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What Facilitates and Supports Political Activism by, and for, Undocumented Students?

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What Facilitates and Supports Political Activism by, and for, Undocumented Students?

Brad Forenza[1] · Briana Rogers[1] · David T. Lardier[2]

Abstract Historically, undocumented students have been unable to attend public and private institutions of higher education in the United States. Lack of citizenship and/or financial aid precludes many from ever applying to college or other post-secondary institutions. This can create feelings of oppression, stigmatization, and/or inferiority for undocumented youth, who had no say in their ever coming to the United States. In the absence of a sustainable federal law that facilitates higher education attainment for this population, some states have enacted their own permissive policies. The present study utilizes a critical consciousness framework and a constant comparative approach to explore one permissive policy in a focal state. To this end, the authors attempt to answer the question of what motivates undocumented students, through the lens of critical consciousness, to engage in political activism, and what is the role of adult-allies? Findings support and extend our understanding of critical consciousness dimensions, vis-à-vis the revelation of ten themes and subthemes unique to this sample. Implications for policy, practice, and future research are also discussed.

Keywords DREAMers · In-state residency tuition · Critical consciousness · Higher education · Organizing

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Introduction

The livelihoods of racially and ethnically marginalized students in the United States are currently being challenged and negotiated amidst White, Anglo, patriarchal, nationalist ideologies, which are promulgated through broader U.S. narratives and more specifically U.S. educational institutions. These ideologies are particularly detrimental to undocumented students. Undocumented students and young adults of color are confronted with myriad oppressive-racialized social stressors, which include unemployment, criminalization, deportation and educational inequity (DeAngelo et al. 2016; Mangual Figueroa 2017; McCorkle and Bailey 2016; Nguyen and Hoy 2014). The accumulation of these lived realities constructs among undocumented students feelings of oppression, stigmatization, and inferiority. Yet, despite aversive rhetoric, the number of undocumented immigrants has grown considerably in the U.S. during the last two decades (Krogstad et al. 2016).

Since 1990, the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has grown from 3.5 million to approximately 11.1 million (Krogstad et al. 2016). In 2014, 7.3% of youth who were enrolled in K-12 public and private schools had at least one undocumented parent (Passel and Cohn 2016). Of those families, 5.9% (3.2 million) of children were U.S.-born, and therefore citizens at birth; whereas, 1.3% (725,000) were undocumented themselves (Passel and Cohn 2016). Due to either one parent's lack of citizenship or lack of citizenship of the child, undocumented students are limited in their access to a variety of social resources, which could facilitate upward social movement. Moreover, a disproportionate number of undocumented students do not graduate from high school. They are often "pushed-out" by unfair federal, state, and local policies. And even fewer undocumented students pursue higher education, as they are largely excluded from both public and private colleges and universities in the U.S. Some are precluded from ever applying to college in the first place, due to lack of citizenship and, in-turn, access to financial aid (Perez 2014).

Although studies have started to tease out the impact that documentation status has on students' higher education attainment, few studies have explored the activism of undocumented students and the ways in which activism can empower and support them (DeAngelo et al. 2016). In the absence of a sustainable federal law that facilitates higher education attainment for undocumented youth, the current study takes up the task of asking what motivates, through critical consciousness, undocumented students to engage in political activism, and what is the role of adult-allies? Paulo Freire's (1968 [2014]) conjectures on critical consciousness provide a promising framework for understanding this motivation, and the ways in which undocumented students, young adults, and adult allies engage in political activism to both promote and maintain state policies favorable to educational equity and attainment.

Literature Review

The present study reviews the extant literature on the challenges of undocumented students in the U.S., the critical importance of the DREAM Act for these students, the role of allied adult-activists, and lastly an overview of critical consciousness and

its role in empowering undocumented students and their adult allies. Through this research, we will develop a better understanding of the manifestation of critical consciousness that Freire and other scholars (e.g., Carmen et al. 2015; Christens et al. 2016; Diemer et al. 2015; Diemer and Rapa 2016; Godfrey and Wolf 2016) have shown to be important among oppressed groups who are fighting against the status quo. In addition, we will uncover, through this study, the critical role of student and adult ally activism in promoting and maintaining policies that allow undocumented students to access higher education.

Challenges for Undocumented Students

Annually, millions of students graduate from high schools across the United States. Currently, there are approximately 250-million undocumented students pursuing higher education degrees in the U.S. (Teranishi et al. 2014). For most students, graduating from high school is a time to celebrate and prepare to move on to the next chapter in one's life, whether that means postsecondary education or entering the workforce; however, this event is less monumental for undocumented students, as their future and the opportunities available to them narrow significantly (Perez 2014). Fewer than 10 percent of these students are able to attend college—not due to a lack of desire for a college education, but due to an inability to afford college tuition or to meet legal residency status requirements of some colleges (Bruno 2014; Kim and Díaz 2013). Undocumented students and young adults who plan to pursue postsecondary education are hindered by the fact that they are not legal residents of the state in which they live, forcing them to pay out-of-state tuition rates, and be withheld from qualifying for federal or state financial aid (Bruno 2010; DeAngelo et al. 2016; Forenza and Mendonca 2016).

In June 1982, the Supreme Court issued its *Plyer v Doe* ruling, a landmark decision holding that states cannot constitutionally deny students a free public education on account of their immigration status (*Plyer v Doe* 1982). According to this ruling, denying undocumented students a formative education would create a lifetime of hardship and a permanent underclass (Nguyen and Hoy 2014). The *Plyler v. Doe* decision changed the lives and futures of countless undocumented children and youth who entered this country through no choice of their own, by giving them an equal opportunity and a free primary school education. To be clear, however, *Plyer v Doe* only grants this equal opportunity until the completion of high school. Despite this landmark ruling, undocumented students are confronted with a major roadblock when attempting to pursue a college degree. No matter how qualified a student they are, their undocumented status hinders them from moving forward with their education. Even when admission to a college or university is obtained, undocumented students are often ineligible for federal financial aid under the Higher Education Act of 1965, as well as ineligible for state financial aid or in-state tuition (Kim and Díaz 2013). These undocumented students not only live in fear of deportation, but also face inequities in their pursuit of higher education (Bruno 2010; DeAngelo et al. 2016; Forenza and Mendonca 2016; Gonzales 2008; Kim and Díaz 2013).

Current Political Context and the DREAM Act (Un)realized

Currently, 18 states have enacted permissive legislation providing in-state residency tuition (IRT) benefits to undocumented students (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015; NILC 2014). As a result of these local policies, community colleges and public universities are serving an important role in educating, undocumented students through each of the enabling states (Perez 2014). However, several states continue to allow colleges to deny undocumented students access to higher education (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015; NILC 2014). In an effort to create a pathway to higher education, and ultimately citizenship, former-President Barrack Obama proposed the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act (Morales et al. 2011).

The DREAM Act refers to federal legislation that would eliminate the penalization of undocumented graduating seniors who came to this country by no choice of their own. Under this legislation, undocumented students would qualify for state financial aid and in-state residency tuition rates. The prospective DREAM Act would also provide a path for undocumented youth to gain legal status in the United States (Mahony 2012), as well as cultivating, educating and equipping the maximum number of gainfully employed individuals and taxpayers. Although the benefits in passing a federal DREAM Act are innumerable, political and social movements for passing the DREAM Act have garnered little traction and been met with consternation (DeAngelo et al. 2016).

In the face of slowed federal movements to pass the DREAM Act, and trepidation from many U.S. states to enact legislation providing IRT benefits to undocumented students, former-President Barrack Obama enacted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) through an executive order (Gonzales and Bautista-Chavez 2014; Muñoz 2013). This policy has had many positive impacts for the lived realities of undocumented youth, students, and young adults. Through DACA, undocumented children brought to the U.S. before the age of 16 are temporarily authorized to live and work in the U.S., without fear or threat of deportation for a two-year, renewable period (Bruno 2013; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2015). As of 2015, over 700,000 undocumented individuals had applied for DACA, with 86% of applicants (640,000) receiving benefits through this executive order (Martin 2017; Teranishi et al. 2014). In spite of the staggering benefits DACA has provided to undocumented students, its fate remains unknown in the context of the new presidential administration (Martin 2017).

Federal programs such as DACA and the adoption of IRT benefits by permissive U.S. states has allowed undocumented students to access higher education; however, there continue to be many undocumented students and young adults who are ineligible to apply to, or gain access to, colleges and universities. Many students who progressed through the U.S. public school system and were eligible for the DREAM Act and DACA continue to exist in limbo, as innumerable obstacles face these students as they attempt to pursue higher education in today's political and social climates. In addition, those who do make it into college are further confronted with losing scholarships, due to their legal status in the U.S., discrimination, (neo)racism (Kim and Díaz 2013), and poor academic outcomes,

which is largely due to being poorly prepared for academic life in college (DeAngelo et al. 2016).

In recent years, it is unsurprising that undocumented immigrants have come out of the darkness to advocate for opportunities—like local IRT policies—that seemed impossible to previous generations of undocumented students. This advocacy happens in spite of the known risk of deportation by publicly disclosing their undocumented status to the political world (Galindo 2012). From a scholarly perspective, however, little is known about what facilitates and supports political activism by, and for, undocumented students and young adults (DeAngelo et al. 2016).

Activism Among Undocumented Students

Aristotle famously discussed that humans are political animals (Aristotle 1948 [350 B.C.E.]), and that by our very nature we engage in political activity, which impacts our well-being (Klar and Kasser 2009). Over the past 60 years, college campuses have been a main space for activism, particularly among majority students (e.g., White, heterosexual, U.S. Citizens). Although today's young adults are less likely to be civically engaged when compared to previous generations (Flanagan and Levine 2010), they are more likely to engage in activism than older Americans (Muñoz 2013). Yet, unlike decades past, undocumented students, in particular, have been observed to participate in high rates of civic action, as a source of hope for social and academic policy change (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2015). Through such social activism undocumented students have taken an important role in challenging society against systemic marginalization and oppression.

Undocumented students are forced to navigate a precarious space between engaging in social change and risking their own deportation and further oppression. However, despite these risks, undocumented students are identified as a main source in the DREAMer movement, as well as in-state residency tuition legislation (DeAngelo et al. 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2015). Pairing with local cultural organizations and local-state policy makers, undocumented students have made fundamental legislative changes across the United States. For instance, in 2001, allied with Chicano/a and Latino/a policy makers, undocumented students passed AB540, California's IRT bill (Kirshner 2015) and HB 1403, Texas's IRT bill (Negrón-Gonzales 2014). More recently in 2010, the DREAM Act 5 group wrote *testomonios*, or "coming out" statements, about their own undocumented status, which, through these letters, informed then-President Barrack Obama about their migration to the U.S. and their reasoning for civil disobedience (Galindo 2012; Kirshner 2015). These young adults, and other undocumented students like them, forged an identity of '*undocumented and unafraid*' (Galindo 2012; Kirshner 2015; Zimmerman 2011). No longer did these students wish to remain in the shadows; hence, undocumented students have attempted to revive *Plyler v. Doe* and fight for the right to public education, and extend this right to higher education.

Studies point out that undocumented students who engage in civic activism, despite frightening and harsh realities of deportation or racialized aggression, demonstrate hopefulness for their future (DeAngelo et al. 2016; Huber and Malagon

2007). As Gonzales (2008) discussed, exclusion from larger mainstream society and inclusion with others who can identify one's personal struggle, shapes student activists' political identity and consciousness, as well as their sense of hopefulness, and in-turn drive toward social change. Therefore, undocumented students find, among the collective, a commonality in their ability to broker their "illegality" with their drive to break *the code of silence* and disclose their own (and families') undocumented status, in order to garner important social resources for systemic and academic change (Negrón-Gonzales 2014). These personal-collective relationships, and the navigation between internalized perceptions and disclosing sacred parts of their personal identity, play an instrumental role in developing and maintaining oppositional consciousness and critical thinking, which is necessary for social activism and change (Gonzales 2008, 2011). Hence, undocumented students' who engage in civic activism have the most at stake, as they are likely targets for deportation due to disclosing their legal status. However, these undocumented student activists realize and acknowledge that they need to be resolute in their response and that they can only do so through the unity of exclusion and inclusion.

Adult Allies. Adult ally activists can be equally instrumental in not only advocating for larger systemic changes among undocumented individuals (Mangual Figueroa 2017), but also in empathetically and practically assisting undocumented students and young adult activists in understanding and constructing academic and social changes (DeAngelo et al. 2016). Stanton-Salazar (2011, 2016) described that such adult allies can help young adults *read their worlds* and develop awareness of inequalities within their social system. Therefore, through shared ethnic-racial identity and likely citizenship status, as well as communal respect, adult ally activists can be important and effective resources in developing, maintaining, and augmenting undocumented student and young adult activists' voices.

DeAngelo et al. (2016) articulated that adult-allied actors can be champions for/ with DREAMers, and empower these undocumented students by providing important bridging and bonding relationships to additional socio-cultural resources. The existing research indicates that teachers, school counselors, and college or university faculty members, as well as other adult-allies within the community, can create and maintain social spaces in which undocumented students safely disclose their citizenship status and in-turn develop awareness, through critical discussions, on how to embark upon larger academic and social change (Mangual Figueroa 2017). In addition, adult-allies may also have knowledge about the complex issues facing the community, which can help further develop these critical conversations, bring about greater awareness and power, and assist undocumented students in *reading their worlds* (Mangual Figueroa 2017). Undocumented students and young adults may, therefore, through these critical interactions and supportive relationships, begin to develop critical consciousness or how to "critically analyze their social conditions and act to change them" (Watts et al. 2011, p. 44). This, in turn, allows these same undocumented students to become aware of such systemic inequalities and, through this, "their identities, goals, moral and political beliefs, feelings of agency or alienation, and civic behaviors tend to unfold" (Christens et al. 2016, p. 15).

Taken together, the process and development of undocumented student activism is rarely studied and in need of further exploration (DeAngelo et al. 2016; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2015). Moreover, the role of adult allied activists has been given scant attention and is consequently deserving of further investigation (DeAngelo et al. 2016). Yet, despite such limitations, several pieces of information can be learned from the literature on undocumented student activism:

1. activism positively impacts one's sense of self and overall well-being (Suarez-Orozco et al. 2015);
2. activism creates a strong bond among groups members and between young adults and adult-allies (Kirshner 2015; Rhoads 1997, 1998);
3. activism augments students' sense of empowerment and their perceived ability to be a leader in social change (DeAngelo et al. 2016; Forenza and Mendonca 2016; Galindo 2012).

Considering what is known and what is left to be learned about activism among undocumented students and adult-allies, critical consciousness offers a useful framework through which to explore these processes.

Conceptual Framework

Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire described critical consciousness (*conscientização*) as a form of dialogue, action, and reflection, which moves toward critically analyzing and understanding one's social world in order to effectively create change against the bourgeois elite or one's oppressor (Freire 1968[2014]). Through critical consciousness, individuals become aware of their oppressor/oppression and the perpetuation of their subjugation (Freire 1968[2014]). In essence, critical consciousness is a process that explains how and why oppressed populations engage in systemic change efforts.

Scholars of critical consciousness have discussed that this concept is comprised of three major dimensions: (1) critical reflection, (2) critical motivation, and (3) critical action (Christens et al. 2016; Diemer et al. 2015, 2016; Watts et al. 2011). *Critical reflection* refers to one's awareness and questioning of the status quo, and developing awareness of power and privilege (Christens et al. 2016; Watts et al. 2011). For instance, critical reflection would involve a high school graduating senior who, after beginning the application process of applying to a postsecondary institution, realizes she or he has no social security number. In this case the graduating senior may realize, as Diemer and Rapa (2016) contended, that the government, because of not being acknowledged as a U.S. citizen, was less invested in people with lower power (i.e., *critical reflection*). *Critical motivation* refers to one's analysis of problems or one's perceived ability to affect change (Diemer et al. 2015; Diemer and Rapa 2016; Diemer et al. 2016). Critical motivation occurs when this hypothetical student allows their questioning of the problem to push them to

solve it. Through critical awareness of structural inequality, oppressed individuals begin to develop a sense of agency, through the collective, to solve the problem (Diemer et al. 2015, 2016), which, as Freire contended, is also a manifestation of critical hopefulness (Freire 1968[2014]). Lastly, *critical action* refers to the actual response or propensity to engage in change-oriented endeavors (Diemer et al. 2015, 2016; Watts et al. 2011). Critical action would occur when the individual takes active steps to change this inequity (Watts et al. 2011). For instance, Diemer and Rapa (2016) displayed among a sample of 2811 ninth graders that awareness of structural causes of oppression and social disparities was associated with perceptions among youth that the government was less invested in people with lower power (i.e., *critical reflection*), which in turn was associated with political efficacy (i.e., capacity to engage in social change) and engagement in social action. Critical consciousness is, therefore, both a process and a tool for liberation and empowerment among marginalized urban youth (Hipolito-Delgado and Zion 2015).

Critical Consciousness and Activism. Student and youth activism is part and parcel to critical consciousness. Camino and Zeldin (2002) stated that youth or student organizing is "the intent to fight for rights and reform by addressing explicitly 'political' issues through direct action and advocacy" (p. 217). Previous studies have suggested that critical consciousness, through activism, has numerous developmental benefits such as producing psychological empowerment (Campbell and McLean 2002), creating a sense of physical and psychological safety, increasing emotional support, and providing access to supportive-others, whether adult-mentors or individuals with similar lived experiences (Christens et al. 2016; Ginwright and James 2002; Klar and Kasser 2009). In addition, critically conscious individuals involved in activism are likely to experience a greater sense of communitarianism and support among the collective (Christens and Kirshner 2011; Kirshner 2015), as well as a greater commitment to citizenship (Diemer and Rapa 2016; Klar and Kasser 2009; Westheimer and Kahne 2004).

All told, critically conscious young adults and students, through activism, develop a broader set of critical perspectives on their social system and the oppressive nature of their lived realities (Watts et al. 2011). These individuals also transcend self-interest and work for/with the collective toward larger group interests (Martinez et al. 2012). Yet, there is limited understanding about the process of activism, through critical consciousness, among undocumented students and young adults. This is particularly salient because past experiences with discrimination and fear of deportation, or exposure of alien status, may discourage undocumented students from pursuing higher education and engaging in activism (Pérez et al. 2010). However, it is evident that psychological empowerment plays a vital role in the continuum of being politically active and advocating for equal educational rights of undocumented minors and students.

Research Question and Aim

The aim of this research is to use critical consciousness as a conceptual framework to better understand the process of political activism among undocumented students. While prior research has explored undocumented students through a deficits-lens

(what they are incapable of), this original research effort uses a strengths-perspective to explore processes of a successful statewide IRT initiative. Therefore, we sought to answer the question: what motivates undocumented students, through the lens of critical consciousness, to engage in political activism, and what is the role of adult-allies?

Method

Research Setting and Sample

Participants were recruited through IRT-NOW (a pseudonym), an organizationally based movement in a focal state. The movement advocated in-state residency tuition rates and financial aid benefits for undocumented students. The efforts of IRT-NOW were supported by other formal and informal groups throughout the state (including the state's Legislative Latino Caucus). The efforts of IRT-NOW culminated in enabling legislation that was passed by both houses of the state's legislature, and signed into law by its governor, in December 2013. Soon after implementation of the enacted policy, the IRT-NOW movement disbanded, but some its allied organizations (including the state's Legislative Latino Caucus) persisted.

The sample is comprised of 12 in-state residency tuition (IRT) advocates. These advocates were both student beneficiaries of the state's enacted IRT policy ($n = 5$), as well as adult advocates who came to IRT-NOW vis-à-vis their affiliation with the state's Legislative Latino Caucus ($n = 7$). Student advocates (also beneficiaries of the enacted IRT policy) were recruited into the study via a flyer that a graduate assistant distributed at a statewide educational conference for undocumented students (convenience sampling). Interested young adults were asked to contact the graduate assistant, per contact information provided on the flyer. This yielded an initial sample of six young adults, though one ultimately decided not to participate in the study ($n = 5$). A year after initial recruitment, and in an effort to expand the sample, the PI contacted the state's Legislative Latino Caucus in search of additional participants. Through the caucus chair's campaign office, additional IRT advocates were emailed a recruitment flier, through which they were asked to contact the PI. Seven adult advocates responded in the affirmative. All adults were successfully interviewed ($n = 7$), which yielded a total of 12 research participants. Per IRB approval, all participants were at least 18 years old, all participants offered written consent, and all participants were remunerated \$20 for their time.

Demographically, the full sample was male ($n = 8$) and female ($n = 4$). The initial student beneficiaries ($n = 5$) were roughly 23 years old; the allied adults who were sampled a year later ($n = 7$) were roughly 38. Per IRB approval, citizenship status was not be an explicit part of sampling criteria, though all young adults ($n = 5$) self-disclosed that they had been undocumented during their IRT advocacy. Participants identified as Peruvian ($n = 5$), Puerto Rican ($n = 2$), Mexican ($n = 2$), and Cuban, Dominican, or Honduran ($n = 3$).

Data Collection and Analysis

All participants were interviewed in-person, at a single-point in time (cross-sectional research), by the research assistant or the first-author. Each interview lasted approximately 60 min each. The structured interview guide probed each dimension of critical consciousness. For example, questions like "What communities do you consider yourself part of, and what problems do those communities face?" probed critical reflection. "How and why did you become politically involved?" probed critical motivation. Finally, "Why do you stay involved in political causes (e.g. other immigration reform efforts)?" probed critical action. Conducting in-depth structured interviews that focused on the process of IRT activism, through tenants of critical consciousness, among undocumented students and adult allies, was deemed an appropriate method of garnering data and increasing the rigor of the study (Brod et al. 2009). Using structured interviews allowed the research team to examine the lived experiences of undocumented students and adult allies, through the tenants of critical consciousness, while simultaneously understanding the breadth and depth of their activism. The authors acknowledge that a single interview limits the depth of understanding into the lived experiences of these students and adult activists; however, as per the organizational affiliations (IRT-NOW and the Legislative Latino Caucus), these students and adults provide unique insight and information on activism, which may help inform critical consciousness theory and research on how/why undocumented students engage in activism.

Per full IRB approval, and because of the sensitive nature of documentation and citizenship status, interviews were not audio or video recorded. Consequently, the respective interviewers (research assistant and first-author) had to take real-time notes during each interview. Although, note taking is not ideal, when compared to a tape recorder, it is nonetheless considered an adequate method of data collection, particularly when notes are thorough and comprehensive (Patton 2002). Moreover, to capture quotes that are particularly important and insightful, each response should be repeated back to participants to ensure accuracy (Patton 2002), which for the current study was done by the research team members. However, the authors concede that the nuances of certain responses may have been lost during this process (this and other limitations are discussed more later).

Although interview questions were based in the dimensions of critical consciousness, the present study used a constant comparative approach to assess not only if quotes were present that fell within the dimensions of critical consciousness, but also to reduce these data to record additional emergent themes. Constant comparative analyses is an iterative process of reducing data through recording (Glaser 1965) and reorganizing emerging and embedded themes (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Therefore, the basic defining feature of constant comparative approaches is that "while coding an indicator for a concept, one compares that indicator with previous indicators that have been coded in the same way," (LaRossa 2005, p. 841). Following the initial interviews with students ($n = 5$), the research assistant and first-author de-identified participant responses and copied them into an Excel spreadsheet for an initial round of open coding. The spreadsheet functioned as a saturation grid. Per Brod et al. (2009), a saturation grid is utilized to ensure that all

themes have been exhausted. By the research assistant and first-author's estimation, all themes related to critical consciousness had *not* been exhausted. The next year, additional young adult advocates/IRT beneficiaries were recruited into the sample, but to no avail (another limitation of the study). At this point, the sample was expanded to include adult advocates ($n = 7$).

Following in-depth, structured individual interviews with adult advocates, data were analyzed for the full sample ($N = 12$). Again, data were organized in a saturation grid by participant (rows of the grid) and by question (columns of the grid). Members of the research team immersed themselves in open-coding. Then additional themes and concepts based in critical consciousness were fleshed out, extending the existing theory into new domains (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Merriam and Tisdell 2015). The research team recorded their preliminary findings and processes in the form of memos, which is consistent with this constant comparative methodology and a strategy to ensure consistency and dependability in data findings (LaRossa 2005; Merriam and Tisdell 2015). After several rounds of coding, the team met to discuss their independent analyses. At this meeting, it was determined that saturation of themes occurred at approximately eight to 10 cases. Ultimately, the first-author and a qualitatively trained graduate assistant (the second author) reconciled differences around the identification and organization of themes.

Researchers' Positionality

Truly rigorous qualitative research hinges on the author's ability to be reflexive about his or her role in the study. No author was personally affiliated with the IRT-NOW movement, so IRT-NOW beneficiaries who became part of this sample were completely unknown to the authors. Consequently, the authors believe that their intentions to join this study were motivated by altruism and the desire to share their story (and, potentially, for the $20 remuneration). With respect to the state's Legislative Latino Caucus, however, the first-author is a professional acquaintance of the Caucus Chair. While members of the Chair's campaign team were not the intended research participants of this project, they were necessary to achieve saturation of information. Indeed, adult affiliates of the Latino Caucus helped the authors reach saturation, and the authors are truly grateful for their participation. However, the intended sampling frame had always been the focal state's youthful IRT-NOW beneficiary activities themselves. Findings appear below, and are organized according to the extant dimensions of critical consciousness (*critical reflection, critical motivation,* and *critical awareness*).

Findings

Findings are summarized in Table 1 and are organized according to the explicated dimensions of critical consciousness (critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action).

Per Table 1, each dimension is substantiated by themes and subthemes that are unique to participants in this study. Additionally, themes and subthemes are

Table 1 Summary of findings

Dimension of critical consciousness	Themes and subthemes
Critical reflection (questioning status quo)	Community awareness
	Circumstance
	Context
	Justice
Critical motivation (analysis of problems)	Inequities in educational access
	Challenging popular conceptions
Critical action (propensity to engage)	Action strategies
	Finding common ground
	Being introspective
	Desire for sustained engagement

explored at length below. To this end, the authors hope is to answer the research question, what motivates undocumented students, through the lens of critical consciousness, to engage in political activism, and what is the role of adult-allies?

Critical Reflection (Questioning of Status Quo)

The pervasive theme that is indicative of critical reflection, or questioning the status quo, refers to community awareness. Participants in this sample reflected on three primary community identifications that helped them reflect on the status quo. These included communities of circumstance (e.g. being an immigrant and/or a racial/ethnic minority in the United States), communities of place (e.g. neighborhoods), and communities of action (e.g. being involved with the focal state's IRT movement). Each of these communities facilitated participant knowledge of the status quo in general, as well as the specific ways in which undocumented students were disadvantaged in the American higher education system.

Overwhelmingly, the student beneficiaries in this sample ($n = 5$) reflected most frequently on communities of *circumstance* (a subtheme). All students ($n = 5$) recalled the ways in which inequitable access to college forced them to think critically about their seemingly disadvantaged place in American society. "Being undocumented was holding me back from pursuing my education," said one student. "I wanted to go to college and my [high school] guidance counselor didn't know what to do with me," said another. With respect to the strong identification with their community of circumstance, a third student noted that "I take it personally when [others who are similarly situated] don't embrace the fact that they are immigrants." This circumstantial identification was a principal component of critical reflection among students in this sample.

Adults in this sample ($n = 7$) perceived community-based identities in more varied ways. Consequently, their reflection of, and sympathy for, the plight of undocumented students was often rooted at the intersection of their own community identifications. For example:

My father and mother were Dominicans and I was born over there. From them, I learned the way of how Dominican people think and behave. When I came to [the United States], I learned how American society was divided by racism. You'll see all different people living here. It's more diverse. It's a whole new world. The Dominican Republic didn't have all that… However, when I came here, I automatically became part of the Hispanic community, not just the American community.

The quote above illustrates the ways in which identification with a community of place or circumstance might change over time. Immigrant students in the United States might not anticipate the ways in which being a racial/ethnic minority can affect one's overall identification with groups and communities. The quote above also implies that the speaker developed his own heightened awareness of circumstance after leaving the Dominican Republic and experiencing racial inequality in the United States. Conversely, another adult noted that "If you're really a community-based person, than you can't single-yourself out by race or ethnicity." This adult IRT advocate adopted a *context*-based approach in reflecting on the status quo:

To me, community means a gathering of people who are not only involved politically, but also socially… I come from a very diverse city and a very diverse community. My community consists of Latinos, African Americans, Haitians, Italians, Arabs, and I consider myself part of all of [those communities], because we're all in it together.

The quote above, which minimizes circumstantial solidarity, adopts the notion that society works best when individuals de-emphasize the differences between them. To this end, the speaker's questioning of the status quo may be rooted in what is best for a community of place as opposed to a community of circumstance. In the context of IRT policy, the community of place would be the entire state. In other words, it is the speaker's implied position that everyone in a community of place should care when part of their community is being disenfranchised.

Several adults (but not students) implied that their primary community was action-oriented. This identification likely refers to the adults' ongoing political affiliation with the state's Legislative Latino Caucus. These adults ($n = 4$) were rooted in a strong sense of social *justice*. Their questioning of the status quo and the equitable distribution of resources was constant. "Most of what brings people together is having a common agenda, wanting the same things," one adult commented. "In a community, you can't worry about what your individual incentive is if you're working towards a larger goal," she concluded. Being identified with an action-oriented community created a constant awareness of social justice for this speaker, and for other adults in the sample.

Critical Motivation (Analysis of Problems and Perceived Ability)

With respect to critical motivation, all participants ($N = 12$) were motivated to affect change because of inequities in educational access for undocumented

students. As one adult noted, "These young people were brought to [this state] by their undocumented parents and as a result, they don't have the same rights and privileges as their friends… [after high school], they can't continue their education." This adult advocate's assessment was personalized by a student beneficiary, who noted that, "I had great grades, all A's, but absolutely no hope of going back to school." Variations of inequitable access to higher education were discussed by all five students. Additionally, some adult advocates reflected on people they knew who had foregone college because of the absence of IRT policy. Beyond actual policy, however, participants also analyzed (and were motivated by) the negative social constructions that have been afforded to undocumented individuals.

"Our biggest challenge is that we buy into what politicians say about us, and about who deserves what," said one student. Here, the speaker further explained that the political branding of undocumented students as "illegal" created a stigma around an undocumented student's entire being and what he or she should be entitled to. All participants ($N = 12$) conceded that undocumented students have historically had weak political power and a negative public perception. According to Schneider and Ingram's framework (1993), this conception classifies undocumented students as deviants. To this end, challenging popular conceptions of undocumented students is most indicative of critical motivation (the analysis of problems and perceived ability). "We don't just want to change politicians' minds [about how they view undocumented youth], we want to change peoples' minds," said another participant.

For participants in this study, analysis of problems referred to both a lack of concrete IRT policy, as well as a desire to change minds and hearts regarding undocumented youth, their talents, and their capabilities.

Critical Action (Response and Propensity to Engage)

All participants in this study were involved in effectuating change at the statewide level through IRT-NOW. Young people in this sample became involved with IRT-NOW because they were the assumed beneficiaries of the proposed policy change; in other words, they stood to benefit from being afforded in-state residency tuition. Adult advocates were not necessarily the direct beneficiaries of the proposed policy change, but were instead engaged in the IRT Movement because of their association with the state's Legislative Latino Caucus.

Throughout their engagement, both students and adults ($N = 12$) identified several action strategies that helped to facilitate engagement. The first strategy pertains to *finding common ground* with others who might share different values than a focal participant. "Personalities can be problematic," said one adult. "Definitely there have been situations where I have had to work with difficult people. It's all about values and finding common ground and moving forward," said another adult. "I think that [finding common ground] supersedes working with any difficult person," she concluded. Finding common ground is also illustrated in the quote below:

Many times, I've worked with people that I don't align with. Since I work in computer science, I am very logical. I recognize that's only one way of thinking, but it's through my political involvement that I realized that. Yes, sometimes you'll work with people who you just don't agree with, but I've learned about myself, too. And I've learned about how I relate to others. My way of doing things is a family way. I don't seek conflict or fights because we are supposed to be working as a unit with a common goal.

In addition to finding common ground, the speaker above reflects on ways in which his interactions with others in the IRT movement enabled him to *be introspective*. Being introspective is the second subtheme related to critical action strategies. As one student indicated, "What I learned about myself is that I can do more than what I thought I could. I learned that I cared about other people. [My IRT-NOW involvement] wasn't just about me going back to school. It was about others, too." An adult advocate corroborated this sentiment when she noted that, "In volunteering with people, there are always new things to learn about yourself."

Adults in this sample ($n = 7$) were already part of a sustained advocacy network, vis-à-vis the state's Legislative Latino Caucus. Students, however, had no sustained organization through which to continue their advocacy. In the context of these interviews, however, all students ($n = 5$) and adults ($n = 7$) noted their desire for sustained engagement. "Although I finally have residency, I still don't have citizenship," said one student. "We need to keep channeling our power to make change happen," said another. As one adult concluded, "It is our responsibility to continue promoting the values that we believe in."

Discussion

Summary

This research supports and extends our understanding of critical consciousness as it applies to student beneficiaries and adult advocates of IRT policy in a focal state. Specifically, this study identifies themes and subthemes that are unique to these populations, which map onto the explicated dimensions of critical consciousness. In brief, critical reflection refers to one's questioning of the status quo. Students and adults identified community awareness through one of three means—*circumstance*, *context*, or *justice*—that enabled them to think more critically about their world. Critical motivation, which refers to analysis of problems, suggested two primary themes. First, inequities in educational access refer to the conclusion that undocumented students were being denied a higher education because of their citizenship statuses (which they had no control over). Second, challenging popular conceptions refers to analysis of the ways in which undocumented students are perceived in the United States: as politically weak and socially undesirable. Finally, critical action refers to one's propensity to engage in change efforts. All participants in this study had been involved in the focal state's IRT movements. Students were the prospective beneficiaries of the ultimately enacted policy; adults were advocates

of the policy vis-à-vis the state's Legislative Latino Caucus. Both students and adults identified two action strategies: (1) *finding common ground* with fellow volunteer advocates, and (2) *being introspective* about one's political involvement to facilitate personal growth. Also indicative of critical action was the desire among participants for sustained engagement. These are the factors that motivate undocumented students and adult allies, through the lens of critical consciousness, to engage in political activism.

Limitations

This research is context-bound and should not be generalized beyond the 12 IRT advocates interviewed for this project. Additionally, the sample is entirely comprised of individuals from Latin American and South American countries. This disproportionality is neither reflective of all IRT beneficiaries, nor IRT-NOW's disbanded constituency. Instead, this disproportionality can, in part, be attributed to the way in which adults were sampled, vis-à-vis the Latino Caucus. Similarly, the fact that adults were sampled at all is a product of low interest among student advocates. Students may not have been willing to participate in this research because they may have been concerned about de-facto revealing their current or former citizenship statuses (even though, per IRB approval, disclosure was not part of sampling criteria). Individuals who did participate, however, were assured confidentiality in two primary ways: (1) participants could initial their informed consent and receipt of remuneration, instead of signing their full name, (2) no audio or video recording of participants was allowed, per full IRB approval. This latter protection (no audio or video recording) poses as an additional limitation, in that interviewers were forced to take real-time notes on a laptop computer. Real-time note-taking likely created a casualty in the nuances of certain responses.

Several additional imitations need to also be considered; for instance, there are, within the present sample, numerous and diverse intersections within/among the present sample of Hispanic/Latino/a students and adults, which may have impacted their level of comfort to disclose their undocumented status, and their ability and drive to engage in activism. Therefore, future studies need to consider the journeys of undocumented students and their adult allies when examining critical consciousness, as well as empowerment and student activism. Nevertheless, the authors believe that this research demonstrates a formative attempt to contextualize critical consciousness as it relates to motivating undocumented students and adult allies to engage in political activism.

Implications

In an economic era where the financial and employment consequences of high school dropout have never been higher, the decision to leave high school early will have lasting implications for the well-being of undocumented immigrant youth and the states in which they reside (Potochnick 2014). An implication for state legislators and governors who oppose supporting DREAM and IRT-related policies would be that they are, in fact, hindering our society from being composed of, to the

fullest extent, educated citizens. Withholding undocumented immigrants, which make up about two million of the K-12 school population in the United States (NILC 2010), limits the number of postsecondary educated professionals in our society. Students who attend college will move into better paying jobs, pay more taxes, and have more money to spend in the state they live in (NILC 2010). The average college graduate earns over 60 percent more than the average high school graduate throughout one's professional life (NILC 2010). Higher earnings translate directly to higher tax revenue and spending power (NILC 2010).

College presidents and boards of trustees can also attempt to bypass legislative processes and take similar action at the institutional level. In the absence of state IRT policy, this might involve college and university officials lowering the cost of tuition for undocumented students that plan to attend their educational institutions (Thangasamy and Horan 2016). Similarly, practitioners such as high school guidance counselors should learn that, although undocumented immigrants are less likely to pursue a postsecondary degree, this does not mean it is not an aspiration of theirs. Since they are not eligible for most types of financial aid, undocumented students will need extra assistance finding all the financial support they can get, such as private or non-governmental scholarships (Perez 2014). High school guidance counselors should be able to assist with connecting the undocumented population within their schools to the appropriate agencies and resources that will be able to assist them with these financial needs.

When a student reveals their undocumented status, social workers, school guidance counselors, and child advocates alike should encourage them to understand the status of their residency, advise them to contact a licensed immigration attorney, and offer to help them access legal services from the community (Kim and Díaz 2013). College recruitment officers should learn if the state in which their school is located in is one of the states that offers financial aid to undocumented students, or is a state that has an inclusive IRT policy.

Finally, future research may wish to explore IRT advocacy with larger samples or deductive methods. Doing so might enable scholars to discern the extent to which political activism can function as a protective factor or an empowering process for an otherwise oppressed population, such as undocumented students. Nevertheless, the authors believe that this formative research has contextualized critical consciousness with a less-studied population, while also attempting to answer the question of what motivates undocumented students, through the lens of critical consciousness, to engage in political activism, and what is the role of adult-allies?

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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