and thus it is incumbent upon those of us with access to remove inequitable obstacles and support a variety of emerging adults toward social integration.

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