Tell Me Your Story- Exploring Rural Latinx/e Students' Educational Journeys Through Personal Statements

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Abstract

Using a qualitative approach, this study sought to describe the educational experiences of Latinx/e youth in a rural setting. Research questions focused on two areas: 1. How will reflection by rural Latinx/e students on their lived experiences as marginalized youth unearth information about struggle, survival, resistance, and hope in hegemonic K-12 educational systems? 2. How can the lived educational experiences of rural Latinx/e youth inform educational practice? Data was sourced from thirty-four student written personal statements and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that rural Latinx/e students are their own diaspora who face unique challenges, but also have motivations and ambitions that differ from traditional narratives about people from rural places. Participants proudly shared across the data set that although they came from tough circumstances, they were highly motivated to achieve stability and status in the form of a college education and professional careers. Their motivation to succeed primarily stemmed from a deep love of their parents, most of whom immigrated to the United States to work in the agricultural industry as field laborers. They were also strongly influenced by a desire to avoid agricultural work as a career. For the most part, participants identified college going paths that would lead to stable, financially lucrative careers of service in sectors like health care. However, some chose careers of resistance in athletics, politics, and the arts. Finally, even though students named a strong motivation and desire to serve their families and communities by attending college, substantial financial barriers existed for rural Latinx/e students in this study as they approached the realities of paying for higher education. Implications for policy and practice at the teacher, school, and national level are provided.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, Jesse, Aiden, and Joan. Oh, and to my two pups, Archie and Snoopy, too. Thank you for your endless patience and love. I could not have done this without you.

I'd also like to dedicate this dissertation to my school family. I work with an incredible group of educators and students. You inspire me to be my best each and every day.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Educational systemic inequities have existed from the beginning of schooling in the United States. From Indian boarding schools that separated indigenous children from their families to the ongoing segregation of Black and Brown children (García, 2020), the democratic promise of public schooling has been exclusive and elusive. While explicit inequities are less common currently, there still exists in the language and practice of school systems implicit and insidious ways of marginalizing students (Joseph et al., 2016; Kohli et al., 2016). Despite often good intentions, educational research has unwittingly partnered in this work helping to "other" and classify students of color, reifying whiteness in the process (Patel, 2016). This practice has trickled down to school districts, who have dangerously sought to become "data driven," (Neuman, 2016) by focusing on parroting the data collection practices of the academy, resulting in detrimental high stakes assessment that does not measure learning, and in fact contributes to the very educational inequities it seeks to eradicate (Amrein &Berliner, 2002; Calderón & Urrieta, 2019; Maddus & Clarke, 2001).

An especially salient example of this marginalization exists within the schooling experiences of Latinx/e[1] youth. The history of being a Latinx/e student in the United States educational system is one fraught with complexities. From settler colonialist practices instituted by Spanish conquistadors to the Mendez family's trailblazing lawsuit calling for desegregating schools[2] for Chicano students to modern day Dreamers fighting for citizenship, it is a story of oppression, but also of creative agency and resistance (MacDonald, 2004). As a group, Latinx/e students have faced marginalization like other minoritized youth but are also confronted by unique issues like English language proficiency barriers or immigration challenges (Gandara & Mordechay, 2017). Dixon De Silva et al. (2020) found that Latinx/e youth are also disproportionately impacted by trauma because of factors such as polyvicitmization (experiencing more than one traumatic event), exposure to

[1] Latinx/e is used as a gender neutral and inclusive term to refer to people from Latin America. However, it must be noted that although the term can be used to unify, it also obscures indigenous membership and country of origin identities. I use specific terms and participants chosen identity markers in my research whenever possible.

[2] The Mendez family fought and won the first school desegregation case in federal court, eight years prior to the Brown v. Board of Education ruling. See *Mendez v. Westminster*: 1947.

community violence, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This heightened trauma is likely only exacerbated for rural Latinx/e students who may have compounding issues like scarce resources or through membership in migrant labor systems that incur financial and residential instability for their families. However, because of a dearth in the literature that focuses specifically on rural, versus urban, Latinx/e students, it is hard to know what they are experiencing and at what level. This is a result of data that is lumped together in one homogenous group, obfuscating important details of Rural Latinx/e students' unique experiences.

As a practitioner who works with Latinx/e students in rural North America, I have experienced the phenomenon of data driven educational[3] system in real time, only having just recently seen schools trend toward equitable data collection that centers on student voice[4]. Data driven schooling has been criticized for its over emphasis and reliance on standardized test scores, but recently researchers have also identified that the immense time and effort educators have put into analyzing data in this way has not had a significant impact on improving learning outcomes (Hill, 2020). Conversely, student voice, which is typically an under-utilized source of information to drive educational practice, is paramount if schools hope to achieve the bold equity objectives so many have set forth (McMahon et al., 2012). It is common for districts to set lofty goals about how they will educate children. As an example, Seattle Public Schools' vision statement asserts that "Seattle Public Schools is committed to ensuring equitable access, closing the opportunity gaps, and excellence in education for every student" (Seattle Public Schools, 2019). Equitable schooling is a common promise and one you will see some iteration of in nearly all public schools. However, to achieve important ideals districts must first listen to and know their students to be able to understand what they need as learners and human beings. Student experiences, ideas, and voices must be centered in order to achieve the ambitious objectives in today's teaching and learning communities.

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[3] "Data driven" refers to making educational decisions in school systems based on data. This data often comes from a variety of standardized tests that assess student skill in areas like English language proficiency, math level, and special education eligibility.

[4] The Carnegie Foundation's "improvement science" work is a strong example of systemic efforts to harnesses student voice. Data is typically gathered through tools like student interviews and focus on a problem of pedagogical practice that can be ameliorated in a single school year. See https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-ideas/ for more information.

This present research study aims to illuminate student voice and knowledge through the genre of autobiographical writing. It seeks to explore first-person experiences of rural Latinx/e youth navigating barriers and success in one rural high school through reflective storytelling that centers the voices, experiences, and life goals of students in order to affect systemic level educational change. The present research is rooted in humanizing pedagogies (Bartlomé, 1994; Darder, 2017; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 2018; hook, 1994; Salazar, 2019) and storytelling as an act of resistance and transformation in hegemonic educational spaces (Caruthers, 2006; Cervantes-Soon, 2016; Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017; DeNicolo et al. 2015; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002; Passos Savvidou, 2010; Smith 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

Theoretical Frameworks

LatCrit Theory

Delgado and Stefanic (2017) define Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a "collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (p. 3). LatCrit was theorized as an offshoot and expansion of CRT at a colloquium in 1995 focusing on Latinx people and CRT (Valdes, 2005). This theory, like the overarching theory of CRT, was conceived first in the discipline of law but has extended to include social justice focused scholars of many different schools of thought, including education. LatCrit differs from CRT because of its emphasis on coalition building and expanded focus into ideas that specifically impact Latinx people like immigration, ethnicity, language, sexuality, and more (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). However, LatCrit is not something contradictory to CRT, but rather should be seen as compliment to CRT's basic principles. Five themes of a LatCrit framework for educational research are outlined by Solorzano & Delgado Bernal (2001):

1. The centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination.
2. The challenge to dominant ideology.
3. The commitment to social justice.
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge.
5. The interdisciplinary perspective. (pp.312-315)

Third Space Theory

The inception of Third Space Theory is generally attributed to Komi Bhabha's (1994) seminal work *The Location of Culture*. In this collection of essays, he posits that there exists a "third space" in the postcolonial project that displaces the legitimating narratives of cultural domination. Further it is in that "third space" that the most creative forms of cultural identity are produced in the "intersections and overlaps across the spheres of class, gender, race, nation, generation [and], location" (Bhabha, 1994, p.1). Soja (1996) expanded ideas about third space in that it was not only a way for people to reflect upon experiences but also as a "form of potentially emancipatory praxis, the translation of knowledge into action in a conscious-and unconsciously spatial- effort to improve the world in some significant way" (p. 22). Soja's notion of applying social justice action to this theory has been married in many other spheres. For example, Anzaldua's concept of existing literally, emotionally, and theoretically in borderlands (1981) and the impact of this reality upon Chicanx people who live as Mexican, American, but also exist in a third space of being Chicanx. More recently, this theory been furthered in Dryness & Sepúlveda III's (2021) work that identifies global immigrant Latinx/e youth as a diasporic third space community, showing the myriad of applications of this idea to postcolonial minoritized populations.

Critical Rural English Pedagogy

Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP) is a burgeoning theoretical framework. Only recently introduced in the text *Teaching English in Rural Communities* in 2021 (Petrone &Wynhoff Olsen), the concept is still being fully imagined and supporting literature nascent. CREP interrogates issues of rurality through the lens of teaching and learning in English Language Arts. Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen (2021) present CREP as a way to develop and implement English curriculum that centers student analysis and discourse of rurality both as consumers and creators of rural ideology. Ultimately, rurality is an overlooked construction, whose ideas are often misunderstood as they are perpetuated outside of the spaces of the small communities that are defined by the tenets of its stereotypical definitions. CREP offers a new way to begin to examine the complexity and nuance of rurality.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review is an overview of rural educational research, exploring the educational experiences of rural and Latinx youth as underserved groups and emphasizing the need for research that is told through marginalized voices. Humanizing pedagogies will be discussed regarding how they lead to authentic learning. Finally, storytelling as an act of resistance and transformation in K-12 education will be highlighted.

Rural Educational Study

In general, the study of rural education has been a bit of a moving target for quite some time. For example, even the very word "rural" has yet to be defined systematically in the over one hundred years of research utilizing the term (Their & Beach, 2019; Their et al., 2021). And, even if such a definition were to exist it is likely to be incomplete due to the vast variety and complexity of rural communities. To be sure there are commonalities from community to community, but there are important differences in the place-based learning experiences of a small reservation community in Eastern Montana, a fishing village off the coast of Maine, or a farming town in Ohio. Burton et al. (2013) noted that rural Americans may well represent the single most diverse and heterogeneous group of individuals in American society. The research community reflects this complexity not just in its struggle to name and define the borders of what "rural" is, but also in the ways it has problematized rural education. Urban educational reformers have created a false dichotomy between rural and urban schooling, framing the fluctuating issues of small communities as a "rural problem" (Biddle & Azano, 2016). This framing has resulted in the repeated attempted efforts to implement initiatives that homogenize rural school experiences so that they are the same as urban counterparts, despite the vastly different resources and needs of students in rural America. Additionally, despite the incredible variety of rural communities, research has been conducted only in certain sections of the United States. Their et al. (2021) posit that there are rural "research deserts" and that research site selection privileges the south and the Midwest, ignoring the Northeast, Upper Midwest, and great swaths of the West. The above points are noted to situate this study in the understanding that rural schools are not just understudied or studied with an urban researchers' perspective, but also that this work is complex in that it calls for a uniform generalizability, but also anonymity, nuance, and an

eye towards the individual needs, histories, and unique experiences of people from small communities.

Complexity of Rural Youth

There are profound differences between the experiences and opportunities of rural and urban people (Burton et al., 2013; Koricich, et al., 2018). Burton et al., (2013) found that rural youth are an often unrecognized and overlooked marginalized group even though they make up nearly 50% of American school districts. Additionally, despite the fact that 56% of school districts in the U.S.A. are rural, nearly one in five students attend school in a rural district (AASA, 2017) and 46 million Americans live in rural America (Dobis et al., 2021) the educational needs and experiences of rural students are largely lumped in with their urban counterparts (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

While rural students in general face greater disadvantage academically and economically, including but not limited to higher teacher turnover in their K-12 education and well as significant increases in poverty due to a decrease in economic bases, rural students of color experience even greater hardships (Means, 2018). Despite the fact that nearly one in four rural students are students of color (Showalter et al., 2017), they are rarely meaningfully discussed in research or in the greater national conversation about rurality (Means, 2018). Irvin et al. (2016) found that rural teachers had lower expectations for students of color. Rural African American and Latinx/e students also report that they have more significant barriers to higher education than white students (Irvin et al., 2012). Finally, O'Connor et al. (2010) found that because of a lack of social capital, rural Latinx/e students were four times less likely to attend a four-year institution than their white counterparts.

There has been significant and rapid growth in the last decade of Latinx/e populations in rural America, surpassing African Americans who previously made up the largest minority group (Housing Assistance Council, 2012). And although rural Latinx/e youth face marginalization similar to non-Latinx/e rural and Latinx/e counterparts, because of their intersectional positionality they experience oppression in a different way, even if it is the same kind of oppression. Take for example success hierarchies in schools. In an urban school the coveted positions would most often be in college preparatory classes, sports, or cheerleading. And, while this is also true in rural schools, there exists additional spaces of different social hierarchies. For instance, the Future Farmers of America (FFA) is an

organization that is both a class and a club in rural schools and is integral for supporting young people who hope to have careers in agriculture or ranching. Farming has become an increasingly complex industry, dependent on technology, scientific testing, and business acumen, so students who hope to move from labor jobs to leadership need the sophisticated skill set and the network that FFA provides. Unfortunately, even though many Latinx/e students in rural areas take part in agricultural labor and are interested in exploring farming and ranching as a career, they are sometimes barred access from FFA in a subtle, but effective system that makes them unwelcome in the classes and clubs, privileging their white classmates instead (Barajas et al., 2018; Elliot & Lambert, 2018). Additionally, rural Latinx/e LGBTQIA+ youth also face marginalization differently. While they too share similar marginalized experiences with their urban counterparts, they also have less access to supportive organizations like Gender Sexuality Alliances or Gay Straight Alliances (GSA's)[5] (Zongrone et al., 2020) and reside in communities that are less diverse and less accepting of LGBTQIA+ people. Dixon De Silva et al. (2020) also found that rural Latinx/e youth are more likely to experience traumatic events and are at higher risk for developing mental illnesses compared to white youth. Finally, Raffaelli et al. (2016) emphasized that even though rural Latinx/e youth populations continue to grow, their development and well being is largely invisible in the research literature, which only exacerbates inequities (Hamann & Harklau, 2010).

Latinx/e Students as An Underserved Group

Latinx/e students are an underserved group in K-12 education who have distinct and diverse needs. They make up one in four public school students nationally (Fry & Hugo Lopez, 2012), but are still performing far behind white and Asian counterparts in high school and college graduation rates (Gandara & Mordechay, 2017). Low academic performance is especially concerning in rural America where Latinx/e youth are often the children of parents who labor in agricultural work and other entry level jobs. These jobs can add additional stressors to families including financial instability, regular migration for employment, and disrupted schooling (Belhadj et al., 2015). Like many other people of color

[5] GLSEN, a national network that works to create safe schools for LGBTQ youth, clarifies that GSA originally stood for Gay Straight Alliance. However, they are more commonly known as Gender Sexuality Alliances today. Both terms are included here as some school organizations still use the original acronym. See https://www.glsen.org/ for more information.

in the United States, Latinx/e students confront issues of racism and poverty as major barriers to success (Gandara & Mordechay, 2017), but also have unique challenges like the erasure of their indigenous identity and other facets of their culture of origin (Calderón & Urrieta, 2019). The most academically successful students are those who are able to assimilate into the hegemonic system of schooling, abandoning, or at the very least compartmentalizing, their language and any cultural funds of knowledge (Greenburg, 1989). Students who are not able to do this, end up part of system created problems where the knowledge they do have is not valued, thus creating "educational gaps." For example, there is the ever-growing issue of Long-Term English Language Learners (LTELL) in secondary schooling. Students who have been in U.S. schools for seven or more years and have not been able to test out of their English Language Learner (ELL) status are categorized as LTELL's (Flores et al., 2015). Students identified as LTELL's are often the victims of damaged centered research (Tuck, 2009) where they end up being perceived by educational practitioners as deficient in their linguistic and academic abilities (Brooks, 2020). This perception only furthers dehumanizing pedagogies and increases barriers to pathways of viable college and career options. These are merely a few examples of the numerous and incredibly complex challenges that Latinx/e students encounter, but they help to paint the picture of the current reality students face.

Humanizing Pedagogies

Humanizing pedagogies are essential to not only deep, but authentic learning (Kirkland, 2014). Educators must be able to provide relevant instruction to students, but also to have a sympathetic understanding of what is going on in the minds of those they are educating (Dewey, 1938). This idea is not new and has evolved and been refined through time.

Freire (2018) posits in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that humanist, revolutionary teachers must engage with students in critical thinking on the quest for mutual humanization. This concept was furthered, as Darder (2017) expanded on Freire's notions of a pedagogy of love that requires deep, human commitment that rests in a relationship of community with the educational processes of students. A pedagogy of love is counter to the banking educational practices that position teachers as masters and students as passive vessels. This mantel of humanization in education is passed on in the work of bell hooks

(1994), who asks us to move into a revolutionary status of teaching to transgress by valuing community, inclusion, and learning that is relevant to all students.

Bartlomé (1994), suggests that we move towards a humanizing pedagogy, away from "technical solutions" (p.174) that identify barriers for culturally and linguistically subordinated students in teaching methodology rather than as a result of systematic oppression. Salazar (2013) shares the "what" and "how" of humanizing pedagogy, clearly articulating and emphasizing the need for human development, humanization as freedom, the journey towards critical consciousness, and transformative critical reflection and action.

Despite the relative longevity and trajectory of humanizing practices, there remains a need to still do battle for the idea. A long history of dancing around systemic inequities both inside the academy and educational praxis, makes Patel's (2016) appeal for a "move from ownership to answerability" (p. xiv) in order to decolonize educational systems more urgent than ever. Humanizing pedagogies are integral to the process of ownership and responsibility in dismantling educational systems of oppression.

Storytelling as an Act of Resistance and Transformation

Stories are important and powerful. However, they can be easily underestimated because of their common place in our everyday lives. Short (2012) emphasized that stories are more than simple entertainment or distraction; they are how we create and understand our internal and external worlds as individuals and within community with others. Rosen (1986) argued that stories help us organize the chaos of our lives into units of understanding, thus without them our experiences may feel meaningless or a confused cacophony of random events. Stories help us identify nuance (Carter, 1993) providing opportunities to structure and reflect on our lives (Bruner, 1988).

In sharing our stories, we identify our unique human experiences, while inviting others to co-create meaning with us (Short, 2012). Smith (2012) reminds us that each individual story is powerful and that new stories contribute to a collective which gives every person a place. This collective gives way to theory. As Brayboy (2005) posits, "stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being" (p.430). The erasure of the stories of Black and Brown bodies has been an intentional act of colonization (Dyrness & Sepuveda III, 2020), and when

marginalized people tell their stories it is an act of survivance[6] (Sabzalian, 2019). This study aims to make visible the experiences of rural Latinx/e youth, contributing to a long history of voices, "a form through which the voice of 'witness' is accorded space and protection" (Smith, 2012, p. 145).

For most of us, our schooling experiences hold important moments of identity development. Those memories are often held as stories that we revisit and share with others to explain who we are and what we have been through. For example, consider the experiences of two of the educational researchers referenced in this paper as they illustrate their ideas and tensions with hegemonic educational oppression. Through these short anecdotes they emphasize the power of narrative in acts of resistance and transformation. In talking about her desegregated schooling experiences hooks (1994) says:

> School changed utterly with racial integration… Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived or behaved. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us (p.3).

Salazar (2013) shares a similar tale of the impact of schooling that reified whiteness, even though she comes from a different background, place, and time in American history.

> In the third grade, I desperately wanted to be white. My teachers privileged whiteness…and therefore I ascertained that White[7] children were smarter, more attractive, and affluent. As a result, I became a connoisseur of whiteness…I observed my White classmates… and found a common pattern; every White student in my class was in the highest reading group. Thus, I hypothesized that if I propelled myself into the top reading group my skin color would change and I would become White and worthy (p.122).

While these stories are only two examples, they give the reader a window into the complexity of the authors' educational journey in one short anecdote. What is not included,

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[6] Survivance is a combination of the words "survival" and "resistance." This usage comes out of indigenous scholarship and defines "indigenous creative approaches to life beyond genocide, beyond the bareness of survival" (Morrill, 2017, p. 15), but is applied here as a term that includes all marginalized people.

[7] The word "white" in reference to race is capitalized here to accurately reproduce the author's words. However, white as a race identifier will not be capitalized in the rest of the paper to decenter white supremacy in language. Please see Matias et al. (2014) in the reference section for further context.

because of the limited to space of this paper, is what happens next. But likely, even if a reader is not familiar with the researchers' significant academic contributions, the blanks can be filled inasmuch that the message is sent that their stories, while painful, fueled their resistance to the oppression they faced. These researchers took up Lorde's proverbial "tools that built the masters house" to articulate their experiences, revealing the truth of the barriers they faced to their largely white academic audience.

Further, storytelling is a powerful tool in educational praxis too. Applied as a humanizing pedagogy, it can be an antidote to the deficit language and thinking both within and outside schools regarding the teachers and children who inhabit them. It has been successfully utilized in teacher professional development. Savvidou (2010) used storytelling as dialogue to explore how educators construct professional knowledge. Caruthers (2006) had educators write stories about their experiences with the normally taboo topics surrounding diversity as part of a professional development activity to build equitable practice in their school district. These stories, combined with dialogue and inquiry, helped the staff to examine their ideas around diversity, "breaking the paradigm of sameness that perpetuates the silence around cultural difference" (Caruthers, p.661, 2006).

Autobiographical reflection through storytelling is a powerful pedagogical tool when employed with students but can be challenging for practitioners to engage in within the context of the regular school day because of myriad competing interests (Lujan & DiCarlo, 2006). However, when framed as something pragmatic, something that is seen as useful by students, teachers, parents, and administrators, it more easily becomes an instructional priority. This is the power of the personal statement essay. Because it is a common requirement to earn scholarships or gain admittance into universities, it is more widely supported as a good use of the limited, and therefore precious, instructional minutes.

This concept was explored by Alvarez (2012) who asserted that the personal statement could veer dangerously into the territory of a tool for the alleged meritocracy in the game of college admissions. It makes visible the preferred qualities of college bound students. However, these qualities are often the embodiment of hegemonic and sometimes unattainable ideals of K-12 and higher education systems. For college-bound student writers, this process can be a dizzying and sometimes contradictory experience of discussing achievements, like being heavily involved in school activities or having a high grade point

average and test scores, and challenges, like experiences with intersectional memberships or overcoming barriers. Further, as it is traditionally conceived, the personal statement alienates students who are not college bound, or who are simply not applying for competitive scholarships and universities.

It is well documented that rural students have a lower rate of college enrollment (Byun et al., 2012b; Hu, 2003; Koricich et al., 2018), are more likely to delay their entry into postsecondary education (Byun et al., 2015), and are less likely to attend a highly selective college or university (Byun et al., 2015; Koricich et al., 2018). So, what is the value of reflective autobiographical writing in the form of a personal statement for young people who want to attend a technical school, start at a community college, immediately enter the work force, or who want to attend college but do not have a long list of achievements to discuss? How do educators ensure that writing a personal statement does not serve to commodify the lived experiences of students? The answers to these questions lie in how the assignment is framed and the instruction is delivered. The personal statement is still pragmatic and useful, but not only as a tool for college admittance. Rather, it can be conceived as an opportunity for upper-level secondary students to reflect upon their educational path and set goals for whatever future they have dreamed up. Alvarez (2012) reimagined his version of the personal statement as a tool to speak back against systematic oppression by having his students critically examine the concept of meritocracy as part of their essay. The present study's version of a personal statement is also reimagined, but in this case, it uses the lens of the needs of rurality in order to include and embrace students from all vantage points and value a wide variety of trajectories. Thus, secondary ELA instructors are able to offer students a moment to ponder on where they have been, what they value, and how to make plans to positively impact the world as a part of their future goals. Expanding this essay's purpose away from the singularity as a first-step for four-year college admittance is central to creating inclusive learning where all rural students are given the opportunity build critical writing and communication skills regardless of an immediate college going path.

Chapter III: Method

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe the educational experiences of Latinx/e youth in a rural setting through the use of personal statements[8] to inform educational practice.

Chapter I will provide an overview of Thematic Analysis (TA) and how it was used as a method of analysis for this research. Next, researcher positionality is explained along with connections and divergences with the study population and a description of the study population. Finally, a detailed research plan is provided, including data collection, procedures, analysis, and ethical concerns.

Research Questions

This study seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. How will reflection by rural Latinx/e students on their lived experiences as marginalized youth unearth information about struggle, survival, resistance, and hope in hegemonic K-12 educational systems?
2. How can the lived educational experiences of rural Latinx/e youth inform educational practice?

Methodology Selected

Thematic Analysis as Methodology

This study was performed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA). Thematic Analysis (TA) is an umbrella term that can be applied in multiple ways, but typically refers to three broad approaches: Coding Reliability, Codebook, and Reflexive TA (Braun et. al, 2019). Coding Reliability is what Braun et al. (2019) refer to as a "small q" approach, meaning that the method uses qualitative techniques, but within a positivist or post-positivist framework and endeavors to prove pre-existing themes and/or theories. Codebook is similar in that it uses a structured codebook that is developed prior or early on in data analysis. However, it moves towards the middle of the spectrum of quantitative and qualitative methodology because it is typically rooted in a qualitative philosophy. Finally, Reflexive

[8] Personal statements, as referred to here, are a form of autobiographical writing that is often done by high school students as a way to share who they are as individuals to college admissions boards and scholarship committees.

TA, is informed entirely by a qualitative philosophy and is what Braun et al. (2019) deem a "big Q" method. Reflexive TA is an organic method in which themes are understood as actively created and built at the intersection of the data and the researchers' interpretative framework. This approach differs broadly from Coding Reliability, and Codebook in that data does not exist to be unearthed. Rather, theme generation is a creative and active process that researchers are central to (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Reflexive TA was used as a study method because it is rooted philosophically in "big Q" qualitative research and thus fits with the constructivist epistemology of this work. Further, it provided a method of inductive in-depth analysis that could be used with a larger study population and did not require extensive follow up interviews or restorying as other potentially useful methods like grounded theory or narrative inquiry. This feature was especially useful for this study because data was gathered from a large sample of student writing with no interviewing. TA is appropriate to use with participant populations from all backgrounds, which is important because this research gathered data from students who had a variety of life experiences. TA was also chosen because of its utility, accessibility, applicability. It can be easily utilized by a solo researcher, making it a flexible tool for dissertation work. There is also an extensive body of literature that outlines how to use Reflexive TA as well as studies for me to review as models. Finally, this method is creative, organic, and interesting to me as a burgeoning researcher building an analytical skill set.

Trustworthiness

This study utilized Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four main criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to guide the quality and trustworthiness of research. There are many strategies available to ensure research quality, but for this study trustworthiness was assured through methodological coherence and triangulation. Methodological coherence requires that there is congruence among the research question, methods, data, and analysis (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). Coherence was achieved through first identifying clear, overarching research questions that focused on storytelling from the study population as a way to unearth the experiences of rural students. Next, knowing that the study goal was to glean information from participants of whom there was nascent literature, TA was chosen as a method because it would be flexible in identifying themes in an organic way that complimented the research questions. Further, personal

statements were identified as a data source because they would be a good fit to answer the research questions while providing a rich source to draw data from for TA. These factors lead to a harmonious collection and analysis of data resulting in methodological coherence.

Triangulation requires researchers to build credibility by cross examining the research at multiple points (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013). In this study, credibility was initially built through peer examination. After collecting the initial essays and reading them, I met with the teachers in the study and had them share their thoughts on what they noticed. They identified themes that stood out to them as English teachers and also shared ideas for improving the assignment in following years. In the middle and later stages of analysis, I had multiple discussions with the co-investigator about what was most salient from her perspective as a researcher and former English teacher in multiple rural locales. Finally, I utilized three theoretical frameworks to analyze the data. This led to connections and confirmations with pre-existing research across the literature.

Researcher Positionality

I am a cis heterosexual white woman, born in Montana and raised on a reservation. I finished high school in a rural district in eastern Washington. I am a secondary English/ ELL teacher and literacy coach. I have taught in the same rural district with a predominantly Latinx/e student body for the past eleven years. I have embraced social justice work as a learner and a leader for my entire career. I am a mother and caregiver. I am also someone who has had tremendous difficulties in school. There were certain points in my life where the road to higher education and my chosen profession seemed impassible. I became a teacher to support and listen to the students, like the kids I grew up with, who are not usually heard. I embrace feminist and servant leadership as a teacher leader. My professional goal has always been, and remains, to make a positive difference for learners through the work I do. My research is conceived in the same way. Because of my experiences as a student and teacher, I am well aware of the many privileges I have. As such, I endeavor to dismantle the coloniality and supremacy that exists in my own heart, mind, and world through vigilant work and reflective practice as an educator, storyteller, and human being.

Connections with Study Population

My experiences are similar to my study population in many ways. I grew up rural, and I grew up without a lot of money. The study setting is in a town that is the same size as

the schools I went to and the poverty metrics are similar. Like many of the students I serve, I also felt the pinch of the lack of opportunity living in a small town. I saw the inequity that the people with the "right last names" or because I grew up on the reservation, right skin color, were the ones who would be given the opportunities to make a better life for themselves. I also grew up in a place, time, and family where being a woman meant being subservient and less important than men. This seems to be the greatest connection I have with my students, especially my female Latinx/e student as they try to traverse the worlds between their parents' traditional notions of femininity and the modern era they live in.

Divergences with Study Population

Despite commonalities in my upbringing, I currently live in a much more privileged reality. I am college educated, middle class, and do not have the challenges of a visible or invisible disability. Most importantly, I experience incredible privilege because I am white. No matter how many commonalties I can relate to with my Latinx/e students, I will never be able to understand what it feels like to live in a body that has been racially marginalized, oppressed, and maligned both in an historical and ongoing way. I can act as an ally, advocate, and sounding board, but my privilege is so normalized as to be invisible, necessitating the need for me to be eternally cognizant of centering marginalized voices and experiences.

Study Participants

The study took place in rural central Washington, USA. Study participants were from a district that has roughly 3,000 total students, with about 800 enrolled in the high school. District demographics were 86% Latinx/e and 14% white. After the study was approved by the University of Idaho's Institutional Review Board, all 11th grade students were invited to be a part of this research study after they completed their personal statement essay, but a convenience sample was drawn from the Latinx/e participants who signed research assent waivers. The focus of this inquiry is on rural Latinx/e student populations so while data was collected from all students, it was only analyzed for the study's focus population. Because study participants are under 18, and therefore part of a vulnerable population, it was important that all students were given equitable access to the learning experiences and that no one felt othered as a result of the research process.

Data Collection

For this study, I collected one page personal statement essays from student participants that were written as a part of regular and long-standing English Language Arts (ELA) instruction for 11th grade students at this high school (see appendix A, B, C, and D to review the assignment, rubric, and essay sample from a former student that was given to all participants.) Before the personal goal essays were assigned, all students were informed that they were invited to share their work as a part of a research project that was gathering the perspectives and experiences of rural students. The project was explained, and students were given the opportunity to ask questions at that point or as they arise later in the process. They were assured that they did not have to participate in the project and that by doing so they would neither curry favor, nor be treated disparagingly as a result of their participation. Essays were graded by instructors using a rubric with a pass or fail point system (see Appendix B). Students who did not complete the assignment to the rubric's standard and/or due date were given additional time to resubmit the work. Additionally, this assignment was seen as a first effort by the study site's English department. As such, all students were given the opportunity to review and revise this essay again at the beginning of their senior year in English 12 before officially submitting it to colleges or scholarship committees.

Thirty-four samples were gathered from a total of seven classes, five mainstream and two honors/dual credit courses. Classes were taught by three different instructors. One of the instructors was this study's principal investigator who taught one course of the honors/dual credit English 11. The rest of the classes were split between the other two instructors.

Instrument

Data was collected through the Personal Statement Essay (see Appendix A). This essay is written annually by all 11th graders in the school that is being studied and is a standard and long-standing assignment. The essay was refined this year by the 11th grade teachers to be more inclusive by expanding the prompt to include students who will move into college and career paths outside of four-year universities with competitive admissions processes. The essay asked students to write a one-page personal statement that shared their goals and aspirations as a student and citizen. They were prompted to frame their essay in four categories: Personal Anecdote, Background, College and/or Career Goals, and Positive Difference. Students were given a single point rubric (see Appendix B) that outlined how the

writing would be assessed, multiple student examples of previous personal statements, and an annotated personal statement that showed how each of the categories from the prompt look in an actual essay (see Appendix C).

Procedures Followed

Initially, I met with the 11th grade ELA teachers and high school principal to share materials, get feedback on the research idea, and gain support and permission. Next, the principal gave signed permission to conduct research (see Appendix G). After that, research approval was applied for and then granted by the University of Idaho's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the study was approved, the researcher began distributing materials and meeting with teachers about the project. Then, the assent/consent forms (see Appendix E and F), one for parents and one for students. I gave a short presentation overviewing the research plan to students before the writing unit begin in each class, carefully emphasizing that there would be no repercussions for their participation in the project. Consent forms were handed out and collected one week later. Students were asked to turn in the student form, marking yes or no, so that all participation responses could be clearly recorded. Samples were collected after a two-week writing and assessing period. Samples were not considered ready for analysis until after they were assessed by instructors, final grades were entered into the grade book, and all permission slips were signed and collected. All samples were blinded when they moved into the analysis stage.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the theoretical lenses of Lat Crit Theory, Third Space Theory, and CREP. LatCrit frames the experiences of rural Latinx/e youth as unique, impacted by race, racism and other form of subordination, and highlights and centers participants' experiential knowledge as a way to challenge dominant ideologies. Third Space theory is applied here to the diasporic space of all Latinx/e people living in the United States, but goes further in that notion to include the singular experiences of rural Latinx/e youth. CREP helps to round out the analysis as it focus is in "respond[ing] to the marginalization, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding of rurality within mainstream American consciousness…" (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p.7). Data were intentionally chosen and analyzed from participants' English Language Arts course to provide an avenue

for students to "create and disseminate texts that re-present a more comprehensive, accurate, and social just rendering..." of rural people (Petrone & Wynhoff Olsen, 2021, p.7).

I identified patterns and themes through an inductive and cyclical process of open, axial, and selective coding (Williams & Moser, 2019). First, I began my analysis by reading all essays for which I had received an assent and consent form. Initially, there were a total of fifty essays. However, my research questions focused on the experiences of rural Latinx/e students and only a portion of the essays were from students in that demographic. This left a total of thirty-four essays to analyze from the original fifty that were collected. From those thirty-four essays I used the verbs struggle, survival, resistance, and hope from my research questions as deductive codes to identify sections of the essays to delve deeper into for open coding. All themes that fit into those categories were highlighted and color coded. From there, I used In Vivo open coding (Saldaña, 2016) and ten themes emerged: Intense Struggle, Parents as a Central Force in Students' Lives, Agricultural Work as an American Nightmare, Siblings (and Cousins) as Motivation and Inspiration, Post-Secondary Plans, Indigenous Pride, Barriers to College Dreams, Perseverance, School and Education as a Place of Hope, and Hard Work. Subsequent reading of the essays with a constant focus on my theoretical frameworks of LatCrit, Third Space and CREP, clarified overarching themes so I collapsed my data into only the most salient themes. This was especially challenging as some themes, like Indigenous Pride, illuminated important lived experiences for rural Latinx/e students, but unfortunately did not connect with the overall thread of the data. However, these themes have been noted as important and interesting areas to explore in later research. Next, I used axial coding to organize the nine themes into four major themes grouping subcategories underneath. Finally, the four themes that emerged as most prominent in answering the research question are Adversity, Parental Sacrifice, Motivation and Inspiration, and Post-Secondary Plans. See Table 1 for an example of how codes evolved over time.

Table 1

Illustrative Data Reflecting Inductive /Deductive Coding Processes

Data	**Open Code**	**Thematic Code**	**Axial Code**	**Supporting Codes**
"We grew up really poor and	Struggle	Intense Struggle	Adversity	Issues of Poverty

struggled with things that children shouldn't experience at such a young age."		Agricultural Work as an American Nightmare		Domestic Instability
…[m]any nights of seeing my mother cry and pray to God for help. I always keep this in the back of my mind as one of the many sacrifices my parents were willing to make for us to get a better life and better education than they did.	Survival	Parents as a Central Force in Students' Lives Inspiration	Parental Sacrifice	Agricultural Work as the American Nightmare Debt Repayment
"I have an older brother who decided not to go to college. I also have a younger brother. My hope is that he will see that I took this chance for a better career and will hopefully follow in my footsteps and attend a college."	Hope	Perseverance School and Education as a Place of Hope Hard Work Siblings (and Cousins) as Motivation Indigenous Pride	Motivation and Inspiration	Siblings (and Cousins) as Motivation School and Education as a Place of Hope
"The arts have been one thing that will not leave my side. I hope to create something	Resistance	Post-Secondary Plans Barriers to College Dreams	Post-Secondary Plans	Careers of Resistance

greater than myself and leave a legacy, when my parent couldn't afford one."				

Ethical Concerns

Ethical research practices were thoughtfully and thoroughly implemented throughout this study. Because the study was designed to be used with a vulnerable population of students who are under 18, data that was collected in the least obtrusive way possible. By gathering information that was a part of regular instruction, the study design ensured that students were not required to do extra work or spend additional time outside of their normal class efforts. Participant safety was ensured through blinded responses and summarized findings. Consent forms were reviewed with students, and students asked to provide their assent in addition to their parent/guardian consent. It was important that students provide their assent, even though they were not 18, so that they felt that their voice and permission were prioritized, even though the legal consent was from their parent/guardian. I also shared that there were no repercussions for not participating in the study and that students could withdraw from the study at any time. Finally, I did not begin to analyze their essays until after their work had been assessed by their instructors and entered as a final grade in the grade book.

Chapter IV: Findings

Introduction of Participants

To honor anonymity as well as time and space constraints, I will refrain from describing all thirty-four participants in detail. Instead, they will be introduced in an amalgamated composite form. However, I would be remiss if I did not mention that the uniqueness and potential of each student defies easy categorization. This is the data of dreamers, survivors, poets, artists, farmers, laborers, scientists, mathematicians, members of the LGBTQIA+, Indigenous, Mestizo communities and more. They are the brave, the proud, the joyful, the hilarious, the unsure, the hardworking, and the scared too. Some really like school, and some do not. All have interesting experiences and dreams of bright futures.

For the purposes of general understanding, at the time of the study all participants were between sixteen and seventeen years old, Latinx/e, mostly with roots in Mexico, but also the Central American countries of Honduras and El Salvador. They were 11th graders who were asked to write an essay about an uncertain future while still in the midst of living through a global pandemic. They had missed years of school based socialization and instruction, and no one yet knows how deeply that has impacted them. Most students were bilingual in Spanish to varying degrees, but their language continuum is vast with some students being fully fluent in Spanish and Indigenous languages like Mixtec, and some knowing only English. They were primarily the children of parents who have immigrated from Latin America to the United States and are part of the Latinx/e diaspora. Most of their families were employed by the big agribusiness corporations that support their small community, working in hard labor jobs picking and processing the various locally grown produce. A smaller minority of parents were employed by local businesses and schools. Most students were worried about money, both in the present and future tense, and dreamed of security, even if they were not quite sure yet how to achieve that goal.

Overview of Findings

A total of thirty-four Latinx/e students and their parents/guardians assented/consented to participate in the study. Students were asked to write a personal statement that showed their audience, whether it be a scholarship committee, college admissions officer, person writing a letter of recommendation, or potential employer, their unique qualities and experiences. The prompts and instructors both emphasized that effective essays would paint

a clear picture of who students are, their goals and aspirations, and potential as a student and citizen (see Appendix A). The thirty-four essays were analyzed using thematic coding, with the themes of Adversity, Parental Sacrifice, Motivation and Inspiration, and Post-Secondary Plans emerging as most evident.

These findings complicate the narrative of living and working in rural America. Too often rurality is inaccurately seen as space exclusively held by solely by white people and white culture. And, to be sure, this single story does exist in some realities. However, like famed author and speaker Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie imparts, the problem with a single story is not that it is untrue, but that it is incomplete. The stories you will hear about below share the experiences of the children whose parents' and grandparent's crossed borders, hopefully striving for the promise of the elusive American Dream.

Major Themes

Adversity

For the introduction of this essay students were asked to write an anecdote that took a snapshot of an important moment in their life. They were given multiple examples including an annotated sample from a former student (see Appendix C) that outlined how to include an anecdote in their essay. By and large students found including an anecdote challenging both because it was tough to share personal information and as a technical challenge as young writers. However, most were able to start their essays with a either a story or reference to an important live event. Students shared similar challenges that centered around issues of poverty, immigration challenges, and domestic instability.

Issues of Poverty

In nearly all of the essays, participants reported experiences related to poverty and financial instability. Most students commonly and casually said something to the effect of "I don't come from much" or "We don't come from much" regardless of whether they provided concrete details of issues related to poverty. Students described incredible challenges, most related to issues of long term socioeconomic poverty. One student shared how this barrier created an incredible strain on their day to day existence, "Throughout my life I don't remember a time where my family hasn't struggled with money or close to being without a place to live, which meant we moved round to places my mom could afford to live at." Another emphasized the toll that experiencing such an intense circumstance had taken,

hinting at deeper suffering saying, “We grew up really poor and struggled with things that children shouldn’t experience at such a young age.” One student shared a vivid memory of his experiences with homelessness as a child:

> As I waited my turn to take a shower at a friend’s house, I told myself that I wanted to help my parents out by bringing in more money. Long cold nights of sleeping in the van that we had because we didn’t have enough money to get a house for our family.

These references were common across the essays and illuminated the lived experiences of survival and struggle, but also that this is a group of young people have experienced deep trauma that they still carry with them.

Immigration Challenges

Students identified that negative experiences with immigration contributed significantly to the adversity in their lives. They shared stories about their personal or familial journeys crossing the border and what happened when they got to the American side of the trip. Some participants shared concerns about family members being deported or the constant threat of deportation in the community. Often, students said it was challenging to fit into their new home and that they experienced intense feelings of loneliness and culture shock. Additionally, regardless of citizenship status, the barriers and bureaucracy of immigrating permeated their everyday lives. One student who was born in the United States, but raised in Mexico said:

> Coming to the United States was one of the biggest and most difficult challenges, since it never crossed my mind that I would return to the United States…When I got here [the United States] it was very difficult for me to adapt. I felt it was not my home…I got sick and was depressed for a long time…Moving to a new state was difficult because I had nothing compared to Mexico, and I did not have relatives here. The hardest thing was that I didn’t know any English.

Although many students reported that their families made the move to the United States to improve their living conditions, it did not make the transition easier for them. Immigrating to a new place is challenging under the best circumstances but when coupled with legal matters related to citizenship, loss of identity and family, and language barriers it

created hardships that could sometimes take a long time for the young people in this study to overcome.

Domestic Instability

Students explicitly referenced the pain and fear of instability in their lives. Instability overlapped with other themes, but was also specifically called out in the form of domestic strife. They discussed concerns like absent parents, divorce, and financial concerns that led to stressful, tenuous home lives. One participant shared:

> My life has consisted of many tragic events: being in foster care, my parents divorcing, I moved from California to Washington, these events are not unique, but they have impacted my life in ways I never thought they would.

This comment is especially notable not only because the student provided a list of intense struggles, each of which would levy a heavy psychological burden on its own, but also that they believed the trying events they experienced to be commonplace. Another participant shared that:

> My parents couldn't get a lot of the things I wanted because they were struggling with a lot of money, and things became worse when they divorced and now the majority of my time was caring for my siblings while my mom worked and that really impacted my life.

This story underscored a common barrier for students in this school district who often reported that they became caregivers to younger siblings when they were still children, which can create a host of challenges for students and their families, including impacting academic performance in school. Finally, students also regularly referenced challenges with mental health and loneliness both at school and home because of their experiences with unstable conditions, but this was mentioned less explicitly than other themes of adversity that were provided.

Parental Sacrifice

The second paragraph of the essay asked students to briefly introduce themselves and share about their background. The annotated example they were given is relatively benign in its content (see Appendix C). However, when asked to discuss their families, students had much to say, underscoring how central and important their families are in their lives. Students overwhelmingly reported a desire to honor their parents sacrifices of hard

work and immigration to the United States, emphasizing that their parents were their number one priority. One student introduced her parents saying, “My parents, like many others in my town, are immigrants. Their legacy is unknow, but that doesn’t make it unimportant,” highlighting a foundational theme across the data that students saw their parents as the unsung heroes of their lives. Most essays contained some form of this sentiment shared by one student, “Family means the most to me. I put them above everything and everyone.” But more specifically, participants would center their parents in this feeling. For example, one student asserted, “When I make it out, I will first help my parents out and then others.” And while honoring parents may be a common notion for any child who loves their families, participants emphasized a depth of commitment because of shared moments of survival that was unique to their particular circumstances. One student shared his memories of the desperation his parents felt as they fought for survival and the hope of a better life for their children. He said that there were:

> …[m]any nights of seeing my mother cry and pray to God for help. I always keep this in the back of my mind as one of the many sacrifices my parents were willing to make for us to get a better life and better education than they did.

Agriculture Work as American Nightmare

The majority of students reported that their parents had sacrificed everything in order come to the United States for a new and better life for their children. Often participants alluded to a deep unhappiness in their parents’ lives that was centered around the agricultural work they had to endure to support their families. Field labor, and the life of hardship and instability it created for their parents and themselves, was identified as the cost for the striving for the American Dream. They referenced their parents’ lives as one of toil, almost as if they had completely sacrificed their own existence for a single chance that their children would be able to live lives of ease and success. There was an urgency and direness to their descriptions.

Participants across the study often reported a similar familial origin story. Their parents grew up economically impoverished, and in order to support their families, they migrated north to work in “the fields” picking and processing produce. The lives of their

parents in their country of origin are often limited to short descriptions of a hard existence that was narrowly escaped to come to the United States. One student shared:

> When my parents were younger, they were raised in extreme poverty, hardly any clothes, the food was scarce, and education was not easy to get. When my parents got older, they decided that was the life they did not want to live and came to the U.S. to live the American Dream.

However, despite their escape seeking a brighter future in the United States, their parents ended up not only leaving their lives and families behind, but working in the intense conditions of agricultural labor. In these essays, the fields are represented by students as a necessary evil, a place that gave financial support but also levied a heavy physical and emotional price in the process.

Students reported working in the fields as young as the seventh grade, engaging in dangerous and exhausting labor practices before they were legally old enough to earn money in most industries. Neither participants nor their parents wanted them to work in the fields, but circumstances dictated that they subject their children to these harsh conditions. Even though field labor was most often seen by participants as a temporary means to justify an end by and is not something they or their families wanted for them as a career, it was still something they feared being trapped in. Their parents' sacrifice was a life of field labor in exchange for a better future, while participants were just mere tourists. Students were keenly aware of the fact that they did not have to make the same choices as their parents, but that the path was a distinct possibility if they did not make the right decisions. As one student emphasized, "Seeing my parents in the fields reminds me of how exhausting it is to work in the fields and how I don't want to do it for the rest of my life." This sentiment was echoed over and over again, underscoring their deep gratitude for their parents' sacrifice.

Debt Repayment

Further, there was a strong trend of participants stating explicitly that they needed to repay the debt of sacrifice to their parents. They did not want their family's misery to be for nothing. As a result, students shared that they were expected to work hard in order to lead happy, prosperous lives where college, career, and financial stability were the results that would honor their parents' sacrifices, but most importantly continue with upward social mobility. One student said, "I will show that their sacrifices were not taken for granted and

wasted." Another imparted, "Unfortunately, where they [participant's parents] grew up they were extremely poor and lived in poverty, their goal was to give us a better childhood than what they had, so my goal is to repay them back that favor." Their parents' efforts were not to be squandered and often that repayment was identified as a college degree that led to a good job outside of agricultural work. One student emphasized this point saying:

> My parents are giving my brother and me everything they couldn't have…I always do my best, so that all the sacrifice and effort that my parents made is worth it. I am not going to disappoint them…By studying for a degree, I will be able to give my parents everything they deserve.

This repayment was not just meant to honor their parents' sacrifices but also to provide present and future support for their families. One student said, "I have always had in the back of my head that I wanna give back to my family for everything they have done and sacrificed for me." Another said, "I want to be financially stable to help them [participant's parents] if needed." Sometimes this payment was also explicitly called out as students dreamed and endeavored to provide basic necessities to their parents like housing or making sure that they could take care of them in their retirement years. This also extended to current working realities as students labored in the fields and dream of a better future for themselves and their families. One student stated that:

> While I was working [in the fields] I thought to myself how I want something better that this and now I am determined to do better. Not only for myself, but for my parents who have been through some tough battles. I have a dream that one day I will be able to design my parents dream home.

Ultimately, participants wanted to move into an adulthood where they could be seen as valuable, contributing members of their families, but most especially a source of strength for their parents. They shared a tremendous desire to support their families and be someone that could be counted on. For instance, one participant said:

> Both of my parents were born and raised in Mexico and came to America for a better life. Most of my child hoods was spent with family…who used to live with us. They came to [town name] to start fresh and we helped them out by giving them a place to stay and helping them as much as we could. I really

love to do what I can to help out my family… I want my parents to know that they could rely upon me.

Parental sacrifice weighed heavy on the consciouses of participants. They struggled between the joy they felt for being able to escape the reality of the hardships and struggles that their parents had experienced when leaving their countries, including adjusting to life in the United States, working in entry level agricultural labor, and all of the hardships that came with pursuing their American Dream. Participants felt lucky, and grateful, but also seemed to carry a guilt that they were dedicated to repaying for the blessings of an American life and American opportunities.

Motivation and Inspiration

Participants shared a complex network of motivating factors to overcome the often substantial adversities that they had encountered in their young lives. As is discussed in the Parental Sacrifice section, parents were a primary source of motivations and inspiration, but they also listed a complex web of secondary reasons that overlapped and supported one and another. Family continued as a theme as they identified siblings and cousins as prime motivators, but they also mentioned field work and hope and hard work as things that inspired them to persevere in the face of what may seem like insurmountable circumstance at times.

Siblings and Cousins

While parent sacrifice and service were the primary themes when discussing the centrality of family in their lives, participants also heavily referenced sibling relationships as important motivators and support systems in their lives. Most participants come from large families and often referenced their siblings or cousins, who are commonly thought of by the students in this study population like siblings, *primo hermano/as*[9], inspiration for their future goals. One student shared that "Ever since I was small I've always looked up to my cousins because they have taught me that anything is possible as long as you give it a try." Another participant emphasized how she was inspired and motivated by her older brother who has

[9] It is common for students in this study population to refer to first cousins as "primo/a hermano/a,' treating them as they would siblings. This practice is especially common in numerically large families, which most respondents have said describes their family makeup.

already graduated from a prominent state school and was living a successful life and pursuing a career based in his major. Conversely, another student told a different story of familial motivation saying, “I have an older brother who decided not to go to college. I also have a younger brother. My hope is that he will see that I took this chance for a better career and will hopefully follow in my footsteps and attend a college.” The pressure and responsibility for their future plans and the impact of their choices on their family is ever present in participant responses.

Helping siblings, setting a good example for siblings, or even achieving more than siblings is a prominent theme. One participant clearly stated her responsibility to the family saying, “I have to be an example for my siblings.” Other participants provided a more detailed description of that responsibility. One student said, “I hope that by achieving my goals I will make a positive impact on my little sister’s life. I want to show her that even if my other siblings didn’t continue their education that it is still possible.” Another participant emphasized that they needed to keep the promise of upward mobility that their siblings had broken saying, “I want to be able to accomplish what my other siblings couldn’t do and make my parents proud. I want to be able to help them financially.”

Students named a strong faith in the promise of the American Dream and hoped that they would be the one to achieve it for their families, even if their family members could not, regardless of whether there was evidence in their own lived experience of its existence. Students did not share a clear awareness in the essays of the real systemic barriers that needed to be overcome to reach their goals, and their family member’s failures to elevate through meritocracy were blamed on personal effort or will rather than an awareness of concepts like systemic racism or the mythology of the self-made man.

Fields as Motivation

Participant were terrified that they would end up working in the fields repeatedly rejected this outcome for their own career paths. This fear served as a strong motivator that was regularly referenced across the personal statements. They consistently wrote about not wanting to end up in the fields or how their work in the fields was used as a harsh instructive by their parents as a tool to motivate academic success. The fields loomed in their essays as a cautionary tale whose reality was never far away.

Often as participants in field labor, students were opened up to the bleaker realities of agriculture work. What they saw scared them, and was burned indelibly into their memories. It is not uncommon for people who do not have legal documentation to work in the Unites States to gravitate towards field work as a means of survival and participants regularly encountered both people in their own families and in their work who are faced with this challenge. However, as normalized as it is, the repercussions of living in the United States without documentation can be devastating to watch. One student shared a moment when a co-worker was struggling with this circumstance. She recalled:

> The fields had been home to work but it did have painful memories…my coworker received the news that ICE was coming to [town name] and I felt heartbroken seeing them cry in pain since they didn't want to be separated from their children and family.

Participants across the data were greatly impacted by these moments, causing them to spurn this work, and for some, make career plans that helped to fight against the oppressive forces that impacted their community.

The financial inconsistency and danger of field work was also highlighted as a motivating factor for academic success. This type of labor meant having limited security, and no safety net if things went wrong. Thus, participants who had lived through the unstable realities of field labor were not eager to repeat that path as adults. One student shared, "My mother got injured while working in the fields during the winter which meant my father had to work extra hard to take care of us and bring food to the table every day for our family." This financial reality is tenuous at best and created an insecure existence for participants where the fields giveth and the fields taketh away.

Students reported being explicitly taught to fear the nightmare of ending up in the fields by their parents who used it as a tool to motivate academic success. Participants recalled being taken to work with their families as a way to teach them about resilience, hard work, and as a warning of what could happen if they did not make the right choices for their future. The work was described in detailed descriptions as physically miserable. Participants consistently emphasized that they had learned the lesson their parents were trying to teach them, and it was a path that they did not want to go down professionally. These experiences provided powerful, memorable lessons. One student imparted:

> My parents work in agriculture so when I was of age they took me to work. My first day was difficult. My parents wanted me to experience what they had to go through so I could get a better understanding on why they wanted me to do well in school.

Students expanded this lesson into their academic efforts saying, "…that's why I want to study a career. I want to be someone in life. I don't want to work in the fields like my parents do, they don't want that for me either, that's why I'll continue studying." Painfully, participants equated the labor of their parents as the opposite of a career where they would be considered "someone in life." School was often mentioned as their ticket out of the fields, with participants identifying earning good grades in school as repayment for the collective sacrifices their parents had made so students could have a better life. As one participant shared:

> Since I was young my parents always told me to study hard and get good grades so that I could get a job that pays well. My parents didn't want me to end up like them, they wanted me to be better.

Over and over again, participants echoed a similar theme that their parents wanted a better life for their children than the one that they themselves were living, with the fields often being the site of their misery. As one student recalled when referencing his summer job in the fields:

> Every summer I go and help my parents in the work they do all their life. And they tell me I should continue my studies because they don't want me to end up like them but better. It motivates me to do better and be better for my parents.

Students are keenly aware that their "summer jobs" were a dress rehearsal for what was to come if they did not heed their parents' warnings. As one participant explained:

> Both of my parents work in the agricultural industry. This past summer I worked really hard out in the fields. As I was drenched in sweat, I kept working to earn my own money, and I understand the struggles my parents go through.

Throughout the personal statements the fields served as a powerful motivator, embodying a sort of personification as an evil nemesis that loomed large in their lives. Students regularly discussed how the fields were used as a literal threat, as they were actually taken to work with their families, and also as a warning that the part time agricultural labor of their childhoods would become the full time career of their adulthoods if they were not careful.

Hope and Hard Work

Despite incredible barriers, students were motivated by hope and perseverance. They saw themselves as fighters, underdogs, and winners. As one student stressed, "My life has never been easy and nor do I ever expect it to be; everything I've gone through has shown me how strong and capable I am. I look forward to the future." They were committed, confident, and optimistic that they had what it took to overcome any challenge. Another participant simply said, "I will strive until I reach my goals." And another expanded on this idea saying, "Nothing will prevent me from achieving the goals that I have. I will fight through thick and thin to meet those goals and the dreams that I have. I won't let them [her family] down and I won't let myself down either." They also shared tremendous spirit and pride in who they were, resisting deficit narratives about people who experience financial poverty. One student asserted, "I come from a low income family but that doesn't mean that I have limited opportunities it just means I have to use every opportunity given to me and utilize." And another said, "We don't come from much, but we always make use of what we have…I can do anything when I put my mind and effort into it." These young people were not disheartened by barriers, and still saw themselves as the autonomous drivers of their fate. They demonstrated that perseverance was a strong motivator for a bigger, brighter futures for themselves and their families, striving for, as one participant said, a life were, "I can be someone big not only for me but for my family too."

Many students in the study surfaced the idea that school and schooling were places that motivated them through hope. Often this idea was one that they had learned at home from their parents. As one student emphasized, "I grew up with parents who taught me how to work and how to get excited about my studies." They shared positive experiences about teachers and programs that inspired them in their rural school interactions. One participant

shared a memory of a teacher who helped him continue to dream, even though his goal was lofty. He said:

> My teacher from middle school inspired me to become a professional athlete, he was the one who opened my eyes and made me face the reality that becoming a professional athlete is very difficult and rare. I still remember his specific words, 'It is very rare for you to go pro, but I want you to prove me wrong. If you do go pro I better receive a jersey with your signature on it.

While rural students often have unique barriers that urban counterparts do not experience, they also have unique benefits. As this story supports, it is common for rural students to have strong relationships with their teachers because of the closeness of the community. Those relationships are not just forged for one year, but have strength and longevity as this interaction illustrates when the teacher sets up the expectation that he will be around well into this students' future goals. Another student shared how their strong connections with their teachers as mentors.

"I am inspired by my high school teachers. They [have] taught me the importance of hard work and perseverance." She goes on to explain how in her Health and Occupations course teacher taught her how to take blood pressure and other important skills to prepare her to enter the medical field as a nurse, expounding that "throughout my lifetime I have learned to find mentors. These people are the shining lights to the dark tunnels that help guide for a better future."

Raised by families that often left everything and everyone in their home countries for a "better life," participants echoed a belief passed down from their parents that "hard work" was the key ingredient to success and one their biggest motivators. Students shared a uniform confidence in not only their ability to work hard, but that hard work would see them through any challenge. As one participant said, "Growing up the way we did, I want them [participant's siblings] to know that as long as they try their hardest, they can accomplish whatever they want." This idea of modeling hard work as a means to a profitable end was expanded to showing the greater community that efforts would pay off. As one student said when talking about how his goals would make a positive impact on the community, "Overall, I want to show everyone that hard effort pays off, that pain is transient, and that achievement lasts a lifetime." They saw hard work getting them to, though, and beyond

college aspirations, but moreover it was their responsibility to make their dreams happen. As one participant said when referring to his dream of attending a four-year university to earn a business degree, "I really want this, but wanting it isn't good enough. I have to work for it and working on it comes with barriers, and for me to overcome those barriers, I have to work harder." And finally, another participant emphasized that they were aware that it was a long road to reach their goals but that they were not going to give up saying, "I know throughout my career there will be obstacles, but I will overcome anything as long as I work hard."

These secondary themes underscore the complexity of what drives Rural Latinx/e students in this study to endeavor towards higher education and the careers that help them escape the labor jobs of their rural town. They continued to be inspired and motivated by family as well as the values of work ethic that was taught to them by their parents to help them survive and thrive in the United States through educational attainment.

Post-Secondary Plans

Students were asked to discuss their career and college goals in the second body paragraph of the essay. Instructors were careful to emphasize that their goals did not need to be centered around four-year colleges or careers that could only be obtained from university level educational paths. However, despite messaging that attempted to honor and include trade schools and straight-to-work trajectories, most students shared plans that revolved around higher education.

Table 2

Illustrative Data Reflecting College Plans

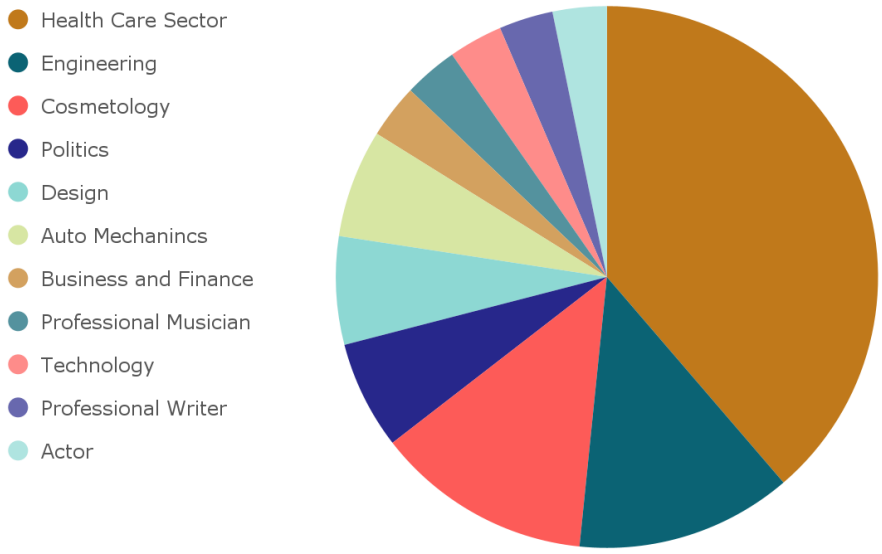
College Plans	**Number of Students**
Straight to Four Year University	20
Trade School	6
"College" with no plan articulated	4
Community College Only	2
Performing Arts School	1

Not Sure-likely college	1

Although participants predominantly identified some form of college as a part of their educational goals, their anticipated paths to higher education varied widely. Twenty students indicated that they would head straight to a four-year university, two said that they would attend a community college only, four said they were generally heading to "college" but did not articulate a specific plan, six students said they would attend a trade school, one said they were heading to a performing arts school, and one student said they did not have a specific plan but it would likely be college. The majority who said that they would like to go to a four-year university typically identified large public institutions located in Washington, but public universities in California, Oregon, and Texas were also named. Students were primarily seeking majors in the health care sector with twelve students saying that they would like to become nurses, doctors, radiologists, anesthesiologists, mental health counselors and physical therapists. The next most popular academic tracks were engineering majors and cosmetology, both garnering four mentions each. Political careers, auto mechanics, and design fields were mentioned as top career choices by two students each. Finally, business and finance, professional musician, tech, professional writer, and an actor were all identified by one student each as career paths. Only two students were totally undecided in their post-secondary plans.

Table 3

Illustrative Data Reflecting Academic and Career Goals



Money Concerns

Unsurprisingly, given the way participants reported their financial realities, money was consistently listed as a major concern when attending college. Financial hopes often rested in outside sources. "We do not come from much, which is why I plan to apply for scholarships, financial aid, and works a full time or part time job as I further my education" was a common refrain. This fear was exacerbated by precarious financial situations as a result of families that relied upon income from agricultural work. As one student stated, "Scholarships would be extremely beneficial because…my father is the sole provider for my family due to my mother's work-related injury. Another said:

> Attending college will not be cheap. I know I can't rely upon my parents for money since they have been taking care of me for the past 16 years. I plan on signing up for any scholarship I qualify for so it can help me with paying for college.

One student flat out said, "I know I cannot rely upon my parents to pay for my college tuition expenses" when explaining their financial need to an audience of scholarship

granters or college admissions officers. Students regularly indicated in their essays that not only were they ultimately responsible for figuring how to pay for higher education, but that their parents had already done enough. This caused them great concern as none shared that they had the financial resources or knowledge to finance a college education.

Staying Close to Home

In keeping with the theme of honoring parental sacrifice, participants chose schools and career paths that honored both their parents sacrifices and the tenets of the American Dream. In order to reconcile these to disparate and competing ideas, participant both endeavored to leave their homes to seek better jobs and opportunities by attending college, while also making plans to return as soon as possible to support their families and communities with their newfound success and status. They felt a tremendous responsibility to their families. As one student said when referring to her college plans, "Education is the reason my parents risked their lives to cross a border." Thus, many students discussed career paths that were solid and financially reliable trajectories from institutions that were well respected but as close to home as possible. One student imparted,

> Radiology has been my future career for a couple of years. Ever since that, I have been researching colleges. One specific college came to mind: University of Washington. I would like to be able to study somewhere not far from home.

In another example, a student shared that she would stay local to attend a community college and then transfer to a four-year university. She also emphasized that she wanted the security of being close to home saying, "I'd like to attend a two-year college to make sure being a nurse is something I want to be and then transfer to a four year university." Finally, for those students who did choose to leave for higher education, they articulated that they planned to have a college journey that is temporary, so that they could head right back to their home community. One participant who wants to become a physician shared, "My plan is to attend University of Washington and the find a job in a clinic in [town near his hometown]."

Careers of Resistance

Most students identified career paths that were relatively stable in career fields of service. These were most often in jobs that they would have had immediate

contact with as patrons in sectors like health care, mechanics, and cosmetology. Often young people, especially those who need to consider limited financial realities, are guided internally and externally, towards careers that will support them, with little concern of luxuries like dreams, happiness, or passion, all of which are likely a menu of choices that their parents had not been privileged with. However, some students chose to ignore the path of the pragmatic and embraced careers of resistance. Careers of resistance are those that may be seen as lofty or unlikely to yield reliable income, especially given the tenuous circumstances and incredible struggle many participants have shared as barriers in their lives. The careers path of resistance explored by participants were incredible in their complexity, and often surprising in their inspiration.

Athletics figured prominently as a career of resistance with three students pinning their future hopes on playing or being a part of professional athletics. One of the students wh shared that his dream is to become a professional athlete was careful to say that "I also need to be realistic" and has also focused on other career choices like coach, physical therapist, or physical trainer. Even with this caveat, he was still dreaming big and breaking the mold. Another student interested in a career in athletics said, "If I could though, I would continue playing soccer and go take my skills to a college that would accept me." And another, states that his primarily plan "will be to go on and play college soccer."

Careers of resistance were sometimes correlated with wanting to study in non-traditional ways or in faraway places. One student, who has only lived in the U.S. for a few years, shared that "At the moment, all I know is that I want to go to a foreign university. I want to study something that has to do with travelling and seeing new places because that is something I like and enjoy doing...Several career ideas I have come to my such as: photography, cosmetology, and stewardess…" This student bucked the idea that they needed a practical job or path, or that they needed to work in agriculture like their parents. They dreamed of an exotic life of travel and new experiences, a luxury their parents who are in the fields could never have imagined. Their dreams are an act of resistance in and of themselves.

Students identified unique sources of college and career inspiration from outside of their rural community. One student explained that he planned to attend college, but to study music. This career path was not typically seen as pragmatic in their rural communities and

demonstrated a resistance to the narrative of safe, reliable employment. His inspiration came from a curious source outside of his family or community, famed 1930's jazz saxophonist and big band leader Charlie Parker. The student explained:

> I have many inspirations when it comes to music, but the one person who stands out is Charlie Parker, an inspiration in the music world. Bird, as he is referred to, wasn't always as good as he was…I plan on getting my bachelors of music degree. Then I plan on obtaining a masters of music degree. I may not become as good as Bird, but I will put in the same amount of dedication and concentration as he did to reach my goals.

In the one of only two references in all of the essays to the COVID pandemic, a student described how their experience redecorating their room after watching home renovation shows during quarantine led to their future career path. The choice to follow a creative, passionate impulse, rather than practical, stable career path is in and of itself and act of resistance. They shared how they came to this decision, "As I created my perfect space I felt so passionate about my project like I've never felt before and I didn't want to stop. This experience made me realize that I was interested in becoming an interior designer." There are no interior designers located in the town where the study is set, nor within a 300 mile radius and the participant has likely never experienced this job firsthand, but still felt inspired to explore this non-traditional path.

Another student was also influenced by sources outside of their community described their political aspirations saying, "I always thought about how much injustice there is in the world and no one or it seemed like no one was trying to fix it…I want to have an education in political science. A major impact on my decision to go into this field are Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez." Working as a professional politician is also not typical, and goes against the grain of what students see as typical trajectory in their rural community. This career choice was not only an act of resistance against the typical path for or rural Latinx/e students, but against systems of oppression.

Students who chose the arts seemed to be the most brazen and aware that they were following a path of resistance in their education and career trajectories. One student who identified themselves as a "first generation kid living in rural Washington," was aware that their path as a writer was not pragmatic, or possibly even seen as valuable, but was still

going to pursue a career in writing anyway. They said, “So many people will be quick to look down upon creative writers and say that they have nothing to offer society...” but that “giving back is my strongest passion and having one person enjoy my work my biggest dream.” This student knows that their path is not easy but chose resistance in the form of embracing their dream of living a life of the mind.

The dream of a humanities focused path was echoed in another student’s goal to attend a performing arts school and have a career as an actor and director. “The arts have been one thing that will not leave my side. I hope to create something greater than myself and leave a legacy, when my parents couldn’t afford one.” Again, students are actively resisting the narrative that they will live their parents’ work lives and are bravely aspiring for goals that are seen as impractical or risky by their community. They concluded their personal statement powerfully emphasizing this point saying, “I saw first-hand standing on the stage the smiles of an audience who was truly impacted by our work. I want to keep doing that. I want to be remembered for breaking out of the shadows of my own self-doubt and sharing with the world something that is entirely my own for others to see and one day, for them to do the same.”

These students all shared a curiosity and bravery in their choices. They had identified numerous pressures and barriers from family and circumstances throughout their essays that could have easily influenced them to conform to a college and career trajectory that was familiar and straight forward. Yet somehow, they resisted safety and certainty, and instead chose a path motivated by their own hearts that was influenced and inspired by figures and ideas outside of their immediate communities.

Service to Community

In the conclusion section of their personal statements, students were asked how their plans will benefit the community. Participants did not struggle with this answer and strongly identified in their essays that their choice to return home as a part of their college and career goals was not just about coming home to the safety and security of loved ones, but also about a greater commitment to doing good. It was common for them to emphasize that “It’s always been a dream of mine to help people.” The majority of the career paths they chose were a complex combination of security for themselves and for their families, as well as an act of service to their rural communities and the larger cultural communities they were a part

of. For some students this meant service to Latinx/e populations or agricultural laborers, but in other cases it was for LGBTQIA+ communities or indigenous populations. Their stories were wrapped tightly in hope and service to their community.

For example, one student referenced service in the sense of the larger Latinx/e community, including her ancestors, important Latinx/e social justice figures, and current leaders. They said, "I have the privilege and responsibility to fight for the people who continuously give their lives for my future." This sentiment is furthered by another participant who said, "To all of the Mexican immigrant parents who silently endure discrimination and judgement, thank you." Another imparted, "My inspiration has come from all of the hard working immigrant workers I have worked with, and a dream to create new laws to protect immigrants during field conditions and a better future for them." And still another student echoed this feeling when discussing her college plans saying:

> The reason my mom continues to break her back under a scorching sun is the reason for our "American Dream." By "our," I mean myself, my family. Every generation of ancestors that make up the beautiful Hispanic ethnicity, all of the Mexican immigrant parents who share my mom's story, all of their children and my heritage. This college education is for all of us.

Students continued this theme, emphasizing that they did not want to help just their local communities, but also aligned themselves with Latinx/e social activists and movements. Despite their rural location they felt connected with other Latinx/e people across time and space. As one student said:

> Achieving my goals would make a positive difference for my community to my life since I want to become an icon to my people and present a good image to the Latino community and follow in the steps of my icon Cesar Chavez to make history by changing the way how to fight for justice that my people have been waiting for.

Another participant shared her commitment to the greater Latinx/e community, including Indigenous people from Mexico saying that, "I have decided to become a congress woman to represent Mexico Indigenous people, immigrant workers in the fields…I want to create laws to help people have better working conditions, create a pathway [to] citizenships, and also [have] orchid companies pay their fair share." Again and again, students named

aspirational careers of service that were community based, but also highlighted the complexity of the needs of rural Latinx/e populations as a third space diaspora with their own unique challenges and identities who in addition to being part of a larger Latinx/e diaspora in the United States. In this way, students are illuminating lives that included overlapping oppressions, memberships, and opportunities that were committed to service.

Not all community service was focused in health care or politics. Students were adept at sharing how their passions and skills could help their communities in less literal ways. For example, one student shared that his goal to be a musician is rooted in service for a global community saying:

> I want to play music for others, music is a language, it connects people. In a world such as the one we live in, where people often put up borders and separate themselves from everything outside, it is important to have something to connect themselves to. I want my music to be something people can connect to, I want to be the one that leaves people in awe…

Another student shared that the reasons behind their dream of becoming an architect and builder were based in building basic resources for strong communities saying that, "After a childhood providing shelter for family members who emigrated from Mexico, one student said that she just wanted to help people "create their safe spot…just like my parents did for my family and I." For this student, there was no separation between the generosity her parents modeled and her future aspirations. They were one in the same.

Only one student referenced a career in agriculture, and in this case, it was a secondary choice to cosmetology. However, when exploring a potential future career in agriculture they emphasized if they decided to work in this sector it would be primarily an act of service to better their community. They said:

> …some agricultural workplaces are toxic, expecting too much for cheap pay, which is unfair. Workers think they can't stand up for themselves out of fear since some are undocumented. My dad and uncles run ranches and I think that what's kind of made me want to go into agricultural management. I want to make sure every single worker feels safe and respected, and feels like what they are getting paid is fair.

Another participant, who identified as transgender in their essay, shared how they would use their career in cosmetology to help people in his community "who may be struggling with their appearance." They go on to say that cutting their hair helped them feel like they were "a step closer [to] being able to look as I want to be seen" and that they wanted to be someone "who people can rely on and trust." This data is especially compelling in that it emphasized a depth of commitment and bravery to serving a rural community where the participant may literally need to fear for their own life and safety, but that they still felt compelled to support those around them.

Barriers to College Dreams

Students in this study regularly named reliance on outside resources that may or may not be reliable, which could be detrimental for the transition from promising high school student to successful college students. For some students, there seemed to be little awareness of this as being a major barrier, and rather just an assumption, or possibly a hope, that the money will just get figured out. As one student said, "The plan is to attend a four-year university, start saving money early before leaving high school, looking for scholarships, and other financial aid opportunities and apply to them and manage to stay away from student loan debt." Conversely, for others, it was clear that steps would need to be taken, but they still seemed uncertain if those resources would truly help. One participant shared, "An obstacle that may delay my career is the tuition costs, although I am currently putting my best efforts into being noticed by scholarship committees to reduce the amount of money I will need to pay through college." For students who did not or could not rely upon scholarships as a revenue source "I plan to work to save money so I can go to college" was a common sentiment echoed by many participants. One participant identified a complex and exhausting financial preparedness plan saying, "My plan to make this [college] dream into a reality is to work as many jobs as I can and set up a savings account, apply to multiple scholarships and grants..." Unfortunately, the choice to work and wait to attend college is often a trap that keeps Rural Latinx/e students out of higher education as it can be difficult to impossible to save enough money to cover all of the costs of attendance before they arrive.

Money worries also impacted where or even whether students transitioned to higher education. Some students abandoned college careers before they've even begun because of the financial realities of college attendance. "I've come to realize that I am not so sure what

I want to do with my life, before I used to want to be in [a] technology career-engineer and build technology for safety and just to get to play with technology that could help humans. But I know money can be a huge obstacle…" One student said that they would really like to attend the four year college of their dreams, but because of money concerns that "Community college is an option for me after high school so I can keep saving up. As I continue my education in college I will keep working…college isn't something easy or cheap and money can be a barrier for me." Participants demonstrated a keen awareness that they do not currently have the financial means to meet their goals and tremendous will to utilize all resources available to them. However, they will need support in addition to will power as they navigate their transition into post-secondary education and financial adulthood.

Chapter V: Discussion and Implications

Findings in Relation to Literature and Theory

This study sought to investigate reflection by rural Latinx/e students on their lived experiences as marginalized youth in order to unearth information about struggle, survival, resistance, and hope in hegemonic K-12 educational systems. It also asked how the lived experiences of rural Latinx/e youth could inform educational practice. Results have shown that story telling pedagogies a part of English coursework are a viable and valuable way to explore the lives of rural Latinx/e youth. Moreover, this data can be used to inform systemic practices regarding literacy instruction, college preparation, and career readiness skills in order to best support all learners.

Summary of Findings

Rural Latinx/e students in this study showed themselves to be a unique group having intersectional connections with rural and Latinx/e communities, but also as their own diaspora containing singular experiences formed by their particular community needs. They, like many people around the world, have experienced tremendous adversity in the form of issues related to poverty. However, they also named barriers more specific to the Latinx/e community like language learning challenges and issues related to immigrating to the United States. These challenges have permeated their identity, and often have caused them to see themselves as underdogs. They proudly shared across the data set that although they came from tough circumstances, they were motivated to achieve stability and status in the form of college education and professional careers. Their motivation primarily stemmed from a deep, abiding love of their parents, most of whom immigrated to the United States to work in the agricultural industry as field laborers. Agricultural work was reviled by participants, both something they pitied their families for having to do and as a career path that they deeply feared would become their own fate. Thus, avoiding agricultural labor has created a powerful motivator for social mobility in their own lives. They saw their parents as the unsung heroes who sacrificed their own happiness for their children's futures. As such, participants commonly shared the idea that they owed a "debt" to their families. They intended to repay this debt of sacrifice and hard work through the attainment of the American Dream, planning to come back to care for their parents with the spoils of their professional statuses. In addition to parents and fear of field labor, participants were

motivated to attend college by the examples set by cousins and siblings, support from school, and a strong belief that they could achieve anything if they worked hard enough. This group of students chose careers of service and resistance for their post-secondary plans. They all identified college going paths that were typically wrapped tightly in stable, financially lucrative careers of service in sectors like health care. However, there was a notable subsection of participants whose plans included careers of resistance in the arts and politics that were riskier endeavors but allowed them to follow their hearts. Regardless, of career path choice, all students easily shared how their plans connected with contributing to the greater good of the community, especially their families and the larger community of Latinx/e people. Finally, even though students named a strong motivation and desire to serve their families by attending college, substantial financial barriers existed for rural Latinx/e students in this study as they approached the realities of paying for higher education.

Furthering and Confirming Theory

Findings furthered and confirmed ideas contained within this study's theoretical frameworks of LatCrit, CREP, and Third Space. Notably, LatCrit and CREP were important lenses to understand integral components of participants' lived experiences as Latinx/e and rural people. However, because of the intersectional nature of rural Latinx/e students' lives, Third Space theory provided a framework to interrogate the unique positionality of the study population, and thus gain greater insights.

LatCrit Theory

A primary theme of LatCrit is centering the experiential knowledge of Latinx/e people (Solorzano &Delgado Bernal, 2001). This study privileged the knowledge of thirty-four rural Latinx/e youth in one high school in both its design and by using the words and writing of participants as the driver of data collection and analysis. This academic inquiry was also created in order to begin to add to pre-existing collective knowledge about rural Latinx/e students, of which there is little academic literature. Moreover, by using student writing as the basis of the inquiry, information was gleaned that complicated notions of what it means to be young, rural, and Latinx/e, from voices inside of the rural Latinx/e community.

Another key theme of LatCrit is the centrality of race and racism in society (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). By and large participants were incredibly aware of

race as a construct and racism as an oppressive structure in their lives. They alluded to it often in their personal statements, even if they were not explicitly calling it out. They referenced their parents proudly, but were also well-versed in the language of pejoratives, knowing that "the fields" and "immigrant" were terms of lower status that were often equated in their community and broader contexts with Latinx/e people. This was seen in not only how they talked about their parents, the great sacrifices their families made, and the detailed descriptions of the terrible work that they had to do, but also in their fear of having to suffer the same fate. More than one respondent asserted that they and their parents wanted them to avoid field labor so that they could "become somebody." Parents used field labor to motivate students academically, and students reported a deep dislike for the practice. By regularly refencing field labor as less desirable than other professions and as a potential worst case scenario for participants' employment prospects, both students and their families helped to build a narrative that field work was also a less valuable and important job. In essence, the message was that the jobs done by participants' own families to support them in their current lives, were the labor of nobodies, despite the very important function they serve. Students also referenced themselves in ways of lower status regularly saying that they "didn't come from much" even as they assured their readers that they were motivated to attend college to be financially successful. They shared details of a collective identify of current and historical struggle in their stories, often starting from deficit narratives about their family origin story and place in greater American society, even as they hopefully braved what was perceived to be an upward social and economic trajectory. As a result, they lived in what Moraga (1981) described as "theory in the flesh," where physical realities created a politic of necessity in which Latinx/e people attempt to bridge the contradictions of their experiences. For example, students were immensely proud and protective of their hard working families, even as they feared and rejected the paths of their parents because they deeply understood the racist and classist subordination of their lives.

Finally, participants also confirmed and expanded on LatCrit's themes of a commitment to social justice and challenges to the dominant ideology (Solorzano &Delgado Bernal, 2001). Because of their personal experiences with race, racism, and intersectional forms of subordination like classism, students often saw themselves as heroes on a quest who had much to overcome and fight for. They shared plans to help immigrant agricultural

laborer's have better and safer working conditions. They were committed to helping their parents who had suffered at the bottom rungs of capitalism. They planned to come back and serve their communities and support their families who did not "make it out." They chose career paths of service in health care and political sectors. These students saw themselves as underdogs and were ready to challenge dominant ideologies by attending college, getting professional jobs, and ultimately disproving the stories and stereotypes they had heard about their community.

CREP Theory

Data also helped to support in building out the burgeoning ideas contained in CREP, specifically the erasure of marginalized populations as a part of the collective whitewashed narrative about rurality. CREP aims to "interrupt dominant narratives of rurality as white spaces and places" (Petrone & Wnyhoff Olsen, p.103, 2021). Homer et al. (2021) acknowledge that Latinx/e people make up a 9% of the rural population and that they make important, although sometimes invisible, contributions to the revitalization and culture of small towns. However, they are still often characterized as criminals in mainstream media and/or treated as permanent outsiders living community lives that are rarely seen by non-Latinx/e residents. This idea is especially true for older rural Latinx/e people, but can expand and impact the home lives of youth too.

Initial research utilizing CREP as a framework in this study has shown that the experiences of rural students can be captured through the dissemination of texts created by rural Latinx/e students in their English courses. Student writing and storytelling provided a window into the adversity, values, and needs of rural Latinx/e students that is not typically seen by people outside of the learning or rural communities in which participants reside. In this study, students shared details regarding the various moments of adversity they faced, the importance of family, college going plans, and their fear of ending up in agricultural work. Without this research, these details would have one been known by a small group of eleventh grade teachers in their school community. Additionally, when student work that invokes storytelling is framed as an important and powerful source of data, the definition of what information and from whom should be utilized to inform school improvement practices is expanded. Because work is being done in this school utilizing CREP, school leadership have decided to add the personal statement to its classroom based data collection practices.

The members of English Language arts team in this high school were a part of the initial stages of thematic analysis. As a result, they saw how utilizing a classroom based-assessment in the form of a personal essay can be used to help guide not only discrete skills like writing, but also be used as a tool to gauge the social emotional needs and post-secondary plans of students. They are planning to form a team to regularly look at this data through the lenses of rurality. Thus, despite CREP's relative newness, this study helped to illustrate the broad range of data collection and data application sources available for educational researchers and systems. CREP is a powerful framework for accessing authentic rural student voice, schooling experiences, motivation, and plans for the future.

Third Space Theory

Latinx/e people, whether located in rural or urban locales, make up a third space diaspora, straddling a middle space between the experiences of the people living in their home countries, while not having full membership in their adopted nation (Dyrness & Sepulveda III, 2020). References to New Latinx Diaspora (Hamman et al., 2002) can easily be conflated with rural Latinx/e populations in areas outside of what is typically thought of as Latinx/e spaces in the U.S. like New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. However, this study's site in Washington State is actually not a new site of Latinx/e settlement and falls somewhere between the historical inhabitation and migration of Latinx/e people and the New Latinx/e diaspora. Braceros[10] from Mexico settled the community where the study is set as early as 1940's due to labor shortages and there has been steady migration ever since (Garcia, 2007), with farms needing more and more labor each year. Thus, the data in this study again highlighted the intersectional nature of Rural Latinx/e students. On one hand, they have overarching experiences with other immigrants, Latinx/e people, and rural populations in general. However, they also have characteristics that are wholly unique to them. It is important to emphasize the complexity of this study population, even as comparisons are drawn that can point to a collective rural Latinx/e experience, in order to avoid building generalized assumptions that may not be applicable to all.

[10] In 1942 the United States was suffering from a labor shortage and created the Bracero Program, hiring millions of men from Mexico to work short term contracts in agriculture and railroad jobs. See https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/bracero-program for more information.

That said, students in this study showed attributes that were specific to their place based experiences and positionalities, supporting the notion that rural Latinx/e youth could be viewed as a third space diaspora in and of themselves. Attributes showed up in three areas: family values, agriculture, and post-secondary plans. While the argument could certainly be made that young people from all areas of the world likely love and care for their relatives, rural-Latinx/e students in this study spoke of their families in general, and their parents in particular, as the center of their lives. They were their support systems, cheerleaders, motivators, inspiration, and ultimately the people whom students felt indebted to serving and honoring. Participants spoke in detail about parental sacrifice and their love for their families in all sections of the essay and in multiple ways, that noticeably differed from their non-Latinx/e classmates. They were also highly motivated by the examples and support of their cousins and siblings. As employees, and not owners, of big agribusinesses in their communities they feared and actively avoided agricultural work career paths, which is something urban Latinx/e youth likely never think of, let alone worry about. Participants all named post-secondary paths that included college plans in order to find safe and financially reliable careers that their parents did not have access to when they were young. Data regarding college plans differed widely for Rural Latinx/e youth when compared their non-Latinx/e rural counterparts. Only roughly 29% of rural students attend college and roughly 70% of rural attendees are white (Dennon, 2021). This is a significant difference between the 100% of students in the study who indicated that their future plans included attending at least some college. Dissemination of data in the study population showed singular characteristics, providing evidence that there is merit to deeper examination of the group as a whole, and separately from rural or Latinx/e students in similar age groups.

Convergences and Divergences in the Literature

Convergences

The review of the literature unearthed studies demonstrating how rural populations are distinctive, highlighting that while there are many commonalties in the rural experiences there were also distinct differences that demanded deeper study to create a clearer picture or rurality as a whole. Additionally, the literature review explored how using storytelling to elicit student voice was a powerful tool to help to mine the authentic perceptions of an understudied population of young people. The data from this study helped to confirm the

literature in the areas of the Complexity of Rural Latinx/e Youth as an Underserved Group and Using Story Telling to Support Humanizing Pedagogies.

Complexity of Rural Latinx/e Youth as an Underserved Group

Findings from multiple studies asserted that rural students are an overlooked and marginalized group despite making up over 50% of the total school going population (Burton et al., 2013; Koricich, et al., 2018). Moreover, rural youth of color are likely to experience increased marginalization in small communities because of their the intersectional membership in categories of historical oppression (Irvin et al., 2016 ; Means, 2018). Participants confirmed findings that supported other rural youth of color as a marginalized population, especially as they named challenges to college attendance. O'Connor et al. (2010) and Irvin et al. (2016) both found that rural students of color faced significant barriers to attending college and were four times less likely to attend a four-year institution than white counterparts.

Similarly, participants confirmed these findings as they overwhelmingly cited the cost of college attendance in tandem with being able to count on little to no financial support from their families as major obstacle to their plans to study in higher education. Additionally, their plans to financially prepare for college almost solely relied upon saving up money while in high school or relying upon scholarships. Both of these options can be unreliable and incomplete funding sources that could contribute to less Rural Latinx/e students attending a four-year university. In addition to strife created by college barriers, they also confirmed Belhadj et. al's (2015) findings that children of agricultural workers experience more stressors than other children because of the unstable nature of field work.

There were also findings that connected participant experiences in this study to Latinx/e youth as a whole. Gandara & Mordechay (2017) asserted that Latinx/e students' issues of racism and poverty as major barriers to success. This study was confirmed as students shared detailed

descriptions of challenges that included financial poverty, housing insecurity, child abuse, caring for younger siblings, mental health challenges, and multiple childhood traumas that led to polyvicitmization, as well as issues related to immigration like language learning, culture shock, and deportation.

Utilizing Storytelling to Support Humanizing Pedagogies

Finally, participants in this study affirmed the use of storytelling as an act of resistance and transformation as they used a school assignment to reflect upon and plan for hopeful future realities, despite the various traumas and barriers they shared (Bruner, 1988; Carter, 1993; Brayboy; Smith, 2021). By deeply engaging in the Personal Statement activity to improve their wiring and analytical skills while creating a story about their life for college admissions officers, scholarship committees, and potential employers, students and teachers were engaged in a pedagogy of love that centered students as the drivers of learning by valuing educational experiences that were relevant to all learners (Darder, 2017; Freire, 2018). In addition to this practical application, they also participated in a moment of pause to reflect on where they had been, while distilling their plans for the future, confirming Salazar's (2013) notion that the some of the most impactful learning is during critical reflection. This study shows the potential for learning experiences in secondary ELA classrooms as a thoughtful, meaningful activity that can also meet the pragmatic ends of building literacy and college going skills.

Divergences

Although there were many confirmations of the previous scholarship on this topic, data diverged in notable ways as well. Literature describing the experiences of Latinx/e youth in general is often deficit focused. Gandara and Mordechay (2017) highlighted low academic performance rates, emphasizing that Latinx/e youth are performing far behind white and Asian counterparts. Calderón & Urrieta, (2019) warned of the erasure of indigenous identity and culture for Latinx/e youth due to the supremacy of European colonization and the myth of the idealized Mestizo. These researchers make excellent important points, and have raised genuine concerns that should be addressed in the attempt to build equitable, inclusive, safe spaces of learning for all students. However, despite all the barriers they had faced, the young people in this study presented a more positive, hopeful, and optimistic picture than is often reported about Latinx/e youth in general. To be sure, they identified tremendous barriers, and some that may seem insurmountable to a casual reader. Yet, they also clearly saw themselves as competent and capable masters of their own destinies. They shared concrete college going plans that would lead to stable jobs, not concerning themselves with the low standardized testing scores discussed in Gandara and Mordechay's (2017) research. They freely expressed their indigenous identity in their

essays, despite the fact their culture has not been embraced in the school or culture at large. One student even went as far to say that "I have decided to be a Congresswoman to represent Mexico Indigenous people." Both of these examples illuminate a hopeful stance that exists outside of the ideas of the mainstream system.

All this is not to say that Calderón and Urrieta (2019) are incorrect in their assertion that there needs to be coalition building and care given to the unique needs of Indigenous students from Latin America. Further Gandara and Mordechay (2017) are also correct to raise concerns about the academic performance rates for Latinx/e youth. Indeed, it is untrue to posit that participants were completely unimpacted by the barriers they experienced at the hands of systemic racist and colonialist practices. Nevertheless, this type of research can also be damaging as it positions Rural Latinx/e youth as passive victims to the structures of white supremacy, erased and relegated to the margins. But data like this can also omit the good work that is happening by youth themselves to combat the effects of marginalization. Students in this study shared a common theme of hope and perseverance. Their plans included not only saving themselves, but doing good for the greater communities at large in which they claimed memberships. They valued family and hard work and were hopeful, purposeful, and mission driven in their aspirations which contradicts one sided deficit narratives and begins to important work of humanizing the complex lives of Latinx/e youth in America.

Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations. This research merely provided a snapshot in time. While every effort was made to include all eleventh grade Latinx/e students in the identified high school, thirty-four total students provided consent to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary, and could have been skewed towards students who were already college bound and felt proficient in their writing skills and future plans. Moreover, if all essays had been eligible for analysis different themes may have emerged. Further, this study gathered data from a specific grade set. Data may have changed if it was collected in middle school, or even from the same group of students next year when they are seniors. The assignment was proposed as a first draft and will be collected again next year after participants have been given some time to reflect and grow as writers. It is common in this school for students to edit and even totally change their essays in twelfth grade.

Location and time period were also limiting factors. Research was conducted in a rural area in Washington State. As has been asserted elsewhere in this dissertation, there is great divergence and complexity to rural towns, so the information gleaned may be specific to place based parameters. Rural areas from town to town, even within close proximity can have greatly differing demographics and school cultures. Further, the essay that the data came from was assigned to students right before Christmas break. Some students were exhausted and were simply trying to get the work done before vacation, which can have yielded implications for quality and participation. Additionally, despite the fact that there was little mention of living thorough a global pandemic by students in their essays, this time period was unprecedented and greatly impacted student attendance, engagement, and learning. Finally, this period was unique in that there was public outcry over Critical Race Theory (CRT) across the country that led to heated debates on social media and in school board meetings. This led to a mistrust in scientific research as a whole, but especially in rural school districts, a fact which may have also affected participation in the project.

Sample reliability is also a potential limitation. Data was collected from a school assignment that was written for an audience of people who grant participants access to colleges, careers, and/or scholarship money. It is possible that because of the power structures at play the information that was shared by participants was biased towards pleasing a teacher or one of the personal statement's intended audience members. Every precaution was taken to avoid bias, including grading essays before analysis, but it is possible that participants still wrote what they thought audiences wanted to hear.

In sum, likely all of these factors have limited the study in some way, although there is no way to tell to what extent. While the aim of qualitative research is not replicability, it is also unclear if this study can be generalized to other populations of rural Latinx/e students at this point because this research has little to no precedence in the literature and has not been conducted at other points in time. Thus, some results may be limited to this study population and may be different if the study was conducted even in the same school with the same students next year. Regardless, because of the dearth of literature using CREP as a framework and/or research that explores the experiences rural Latinx/e students, identifying limitations can help improve this type of study. This project is a good first step in exploring

nascent areas of the literature regarding rural Latinx/e and CREP, and can be built on and improved for future research.

Educational Research in the Time of a Global Pandemic

I would be remiss if there was no mention of the fact that this study was conducted during the COVID 19 pandemic. On April 6 of the 2019-20 school year, the governor of Washington closed schools for the remainder of the academic year. It was hoped at that time that teachers and students would return to classes by the fall of 2020 and resume "normal" operation. Looking back, those thoughts were naïve, but the hope that the massive interruptions caused by school closures would be temporary was an important factor in sustaining families and educators through the many dark days ahead. School did not start normally (whatever that word means anymore) that fall. Instead, teaching and learning was upended as education went virtual. Overnight, schools had to ramp up skills and resources at a dizzying pace. But, even after those resources and skills were acquired, they were often not enough to meet the same quality standards of face-to-face learning There were many days of teachers talking to silent screens of black tabs in Zoom or Google classroom. Most teachers and students tried their best to engage, but the challenges of working from home, access and ability to use technology, and the pervasive fear of an unknown future often proved too much. By spring, restrictions were lifted, and students were allowed to come back into buildings to learn. Thus, another form of teaching was introduced: hybrid. This method meant that educators would teach to students on screens while also instructing students in person, attempting to meet the needs of virtual and face-to-face kids all at once. This proved to be a daunting task.

Schools in Washington returned to in-person instruction this past school year, 2021-22, but all students and staff were required to wear masks, and eventually all school staff were required to be vaccinated, which brought its own set of problems. The present study took place in the fall and winter of 2021-22. There was a lot of fear in the school at the beginning of the year about getting COVID and how things would look after years of not seeing all of the students in person, but overall, it seemed like things were getting better and moving back to what could resemble a regular school year. The biggest concern was "learning loss," because of the massive absences and learning disengagement students had had during lockdown. Educators wondered, could things be any worse than they'd been? At

the very least everyone would be back together again, and that was seen as something positive. But no one in the school was prepared for the condition students came back in. Absences and tardies continued to be a problem because of habitual disengagement built through the interrupted schooling of the past few years. This issue was exacerbated by rampant mandatory ten-day quarantines if someone in a student or teachers' household tested positive for COVID. However, absences were the least of the challenges. Students' behavior had changed dramatically, and discipline reports drastically increased from the overwhelming number of fights, insubordination issues, excessive school vandalism, and disrespectful behaviors towards classmates and teachers. These issues likely stemmed from the trauma that everyone in the school community had experienced over the preceding years of the pandemic, but the causes are still being sorted out in both academic literature and praxis. Regardless of the reasons, from my perspective as a teacher and researcher who has lived through this time, working and learning in schools in the 2021-22 year was one of the most challenging of my professional career and certainly the hardest of all of the years of the pandemic. I cannot yet say in totality how this has affected findings because as of writing this, it still feels like the pandemic is not done. However, it did make conducting a study, from getting students to participate in writing the essay, to having them agree to be a part of the research, to managing my own mental wherewithal as a researcher and teacher, incredibly difficult. I am grateful for what was shared and for being able to glean a bit of information in such an unprecedented and hopefully singular era in the collective history of educators.

Lessons About Rurality

Important learning about rurality has resulted from this study. At the outset, the literature review showed that there was very little in the scholarship about rural Latinx/e people specifically, but also the experiences of rural people in general. This study begins to illuminate the complexity of rural lives in interesting ways. First, it shows that communities of color have unique experiences that overlap, but are also different from the communities of their white peers. For example, while it is common for all rural students to participate in agricultural work, it is predominantly Latinx/e students in this study who work in the fields with their parents as hired labor, rather than owners of farms. This experience leads to strong work ethic and drive in rural students, even if it is just as a motivator to leave agricultural

work. However, it must also be noted that even though rural students in this study were driven and resilient, they also lacked the social networks, financial knowledge, and sometime even academic preparation needed to successfully transition from high school to college to career. This underscores the need for universities, policy makers, school funding mechanisms, and leaders to be aware that rurality in and of itself can be a minoritizing factor that compounds barriers for students of color. If it is possible, and even likely, that rural students will live at many points of minoritization and hold membership in multiple categories of oppression, then what systems of support are provided in their K-12 and higher education paths? Moreover, this study has also shown this population to be special in their commitment to family and community. These students have shown that they have important skill sets, especially in the areas of work ethic, multilingualism, empathy, resilience, and service that make them viable and desirable candidates for higher education and the workforce. Thus, how are they being prepared, recruited, and retained along their educational trajectories so that they can contribute their talents to the world? This question is not easily answered. However, it does provide provocative fodder for future inquiry for researchers and practitioners.

Implications for Future Research

This study highlighted that there is a wealth of information to be gleaned from more deeply examining the thoughts and lives of all rural students through storytelling. Because of the dearth of research in this area, there is a tremendous opportunity for researchers to be on the forefront of examining the complexities of rural students across a variety of contexts. This small study has unearthed a bevy of stories that complicated narratives about rural places and spaces. For example, participants shared stories from the experiences of Latinx/e youth about Latinx/e Indigeneity, trans pride, pursing the arts and STEM fields, all underscored by work ethic and family pride. These narratives run counter to whitewashed, heteronormative stories that position rural people in spaces of deficit and scarcity. They also boggle the mind with possibility. What other ways and areas of rural educational life could educational researchers explore? While the possibilities are endless, I have identified three potential focuses for future study using the architecture of this present study: Focus on Rural Youth of Color, Continued Study with Present School District, Examining Different Rural

Locales. Finally, this study has also shown that there is an exciting opportunity for expanding CREP at the research level.

Focus on Rural Youth of Color

Data from this study showed promise in interrogating the lived experiences of rural students of color. Based on data from this project, questions arise regarding how rural Latinx/e student experiences vary from place to place, especially as so much of the data from this study was focused on agriculture. Further, what are the rural lives of other marginalized students like? Again, this could vary from place to place depending on factors like the size and demographics of the town. The literature asserted that rural students of color are a vulnerable population who face greater academic and social hardships than their white counterparts (Irvine et al., 2016; Means, 2018), making this focus area of rural youth research an urgent and important area of future study.

Continued Study with Present School District

Due to my connection and positionality in the study's school district, there exists the possibility for me to continue to collect data to inform school improvement work. Part of the districts' freshly minted strategic plan is to become a more data informed as a system. Limitations for this research study included no longitudinal data and I am curious as to not only what will the present students say in their personal statements as they finish refining them in their senior year, but also if there are any emerging trends with next year's eleventh grade class. Moreover, what would study participants report if they were interviewed in five years? Research could be conducted to see how and if their plans diverged and what factors may have influenced their post-secondary decisions for college and career. Finally, it is also a goal to normalize and optimize the personal statement as a data collection tool in this school system, and hopefully be able to expand the number of participants in order to analyze a more representative sample of the student population as a whole.

In addition to building out my own personal research agenda, there exists ample possibility to partner with other scholars who are interested in expanding existing literature in CREP, humanizing pedagogies, storytelling, and/or in studying the educational experiences of rural Latinx/e, Latinx/e, and indigenous populations. Partnerships could come in the form of replicating the current study, working together to gather data in tandem using similar methods but different study locations, or creating new projects to interrogate shared

research interests. Moreover, scholars interested in the issues explored in this dissertation can use the results of this study as a model or inspiration for their own research.

Examining Different Rural Locales

Because of the ubiquitous nature of personal statements, it would be easy to replicate this study in other rural locations. The materials for the curriculum are already made and could be readily shared with neighboring rural districts. The study location is in a cluster of small towns, all with different demographics, college and career going aspirations, and total populations. It would be especially interesting to compare towns in a radial structure, first comparing data from schools in a 50 mile radius and then extending outwards. The literature suggested that there are critical differences between small towns, but I am curious if there are also shared similarities.

Moreover, this dissertation sets about exploring the lives of rural Latinx/e students. However, because this population has been understudied, there is no literature comparing the experiences of rural Latinx/e students versus urban Latinx/e students. A comparative thematic analysis of personal statements written by rural versus urban Latinx/e students has the potential to yield data that clarifies the experiences and needs of both groups.

Expanding CREP at the Research Level

This study just began to scratch the surface of utilizing CREP as a theoretical framework. CREP is in its infancy, but this study shows just one of the many ways it could be applied to help gain greater understanding about rural American youth, and as a tool and strategy for educators to frame their work. There are potential opportunities to expand this framework to endless contexts to illuminate the diverse experiences of rural students across the globe. And, when coupled with the natural storytelling and reading instruction that happens in English Language Arts classrooms, could be a regular, pragmatic, non-intrusive way for educators and researchers to engage and learn from students.

Rural students have unique and varied experiences in the myriad of contexts that they live in that deserve time and careful attention from the academy. This is a fertile area of study with exciting implications. The landscape of the rural American student is rapidly changing and growing; thus, it would behoove educational researchers and practitioners to engage in and demand more research that will help support the specific learning needs of the next generations of leaders and thinkers in this country.

Implications for Educational Praxis and Policy

From practicing teachers to policy makers, this study demonstrated tremendous implications for all levels of the educational system. The application of CREP has shown to be a useful framework for working with rural students that can help guide and focus pedagogy for practicing teachers in rural America. College going rural Latinx/e students identified the need to build financial literacy skills, which is something most school could implement. This study also showed that data collection using story telling in an ELA classroom that centered student voice is a viable method for filling in the blanks that quantitative data collection methods that are used in school miss. Finally, policy makers can hear first person accounts of the language and immigration barriers that are holding Rural Latinx/e students back from fulfilling their college going dreams.

Using CREP at a Praxis Level

Practicing teachers can utilize a CREP framework to deeply engage their students in discussions of rurality by providing texts and writing opportunities that center their experiences. And, in the cases where there are limited options for rural focused reading materials, educators could utilize CREP to help students create and disseminate their own texts in the form or poems, essays, and stories. For example, practitioners could use the standard “Where I Am From” poem activity as Behrens et al. (2021) did in her study that helped rural students in Montana interrogate their place based identities. Understanding rurality as a unique construct and experience helps teachers in all disciplines frame conversations and learning in spaces of relevance and applicability, in addition to building deeper relationships with their students. For example, what if the educators were aware of the systemic barriers created for rural Latinx/e students that were unearthed in studies done about access to FFA programs in rural America (Barajas et al., 2018; Elliot & Lambert, 2018)? Could an expanded definition of what it means to navigate rural spaces as a person of color help increase equitable access to places where social capital is built in rural America? These are the questions that CREP can help practitioners answer. In sum, CREP can help practitioners employ more engaging subject matter, increasing participation in pedagogy that fosters the critical writing, reading, and analysis skills that students desperately need intact before they move onto adulthood, but most especially college level coursework.

Schools as Systems of Support for College Dreams

This study clearly showed that students had substantial personal and financial barriers that stood in the way of their college going dreams. They shared that they "could not count on their parents," but also identified that it was ultimately their responsibility to figure out how to pay for college. And, even though participants were willing to be on their own financially, they also had limited financial knowledge. Unfortunately, in the case of Rural Latinx/e students this lack of information created huge barriers that could potentially devastate their college plans. Fortunately, this is an area for which school systems are infinity capable of providing support, but they need to be aware of details of their students' post-secondary plans in order to give them the help they need.

As is named by students in this study who have siblings who did not successfully make the transition from labor to professional work, the obstacles can be insurmountable. Scholarships can help, but often to do not fully cover tuition expenses. The same is true for money saved before attending college. Often, students have to rely upon accruing large amounts of student loan debt to attend to college. And, for students who have undocumented citizenship statuses and only qualify for a state's financial aid program for undocumented students, (like Washington state's WASFA), those dollars are limited to helping with tuition only, and often run out before students complete a degree. Without a clear understanding of these obstacles and how to overcome them, there is a real danger that these students will suffer the same fates of those who have come before them who have not achieved their education and career goals. School systems need to serve as financial literacy partners with students and families starting in grade school on in order to build realistic plans of study that support post-secondary plans. Students in this study clearly demonstrated that they are aware that they want to, and the need to seek more education after high school to transition into professional work. However, it is up to educational communities to help provide the "how."

Data that is "Close to the Desk"

Administrators both at building and district levels regularly seek data that gives them information about what students want and need in their learning communities and beyond. This study showed that an essay that is annually assigned at a key grade developmental grade level, and is already part of the curriculum, could be a tremendously valuable source of data. Most districts, and in particular this study's site, have begun to embrace popular

systems of data informed practices that have permeated educational systems to varying degrees of effectiveness. Unfortunately, qualitative resources that center student voice are almost entirely ignored as viable sources of information. By utilizing data that is "close to the desk," school officials could access information that is more complete and helps to tell the story of the quantitative data they are already regularly collecting. For example, information from this study could help confirm or expand findings from survey data that this district already annually collects to help measure student perceptions about their school experiences.

Finally, using qualitative data that centers student voice at a systems level helps to clarify narratives about students, especially in contexts where the educators and leaders differ culturally from the students they serve. For example, in the school district where this study is set, it can be tempting to make inferences regarding student career interests based on the available data. Students in this district have historically scored well below state standards in reading and mathematics and come with high free and reduced lunch rates. These realities have led to perceptions in the educational community that students may not aspire to attend four-year universities to study in STEM fields, and in fact may prefer technical programs. And while this is certainly true for some students, the participants in this study have shared otherwise, claiming that their primary interest is a career in the public health sector working as a nurse or physician. Both of these career paths require extensive knowledge in science, math, and English prior to college attendance. Thus, while programming in the arts or Career and Technical Education (CTE) is valuable, the aim of the school should also be focused on preparing students for the rigors of college, and being reflective as a K-12 system on how to achieve that goal. This is especially true in this study population of students who identified STEM fields as their primary area of interest. College prep may seem like an obvious aim for secondary schools, but low college going rates for rural students indicate that barriers remain that could be investigated and ameliorated during the secondary preparation level.

Implications for Policy

Rural Latinx/e students in this study were impacted by the barriers they experienced at the political intersection of immigration and language learning policies. And while the present study did not address these issues head on, there is evidence in the students' essays

that the impact of polices from both categories have contributed significant challenges to their lives.

It is paramount that national lawmakers and school leaders embrace recommendations that not only recognize but seek to eradicate barriers created by policies that do not create avenues of success for students who are immigrants or the children of immigrants. While there are many areas to improve policy at the state and national level for rural Latinx/e students, the two that would have the most impact are improved polices around language learning programs in schools and a path to citizenship for undocumented students who were brought to the United States as children.

LTEL's as a System Created Problem

Some of the students in this study struggled to write essays at grade level or named learning English as a primary barrier to their school success. This is concerning because if students do not receive the help they need to build language skills by the time they exit high school they are in danger of becoming a part of 19% of adults in the United States who read at well below average levels (National Center for Educational Statistics). There are complex reasons that Americans are struggling with literacy, but one potential source that is exacerbating this problem is the educational system created issue of Long Term English Language Learners (LTEL). LTEL's are student who enter school speaking a language other than English, and despite spending many years in English only instruction, cannot demonstrate proficiency in English in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

In the school district where the study is set, language acquisition is a common area of focus for learning because many students come from Spanish and/or Mixtec speaking homes. However, even though the majority of students are Latinx/e and there have been many resources allocated to language learning, this high school was moved into "school of improvement" status because they had not been able to make progress towards grade level literacy targets for all students. While "school of improvement status" garners extra support and funding from the state to help ameliorate the problem, it is not a desirable position when measuring the effectiveness of teaching and learning in a district.

The question remains that if a district is aware of language learning needs and has employed myriad strategies and resources to alleviate overidentifying LTEL's, then why is this practice continuing? The answer rests in the historical intersections of politics and

national language learning policies that trickle down to the praxis level. Thus, the reason it is common for teachers in this district to assess essays from students in high school who present skills well below their grade level, is the result of a systemic problem created at the policy level.

LTEL's were first identified in the landmark report Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkept Promise of Educational Opportunity for California's Long Term English Learners (Olson, 2010) when researchers began to notice that students were not making progress in their literacy skills, despite the fact that they had been students in American schools for many years. Even though the report is over twelve years old, students' abilities to read and write at grade level is still a very real problem for practitioners. Moreover, lagging literacy skills becomes a problem for students as they enter college. LTEL as a category as been problematized across the literature because of its oversimplification of a complex group of students (Brooks, 2018), but is still used as a term in this study's setting. However, the question remains how much of what is known in research communities has been applied by school and state policy makers across the United States at the praxis level? There is not yet a definitive answer to this question, although there is evidence from the states which have the highest ELL populations in the U.S. (California, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, Colorado, Florida, and New York) that helps begin to answer this question (Ruiz Soto, et al., 2015). These states all have policies of varying degrees and effectiveness in place to support ELL students as they learn English in public schools. For example, California, which has the largest ELL population in the United States, can point to a historical evolution of policies starting in 1859 when Spanish priests provided bilingual instruction all the way to present time when in 2016 their state legislature passed the Multilingual Education for a 21st Century Economy Act that allows schools to provide bilingual instruction by without parent waivers (Kim & Winter, 2017). Yet, the fact remains that these policies have not diminished the number of ELL students in U.S. public schools largely because of political push back in the form of national and state policies like, including California (Proposition 227), Arizona (Proposition 203), and Massachusetts (Question 2) and the federally mandated Title III - English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement, and Academic Achievement Act English Acquisition Act. This legislation restricted ELL instruction and demanded that schools implement the rapid acquisition of English rather than bilingual education which has

been proven time and time again across research literature to be the most effective method of instruction for ELL's (Rolstad et al., 2005). Thus, in order to eradicate the problem of LTEL's in schools, policies makers at all levels need to engage in deep reflection as to why rapid acquisition English language only policies are still being implemented at national and local systems levels, despite strong empirical evidence that it is not an effective pedagogical practice.

Creating a Path to Citizenship for Undocumented Youth

Immigration issues loomed large for students in this study. They shared stories of familial deportations, encounters with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and their own immigration stories. Because of the fear of deportation, students in this school do not often publicly share their documentation status, but having undocumented citizenship is common for parents and students in this district. This is a substantial problem that creates incredible barriers for students in this study population and beyond but can only be solved at a national policy level.

Currently there are over 11 million undocumented people living in the United States, of which 826,000 are part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients (United We Dream, 2020). Not all undocumented youth apply for DACA, which means that there are nearly a million plus young people living in the U.S. today that are impacted by citizenship barriers. This problem creates tremendous barriers to the upward mobility, safety, and happiness of both undocumented and documented people grappling with immigration challenges. To situate the problem, it is important to note that:

> The overwhelming majority of undocumented children and young adults have grown up in the United States, attended U.S. schools, and lived in the country for virtually all of their lives. Since they were raised in the United States during their formative years, they consider themselves Americans. In fact, most know no culture other than that of the United States, as their ties with their native countries were severed years ago when they left with their parents…Without full legal rights, undocumented youth will be barred from the traditional paths of upward mobility available to other immigrants throughout U.S. history. (Pérez & Solórzano, 2009, p. xxx)

Attempting to support immigrant students through the maze of the United States immigration process is incredibly challenging for people who work at the praxis level. This situation is especially tragic when students were brought here by their families as young children who had no say in the matter, bur live in a terrible limbo of having no country. The laws around granting citizenship for young people, or Dreamers as they are called, via the Development, Education, Relief for Minors act (DREAM), are confusing, dependent on the machinations of the political parties at the time, and have changed eleven times over the past 20 years (American Immigration Council, 2021). Undocumented students in Washington are luckier than most, because Washington state does provide limited funding to attend college in the form of Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA). However, even with college degrees, for many students, the reality is that after they graduate, they will be barred from employment sectors who require them to have a work visa or citizenship, neither of which are available to them.

This barrier is felt keenly at the individual level by rural Latinx/e people, but needs to be resolved at the policy level as educators can only provide so much support for a systemic barrier. Data from this study showed that rural Latinx/e youth already face substantial hardship, and calls for humanizing practices to be implemented in national and state systems of governance. The students in this study make up the fastest growing marginalized population in the United States and are the future of this country. Policy changes have the power to invite Latinx/e students and their families into rural American communities or exclude them to their own detriment.

Conclusion

The outset of this study identified that rural-Latinx/e students were, as a group, understudied in educational praxis and research. Moreover, the kind of data that was typically being collected from standardized tests only helped to reify whiteness as it was often damage centered and focused on deficits in comparison with a normalized standard that could just as easily be correlated with race and socioeconomic status. Further, because of a lack of good information, the collective understanding of researchers, and more importantly, the people who worked day to day as educators, was inferred, and flawed. It was suggested that there was great power in creating a data collection system that was classroom based and rooted in storytelling in order to collect the voices and nuanced

experiences of this population of students. While this study is just one potential application of this idea, it does serve as a strong example of how to collect, analyze, and make decisions about educational practice using classroom data to tell the stories of students who are often unheard. This idea is in its infancy in praxis. Taking serious account of what students say they need and want has unfortunately not been a well implemented best practice across educational systems in recent years. However, this study shows that it is a viable, and important source of information. Student experiences are complex, and it is tough to make generalizations, even amongst groups like rural Latinx/e youth who may seem like they are alike. However, if we divine to use data collection systems that engage in the analysis of storytelling from students, we avoid the burdens of replicability and generalizations as we only need to focus on who is in front of us right here and right now in classrooms. Further, when teachers know their students, what they have experienced, what excites them and motivates them, we can create dynamic educational communities that foster and support deep moments of relevant, long lasting learning experiences rooted in humanizing pedagogy.

Appendix A

PERSONAL STATEMENT ESSAY

PURPOSE: Your Personal Statement should show your audience, whether it be a scholarship committee, college admission officer, person writing you a letter of recommendation, or potential employer, your unique qualities and experiences. Effective essays will paint a clear picture of who you are, your goals and aspirations, and your potential as a student and citizen.

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH: Start with an Anecdote
Begin your essay with an anecdote (small story) about your life that uses vivid detail. The story should be a snapshot of a moment in your life that helps your audience understand who you are as an individual as well as clearly connect to your future goals.

BODY PARAGRAPH ONE-Briefly Introduce Yourself and Share Your Background
Share a little about where you came from, information about your family, your cultural background, volunteer work, or interests. What are the most important details you need to share about your life so that someone gets to know you? Who has helped inspire your future aspirations and dreams?

BODY PARAGRAPH TWO-Discuss Your College and/or Career Goals
Discuss your college and career goals and any experiences in detail. What would you like to do as a career? Who, how, or what is influencing that decision? What are the next steps you plan to take to meet your college and/or career goals after you graduate? Be clear and specific about what you plan to do, how you are going to get there, and any barriers in your way. Remember, this may change and that is okay. Just write your best thought out plan for right now. It is okay if this is just your best guess or dream at this point!

CONCLUSION- Making a Positive Difference
How will achieving your goal make a positive difference in your life and the lives of others? What will you do with your education and/or career? Again, be specific in this section, especially if you hope to use your letter to gain admittance into a university or for a scholarship. It is important to emphasize how achieving your college and career goals will extend beyond just you and into the greater world. Finally, remember that there are a lot of ways that a profession can make a difference. Service careers like nursing, teaching, or farming may have more obvious ways they help people, but careers like electricians, truck drivers, and small business owners also serve very important and positive functions in society.

REQUIREMENTS:
One FULL page in length (NO longer)
Single spaced
Times New Roman Font; 12-point size font
No heading, just your full name at the very top, typed - example: “Personal Statement for Student Name”

Appendix B

Personal Statement Single Point Rubric

Concerns Areas that Need Work	**Criteria** Standards for this Essay	**Advanced** Evidence of Exceeding Standards
	Originality Your essay is an original statement that strongly conveys your individual voice, singular personality, and unique experiences. It is clear when reading your Personal Statement that it is *your* work, without even looking at the name on the top of the paper.	
	Organization Your essay follows the prescribed format, is clearly organized, and easy to follow. Your work makes sense and flows naturally from one paragraph to the next.	
	Content Your essay paints a clear picture of who you are by starting with an anecdote, sharing the most important details about your background, your college and/or career goals, and how those goals will make a positive impact on your community.	
	Conventions and Language Your use of language is vivid, memorable, and clear. There are no mechanical errors. Your Personal Statement is ready to be viewed by stakeholders like potential employers, college admissions officers, or scholarship committees.	

Appendix C

Personal Statement SAMPLE

As I was wheeled into the operating room the doctors explained to me the procedure. To me, they sounded like a broken record: playing the same parts over and over again. We walked into the room and the familiar aroma overcame me. They laid me gently on the cool operating table and goosebumps slowly appeared on my petite legs. The anesthesia falls on my face and I feel myself slowly fading into a bottomless sleep. In the summer of 2014, I had a knee surgery that turned my whole world around. Who would've thought that a surgery so minor could have such a large impact on my life? My athletic career was put on hold and I was devastated thinking that nothing good could come out of this experience. Little did I know I learned and loved a whole new career that never crossed my mind: physical therapy. Without this surgery, I would have never found a career I would love.

I live in a small town in Washington with my little family of four. My parents are educators in SAMPLE SCHOOL DISTRICT and my older sister is currently attending SAMPLE Community College to become an elementary teacher. Becoming an educator runs in my family, but I decided that I want to be the odd one out. After spending most of my freshman year in physical therapy, rehabilitating my "shredded meniscus" as my surgeon would say, I decided I wanted to become a physical therapist assistant. I was inspired by my own therapist Mrs. PHYSICAL THERAPIST. She was the one who worked me back to health and always saw the brighter side of every situation. While my softball team was practicing for a big game coming up, I sat in physical therapy, heart-broken that I couldn't be on the field practicing with them. She told me that this year is just a set back and next year I will come out stronger than before. And that is exactly what happened my sophomore year; I made varsity on my softball team. Without her encouragement and her help, I would not be the same athlete as I am today.

For my junior job shadow, I decided to job shadow Mrs. PHYSICAL THERAPIST. After attending physical therapy for two years, I became fond of the human body. I watched Mrs. PHYSICAL THERAPIST rehabilitate her patients. I saw the smiles she left on the patients when they were one step closer to the main goal: graduate from physical therapy. Watching her rehabilitate her patients inspired me more to become a physical therapist assistant. I have helped people in need my whole life and I believe this is the career that I can leave my mark on patient's lives. I have decided I want to attend a four-year university and major in either Exercise Science or Athletic Training. After my four years, I will attend a physical therapist assistant program to become a certified physical therapist assistant. If I can become half of the physical therapist assistant Jillian is, that would be a huge accomplishment for me and my future patients.

My parents have always helped me out with every favor I had over the past 17 years. My goal is to repay the favor by filling out as many scholarships as I can. My parents are educators in a high poverty town and I know that paying tuition for two kids in college could break their bank. I hope to earn enough scholarships so I will have less college debt to pay off and not rely on my parents for help. I plan on applying on many scholarships sites and fill out all that is available to me. Becoming a physical therapist assistant is just a building block to reach my destination. One day I will become a physical therapist assistant that will make a difference in other athlete's lives. Any money awarded to me is appreciated and will help me get one step closer to achieve my goals in the future.

Appendix D

Personal Statement SAMPLE With Guidance

Start with an Anecdote

As I was wheeled into the operating room the doctors explained to me the procedure. To me, they sounded like a broken record: playing the same parts over and over again. We walked into the room and the familiar aroma overcame me. They laid me gently on the cool operating table and goosebumps slowly appeared on my petite legs. The anesthesia falls on my face and I feel myself slowly fading into a bottomless sleep. In the summer of 2014, I had a knee surgery that turned my whole world around. Who would've thought that a surgery so minor could have such a large impact on my life? My athletic career was put on hold and I was devastated thinking that nothing good could come out of this experience. Little did I know I learned and loved a whole new career that never crossed my mind: physical therapy. Without this surgery, I would have never found a career I would love.

Guiding Note: The student writer starts with an anecdote (small story) about their life that uses vivid detail. The story that the writer shares directly relates to the career path she has chosen. What is a moment in your life that you could "paint" a picture of for your audience?

Briefly Introduce Yourself and Share Your Background

I live in a small town in Washington with my little family of four. My parents are educators in SAMPLE SCHOOL DISTRICT and my older sister is currently attending SAMPLE Community College to become an elementary teacher. Becoming an educator runs in my family, but I decided that I want to be the odd one out. After spending most of my freshman year in physical therapy, rehabilitating my "shredded meniscus" as my surgeon would say, I decided I wanted to become a physical therapist assistant. I was inspired by my own therapist Mrs. PHYSICAL THERAPIST. She was the one who worked me back to health and always saw the brighter side of every situation. While my softball team was practicing for a big game coming up, I sat in physical therapy, heart-broken that I couldn't be on the field practicing with them. She told me that this year is just a setback and next year I will come out stronger than before. And that is exactly what happened my sophomore year; I made varsity on my softball team. Without her encouragement and her help, I would not be the same athlete as I am today.

Guiding Note: The student writer shares a little about where they came from, information about their family, and how they met the person that inspired the career choice they discuss in their anecdote. What important details do you need to share about your life so that someone gets to know you? Who has helped inspire your future aspirations and dreams?

Discuss Your Career Goals

For my junior job shadow, I decided to job shadow Mrs. PHYSICAL THERAPIST. After attending physical therapy for two years, I became fond of the human body. I watched Mrs. PHYSICAL THERAPIST rehabilitate her patients. I saw the smiles she left on the patients when they were one step closer to the main goal: graduate from physical therapy. Watching her rehabilitate her patients inspired me more to become a physical therapist assistant. I have helped people in need my whole life and I believe this is the career that I can leave my mark on patient's lives. I have decided I want to attend a four-year university and major in either Exercise Science or Athletic Training. After my four years, I will attend a physical therapist assistant program to become a certified physical therapist assistant. If I can become half of the physical therapist assistant Jillian is, that would be a huge accomplishment for me and my future patients.

Guiding Note: The student writer shares their career goals and describes an experience that influenced that choice. What would you like to do as a career? Who, how, or what is influencing that decision? What are the next steps you plan to take to meet your college and/or career goals after you graduate? Be clear and specific about what you plan to do, how you are going to get there, and any barriers in your way. Remember, this may change and that is okay. Just write your best thought out plan for right now. It is okay if this is just a guess or dream at this point!

Conclusion- Making a Positive Difference

My parents have always helped me out with every favor I had over the past 17 years. My goal is to repay the favor by filling out as many scholarships as I can. My parents are educators in a high poverty town and I know that paying tuition for two kids in college could break their bank. I hope to earn enough scholarships so I will have less college debt to pay off and not rely on my parents for help. I plan on applying on many scholarship sites and fill out all that is available to me. Becoming a physical therapist assistant is just a building block to reach my destination. One day I will become a physical therapist assistant that will make a difference in other athlete's lives. Any money awarded to me is appreciated and will help me get one step closer to achieve my goals in the future.

Guiding Note: The student writer discusses how their future plans and goals will make a positive difference. They also include specific details about what they need to meet their goals, the schooling they will need, and how financial support would benefit more than just them. Finally, because they are writing this personal statement for a scholarship, they intentionally include a final sentence that speaks directly to their audience.

Appendix E

Student Assent Form

Tell Me Your Story: Exploring Rural Students' Educational Journeys Through Personal Statements

Student Version-Informed Assent for Student Work

Janine J. Darragh, PhD, professor in the University of Idaho Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction (janined@uidaho.edu) and Susan Rose, MIT, doctoral student at the University of Idaho Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction (srose@qsd.wednet.edu) are conducting a research study. The purpose of the research is to explore themes found in rural students' personal statement essays to influence and inform educational practice. Rural students' experiences, aspirations, and goals are an under-examined part of educational research, and this study aims to begin to unearth and share these important perspectives.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a student in rural America who has written a personal statement as a part of your English course. Your participation will not involve anything more than is already being asked of you in your English course. You will write your personal statement essay as you normally would. After it is graded and put into the grade book, Dr. Darragh and Susan Rose will collect your work and analyze it for themes. Your essays will be "blinded" before they are analyzed. This means that researchers will not know your name and that your experiences will stay anonymous. Themes will be identified, and then written up as part of a research report.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and will not face any repercussions for non-participation. You can refuse to have your work be used as a part of the study at any point. There are no names or identifying information associated with your responses. There are no known risks in this study, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when sharing their writing in this way. All essays will be stored on a password-protected laptop computer that is stored in a locked compartment. Once the research study has been completed, the essays will be deleted from that computer.

The findings from this project will provide information about the experiences of rural students to inform educational practices and policies. If published, results will be presented in summary form only.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Mrs. Rose in person or via email. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or about what you should do in case of any harm to you, or if you want to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Assurances at (208)-885-6340 or irb@uidaho.edu.

By signing below, you certify that you agree to participate in the above described research study.

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Tell Me Your Story: Exploring Rural Students' Educational Journeys Through Personal Statements

Parent/Guardian Version-Informed Consent for Student Work

Janine J. Darragh, PhD, professor in the University of Idaho Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction (janined@uidaho.edu) and Susan Rose, MIT, doctoral student at the University of Idaho Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction (srose@qsd.wednet.edu) are conducting a research study. The purpose of the research is to explore themes found in rural students' personal statement essays to influence and inform educational practice. Rural students' experiences, aspirations, and goals are an under-examined part of educational research, and this study aims to begin to unearth and share these important perspectives.

Your student is being asked to participate in this study because they are a student in rural America who has written a personal statement as a part of their English course. Your student's participation will not involve anything more than is already being asked of them in their English course. They will write a personal statement essay as they normally would. After it is assessed and put into the grade book, Dr. Darragh and Susan Rose will collect your student's work and analyze it for themes. Their essays will be "blinded" before they are analyzed. This means that researchers will not know the student's name and that their experiences will stay anonymous. Themes will be identified, and then written up as part of a research report.

Your student's involvement in the study is voluntary. They may choose not to participate and will not face any repercussions for non-participation. They can refuse to have their work be used as a part of the study at any point. There are no names or identifying information associated with their responses. There are no known risks in this study, but some individuals may experience discomfort or loss of privacy when sharing their writing in this way. All essays will be stored on a password-protected laptop computer that is stored in a locked compartment. Once the research study has been completed, the essays will be deleted from that computer.

The findings from this project will provide information about the experiences of rural students to inform educational practices and policies. If published, results will be presented in summary form only.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Mrs. Rose in person or via email. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or about what you should do in case of any harm to you, or if you want to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Assurances at (208)-885-6340 or irb@uidaho.edu.

By signing below, you certify that you agree to your students' participation in the above described research study.

Parent Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix G

Consentimiento informado por el padre / tutor para el trabajo del estudiante

Cuéntame tu historia: exploración de los viajes educativos de los estudiantes rurales a través de declaraciones personales

Janine J. Darragh, PhD, profesora en el Plan de estudios e instrucción del Departamento de Educación de la Universidad de Idaho (janined@uidaho.edu) y Susan Rose, MIT, estudiante de doctorado en el Departamento de la Universidad de Idaho of Education Curriculum and Instruction (srose@qsd.wednet.edu) están llevando a cabo un estudio de investigación. El propósito de la investigación es explorar temas que se encuentran en los ensayos de declaraciones personales de los estudiantes rurales para influir e informar la práctica educativa. Las experiencias, aspiraciones y metas de los estudiantes rurales son una parte poco examinada de la investigación educativa, y este estudio tiene como objetivo comenzar a desenterrar y compartir estas importantes perspectivas.

Se le pide a su estudiante que participe en este estudio porque es un estudiante en una zona rural de Estados Unidos que ha escrito una declaración personal como parte de su curso de inglés. La participación de su estudiante no implicará nada más de lo que ya se le pide en su curso de inglés. Escribirán un ensayo de declaración personal como lo harían normalmente. Después de evaluarlo y ponerlo en el libro de calificaciones, el Dr. Darragh y Susan Rose recopilarán el trabajo de su estudiante y lo analizarán en busca de temas. Sus ensayos serán "cegados" antes de ser analizados. Esto significa que los investigadores no sabrán el nombre del estudiante y que sus experiencias permanecerán en el anonimato. Los temas se identificarán y luego se redactarán como parte de un informe de investigación.

La participación de su estudiante en el estudio es voluntaria. Pueden optar por no participar y no sufrirán repercusiones por no participar. Pueden negarse a que su trabajo se utilice como parte del estudio en cualquier momento. No hay nombres ni información de identificación asociados con sus respuestas. No hay riesgos conocidos en este estudio, pero algunas personas pueden experimentar incomodidad o pérdida de privacidad al compartir sus escritos de esta manera. Todos los ensayos se guardarán en una computadora portátil protegida con contraseña que se guarda en un compartimento cerrado con llave. Una vez que se haya completado el estudio de investigación, los ensayos se eliminarán de esa computadora.

Los hallazgos de este proyecto proporcionarán información sobre las experiencias de los estudiantes rurales para informar las prácticas y políticas educativas. Si se publican, los resultados se presentarán únicamente en forma resumida.

Si tiene alguna pregunta sobre este proyecto de investigación, no dude en comunicarse con la Sra. Rose en persona o por correo electrónico. Si tiene preguntas sobre sus derechos como participante de una investigación, o sobre lo que debe hacer en caso de algún daño, o si desea obtener información u ofrecer comentarios, puede comunicarse con la Oficina de Garantías de Investigación al (208)-885-6340 o irb@uidaho.edu.

Al firmar a continuación, certifica que está de acuerdo con la participación de sus estudiantes en el estudio de investigación descrito anteriormente.

Firma del padre: _____ Fecha: _____

Appendix H
Letter to Principal for Permission to Conduct Research

University of Idaho
College of Education,
Health and Human Sciences

November 1, 2021

Principal Felicie Becker,
I am writing this letter to request permission to work with Austin Foglesong and April Murray on a project exploring the themes found in rural Latinx/e students personal statement essays to influence and inform educational practice.

If granted permission, I will systematically analyze students' work to track patterns and themes in learning. Teachers will remove all student names/identifying information from the work before giving copies to me, so students will remain anonymous in the analysis stage of research. Moreover, should there be any public dissemination of this scholarship (e.g. journal article, conference presentation), the name of the school, district, etc. will not be disclosed.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns, and I thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Susan Rose, MIT, NBCT
ELA Literacy Coach
Quincy High School
srose@qsd.wednet.edu

I, _____ give my permission for Susan Rose to conduct the research project *"Tell Me Your Story: Exploring Rural Students' Educational Journeys Through Personal Statements"* with teachers Austin Foglesong and April Murray.

_____

(Signature and date)

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