



# School to Deportation Pipeline: Latino Youth Counter-storytelling Narratives

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes Julio's counter-storytelling narratives as an undocumented and Latino youth attending schools in the Southeast. Through his narratives, this case study discusses how gender, accent, socioeconomic and immigration status intersect multiple layers of discrimination, pushing Julio out of school prior to his self-deportation. The author concludes how the use of dialogue journaling can allow teachers, school administrators, and other stakeholders to become culturally sensitive to support Latinx youth.

## KEYWORDS

Counter-storytelling; Latinx; undocumented; resiliency

Since Julio came to the United States, he experienced discrimination for not being able to speak English fluently. His education was interrupted due to ill-prepared teachers and culturally sensitive school administrators and law enforcement. Additionally, lacking a positive male role model and family income, besides a racist community, especially against Spanish speaking immigrants. Julio started hanging out with friends, who pushed him to become a gang member and to sell illegal substances. His gang affiliation and illegal activities got him in trouble with school officials and local law enforcement. These incidents made Julio the perfect target to experience gender, racial profiling, and to develop hypermasculinity. Julio was caught by the local police with no choice but to sign self-deportation back to México. Once in his homeland, Julio realized that life can sometimes give individuals a second chance.

Recent statistics claim that Latinx dropout rate has decreased 10% compared to 16% five years ago. Latinx students still represent the highest dropout rate among Blacks, Whites, and Asians (Gramlich, 2017). Earlier literature reveals that the experiences of Latinx children and youth in K-12 education (Bussert-Webb, Díaz & Yanez, 2017; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2008; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2006a) are usually shaped by a subtractive schooling (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999) system, a lack of a multicultural curriculum (Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 2016), and the perpetuation of a deficit thinking model (Valencia, 2010) that push some students to conform to a colorblind and oppressive school system. Other scholars agree that Latinx youth have no choice but to become a "pushout" (Gonzales, 2016) and to join their parents and relatives in low-wage jobs (Gonzales, 2016; Hurtado, 1994). Gándara and Contreras (2010) claim that "Latino students' extraordinary dropout rate is related, in part, to their lack of attachment to school and a sense of not belonging" (p. 28). Cammarota (2008) and Valenzuela (1999) agree that when Latinx students develop a strong relationship with teachers and school administrators, they feel more motivated to remain in school and succeed.

Additionally, recent scholars have analyzed the experiences of undocumented Latinx students during (Nicholls, 2013; Perez, 2009, 2012; Ríos-Vega, 2015) and post-high school in the United States (García-Louis, 2016; Gonzales, 2016; Hatch et al., 2016; Martinez, 2016; Pérez, 2014; Sáenz et al., 2016). While more Latinx students are graduating from high school, studies also show that Latinx students who do not develop a strong networking system and navigational capital (Ortiz, 2004; Pérez, 2014; Ríos-Vega, 2015;

Stanton-Salazar, 1997) have a hard time understanding and resisting higher education, pushing them to change their minds about it. Studies suggest that Latinx students experience a lot of isolation and lack of support when they attend colleges or universities where their funds of knowledge are not valued or when they do not see people who look like them as professors and administrators (García-Louis, 2016; Moll et al., 2009; Pérez, 2014; Pérez Huber, 2009; Solórzano, 1998).

In this paper, I use critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical theory (LatCrit) to analyze the counter-storytelling narratives of Julio (pseudonym), an undocumented Latinx student from Veracruz, México. Julio was one of my ESL students at Ceniza High School (fake name). Julio and I reconnected through social media after 10 years.

Using his dialogue journals and interviews as forms of data in this qualitative case study, I discuss how issues of gender, race/ethnicity, class, immigration status, and language shape Julio's high school experience in the United States. In a chronological order, I document Julio's immigration journey from rural México to semi-rural North Carolina. Additionally, I discuss how Julio is pushed out of high school before his self-deportation back to his homeland. Then I discuss how he decided to go back to school and then higher education. Finally, I conclude this article with some suggestions that teachers, counselors, and school administrators should pay attention to when teaching and advocating for Latinx students in education.

### ***Review of the literature on Latino youth and education***

Although Latinx dropout rate has decreased in the last five years, remaining in schools and obtaining a high school diploma does not guarantee that Latinx students, especially males, will be skilled enough to pursue higher education or find a decent job, allowing them to experience upper social mobility. Many scholars agree that schools perpetuate hostile environments similar to what boys and males of color experience in society, pushing them to develop hypermasculinity and becoming disengaged about education (Cammarota, 2008; Conchas & Vigil, 2016; Fergus et al., 2014; Gonzales, 2016; Hurtado & Sinha, 2016; Noguera et al., 2013; Rios, 2011, 2017; Ríos-Vega, 2015). Gonzales (2016) claims that "The negative labeling of students as unmotivated, incapable, or given to making trouble is often based on educators' personal, cultural, and institutional ideas and values (p. 96). Conchas and Vigil (2012) claim that young men of color do not see school as welcoming environments. Instead, they experience a lack of support from teachers and administrators, leading them to experience hostility and racism. Hurtado and Sinha (2016) suggest that "Latino men occupy a contradictory position within a system of privilege" (p. 12). Compared to Latina girls, Latino males have more freedom to experience life. This freedom exposes them to be more vulnerable to be racially profiled by teachers, school administrators, and law enforcement (Gonzales, 2016; Rios, 2011, 2017; Ríos-Vega, 2015). These contradictions lead Latino males to be at disadvantage than their counterparts in their education. Latino and Black males experience more discrimination and racial profiling than their White counterparts in schools. For instance, Latino and Black youth receive more dress code referrals while wearing saggy pants than White males (Ríos-Vega, 2015). Noguera et al. (2013) posit that "Even though Black and Latino boys frequently encounter similar disadvantages in educational settings—more likely to be suspended or expelled, to be placed in special education, or to drop out; however, most of the studies available have focused on Black men (p. 5). Cammarota (2008) argues that, "the policing of Latinos is such a pervasive and well-accepted social practice that the experience of being monitored and contained happens at school as much as it does anywhere else" (p. 143). This constant racial and gender profiling makes Latinos to become disruptive and disengaged toward their education. Some of them develop hypermasculinity that makes them adopt tough and rude personalities toward school authorities. Conchas and Vigil (2012) posit that "showing toughness is a particularly important characteristic for street children, and a few are demonstrably combative" (p. 17). Unfortunately, most Latino and Black males end up internalizing oppression and marginalization as normal while some others have no choice but to drop out of school.

Authors agree that the absence of Latino male studies in academia perpetuates stereotypes through social media as machos, drug dealers, and docile but reliable workers with the lowest salaries. Fergus et al. (2014) agree that "most of the existing studies have largely ignored the way in which masculinity interacts with race, ethnicity, class, and context (e.g., neighborhood, school,

family, etc.) to influence behavioral outcomes and the social construction of identity” (p. 25). In order to fill in the gap about Latino male studies in education, this article analyzes the counter-storytelling narratives of Julio with issues of race, ethnicity, class, language, immigration, and gender discrimination. It also shows how Julio became resilient after he got deported back to his homeland.

### **Methodology**

Drawing upon critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical (LatCrit) theory, this article analyzes how Julio’s counter-storytelling narratives with issues of ethnicity and gender intersect multiple layers of oppression in school and society. CRT focuses on the intersectionality of subordination, including gender, class, and other forms of oppression. Challenging Eurocentric epistemology and questioning dominant notions of meritocracy, objectivity, and knowledge have particular application to the field of education, and offer a liberatory pedagogy that encourages inquiry, dialogue, and participation from a wide variety of stakeholders. Counter-storytelling and narrative serve as a pedagogical tool that allows educators to better understand the experiences of their students of color through deliberate and mindful listening techniques. “Learning to listen to these stories and figuring out how to make them matter in the educational system is potentially invigorating and validating” (Taylor, 2009, p. 8).

Additionally, as an umbrella under CRT, LatCrit scholars agree that racism, sexism, and classism intersect other layers of oppression based on “race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality” (D. Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25).

Based on Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit), this article analyzes how for Julio, a former English as Second Language (ESL) classroom became a loving and decolonized space where my students and I learned to resist an oppressive mainstream school/community culture. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2009), critical race methodology theoretically

(a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. It also challenges the separate discourses of race, gender and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color; (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, theories used to explain the experiences of students of color; (c) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color. (p. 131)

The counter-storytelling narratives that I explore here come from Julio’s dialogue journal and interviews. As a writing strategy in ESL teaching, my students used dialogue journals to develop their literacy skills in their new language (Peregoy & Boyle, 2017; Peyton & Reed, 1990). It also allowed them to express themselves openly and to talk about issues that bothered them as immigrants and English language learners in the United States. After 10 years and as part of this qualitative case study, I use Julio’s journal as a form of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Julio’s counter-storytelling narratives represent a very useful resource to explore how many documented and undocumented Latino boys and men learn and unlearn to resist multiple layers of oppression and subordination in the United States. Julio’s narratives are replete with hardships, fast-growing paths and pains, adult responsibilities, and decisions. In his journals, he reveals how he learned to resist and to navigate a racist and intolerant society, as well as lack of support from teachers, counselors, and school administrators. It was through his dialogue journals that I realized how difficult education and life were for him since he was learning to survive and to swim against the stream. Later on, after I reconnected with Julio I learned how his resistance allowed him to counteract others’ racial profiling and gender expectations once he moved back to México.

### **Data collection**

The data I analyze here comes from Julio’s dialogue journals that I kept for over a decade and Skype interviews. After I contacted Julio via social media and talked to him about his journal and my study,

he and I had three interviews via Skype. First, I emailed Julio a general description of the purpose of my study to familiarize him with my topic and interest in developing my study. Later, I emailed him some of the journal entries he wrote while he was still my student. It allowed him to have a frame of reference about his school days in the United States.

### ***Dialogue journals***

The use of dialogue journals in the ESL classroom has become popular since it was first introduced, studied, and used by scholars, as well as teachers (Mayher, 1990; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Peyton & Reed, 1990; Staton et al., 1988). As part of this counter-narrative research, I used Julio's journal as "field texts" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). His journal allowed me to identify insightful and chronological events about his life, from his childhood, immigration journey, to his personal experiences at home, school, and the community.

### ***Interviews***

During our first interview, I asked structured questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) based on what he wrote in his journal 10 years ago. The first Skype interview took 2 hours. I asked him very specific questions about his education in the United States. Also, I asked questions based on his journal entries. After I transcribed, compared, and analyzed his journal entries with his first interview answers, I developed some preliminary themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A month later, Julio and I had our second Skype interview. The second interview was unstructured. I decided to do member-checking (Gelsne, 2006) and allowed Julio to give me some feedback on my preliminary themes. This second interview took 2 hours. During the second interview, Julio added more details about his life after he moved back to México. I also used this interview to ask some clarifying questions about terms and acronyms that he mentioned during our first interview. After three weeks, I contacted Julio to have our last interview. I decided it would also be unstructured. The interview took 1 hour. This time I allowed Julio to share with me some updates about his current life in México. He shared about his university courses, girlfriend, and first to-be-born baby. The only obstacle that I encountered during the Skype interviews was to figure out when Julio was available to talk. Since he was working, studying, and taking care of his personal life, it was sometimes difficult to arrange our online interviews. Interestingly, Julio decided to have all of his interviews conducted in English because he felt more comfortable talking to me in his new language, although he was already living in México.

### ***Data analysis***

I analyzed Julio's dialogue journal to develop preliminary themes about his childhood, immigration journey, and experiences in education in the United States. "Having the individual journal, a sketch of his or her life may be a good beginning point for analysis" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 198). Using his journal allowed me to build structured questions prior to the first Skype interview. I transcribed all of the data and made margin notes to form initial themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Then I noticed some common patterns between the dialogue journal early themes and the interview transcripts. This process allowed me to identify and describe Julio's story in a chronological sequence. "The researcher organizes larger patterns and meaning from the narrative segments and categories" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 200). The second and third online interviews were unstructured. During the analysis, I related Julio's life experiences to different theories about Latinx students and their experiences in education in the United States. I rewrote and interpreted Julio's data as a continuous process (past, present, and future), while including his life experiences in México and the United States. Finally, Julio's counter-storytelling narrative unfolds how he counteracted social expectations toward Latino boys in the United States while moving back to his homeland to experience resilience. Analyzing Julio's data was very refreshing and empowering since he was my

former student. Reading, reading, writing about Julio's experiences as a Latino youth in the United States, made me reflect deeply about my role not only as a scholar but as a Latino man as well.

## Findings

This section explains in a chronological order Julio's experiences from his childhood to his adolescence. Although Julio's parents decided to leave their homeland of México looking for a better future, Julio's narratives are filled with hardships. Like most Latino males in this country, especially undocumented, who usually lack a strong social capital within mainstream society, Julio became the perfect target to teachers, community members, and law enforcement. Julio was usually understood as trouble in school and gang member in the community. However, after his deportation, he realized that he needed to prove himself and others that he could overcome life adversities and people's low expectations.

In the following section, I describe Julio's counter-narratives during his immigration journey and his relationship with parents. Additionally, this section discusses Julio's education in the United States and his experiences with drug gangs and the police, leading to his deportation and life's second chance in México.

### Immigration journey

After 4 years of living with his grandmother, Julio's parents decided to bring him along with them. By that time Julio was already eight years old. His immigration journey was very uncommon compared to other undocumented children's stories. He flew to the United States with somebody else's passport and a stranger. His mother met a woman at church while in North Carolina. This woman let her know that she was going back to México to get one of her two children and she offered to bring Julio along with her, using her other child's passport. "*I crossed the border with papers, but they were not mine,*" Julio shared. As this woman left for México, Julio's mother also went back to México to get him ready for his journey. For that, she had to cross the border illegally one more time. Once she gave Julio to this woman, she crossed the border back to this country one more time. Julio recounted how much he admired his mother for being such a brave woman, who risked her life twice crossing the border to bring him to the United States.

My mother crossed the border two times. That's why I love my mother so much 'cause ... I remember her telling me like she, "I told your dad and he told her why don't you go, get him and come back" and he was like "Hell no, I will not cross the border again." So my mom, being a woman, she said, "If you are not gonna do it, I will do it." So, she packed her things, she came, she saw her family, she brought my sister ... and we left.

### Parents

Like most undocumented immigrants to this country, Julio's parents encountered many obstacles in their new homeland (Behnke et al., 2010; Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003; Conchas, 2001; Gándara & Contreras, 2010; Hurtado et al., 1996). One of the biggest challenges was the English language (Ortiz, 2004). Julio recalled, "*my parents had a lot of difficulties finding jobs. This was due to the lack of money and the fact that they didn't speak the language.*" Later, his father found a job at a local hardware store. Because of his auto repair skills, Julio's father became well-known at his job. When Julio's father came to live in North Carolina, everything was normal. He had two jobs, lived by himself, and always worked. Julio shared,

He didn't go out; he didn't have friends, and all that stuff. But when we got together, my mother, my sister, and me, I don't know what happened to him. He changed a lot. He started drinking more often. There was violence in the house. The police went to our house because he was having violent problems with my mom.

Due to his alcohol addiction, Julio's father got fired. Due to several driving under the influence violations, his father was sent to jail. When these incidents occurred, Julio was only eight years old and just 2 months after his reunification with his parents. When I asked Julio if not having a father

around influenced his wrong decisions when he was a teenager, he said that he always witnessed how his friends went out with their fathers and how he missed having a male role model around the house (Sáenz & Ponjuán, 2009). He said, *“I didn’t have that. I had my mother and my sister. So, I ended up being the man of the house.”*

After that, Julio’s mother found a second job to support the family. She worked at a Mexican store where she also became well-known for her kindness and sense of trust. Her second job was at an apparel factory sewing labels on garments. Julio shared, *“I admire my mom because she is a really strong woman even though she has a hard time at work. She can’t really speak the language and she does pretty good at what she does.”* Although Julio’s mother was working at two different jobs to support her family, there were times when there was not enough money to bring home since her job was an hourly-paid job based on production.

### **Education in the United States**

Once Julio moved to North Carolina, he started fourth grade. Like most immigrants to this country, Julio experienced the cultural shock of being in a totally different country and school culture. Besides missing his Mexican food, streets, buildings, shopping centers, and walking to school, what he resented the most was his lack of ability to communicate in the English language (Behnke et al., 2010; Fernández, 2002; Perez et al., 2009). He rapidly learned what could happen if families decided not to send their minor children to school. He shared,

Schools in the U.S. seemed to be better in academic ways. México wasn’t as difficult as it is in the U.S. In here, if you don’t attend school, your parents go to jail or you get sent to a boot camp. In México, they didn’t care if you went or not because it was common for students to drop out and help the family instead.

Julio also understood that he had more opportunities to succeed in the United States than in México. During his early years of education in this country, he explained how he learned to overcome bullying and xenophobia for being a new immigrant and English language learner (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003; Gonzales, 2016). He said,

The school system was very difficult and weird. I began to hate my new school even though I was just starting to go there. My first day at school was the weirdest and most difficult experience I had. I didn’t know anybody. The kids looked at me like if I was weird, but I wasn’t. I felt really sad when many of the White kids made fun of me whenever I tried to speak the language. That kind of expression made me feel like if I was dumb or I even though that I said something bad, but I began to learn how to live with it. I learned how to live with the insults from White and Black kids; the faces they made when I sat close to them. I hated school. I didn’t have any friends.

Julio also explained the challenges he dealt with while learning the English language and how he learned to develop resiliency from within (Sánchez et al., 2005).

Learning the new language was one of the other things that made me feel like I didn’t belong in that school. It was difficult for me to do my homework. Understand what other kids were saying to me, or about me, getting lunch, asking for directions. Whenever I got lost in school, asking to go to the bathroom all these little things made me feel frustrated and just gave me more reasons to miss my old school even more and gave me the feeling of going back to my country where I knew how to ask and do all the things I could in my new school because of the fact I didn’t speak the language.

Julio also recalled Ms. Miranda as his best teacher in elementary school. He explained how she helped him learn his new language.

Ms. Miranda had a positive attitude and a happy look on her face. If you were feeling down, with just a smile from her, she could make you smile back at her. I really admired her.

When I asked Julio about his favorite class in Ceniza High School, he talked about his experience while having a Latino and Spanish-speaking teacher. He said,

In my second semester, I started attending your ESL class ... and I liked your class ‘cause I felt it was a place, a classroom where you could be you. And you didn’t have anybody that would start laughing at the way you spoke English, the way you dress, the way you look, the way you express yourself, ‘cause everybody in your class, we were all



Latino, remember. So, I liked your class a lot too. Because I felt like I was accepted, you can say, in your classroom ... where I didn't have these conflicts.

Julio's sense of belonging is reflected in his dialogue journaling experiences in the ESL classroom. Contrary to what most studies demonstrate about ESL classes as part of a tracking system that hinders Latinx students and other immigrants, Julio's ESL class became the nurturing space where he was allowed to be himself without being labeled or singled out.

### ***Drug gangs and the police***

Although Julio tried to change his bad behavior in school after being sent to a juvenile detention center, it was very difficult for him to counteract the negative stigma and low expectations adults, especially school administrators and law enforcement, had of him. As I mentioned earlier, I knew Julio was a Latin King, but never thought he was selling drugs when he was my student. However, as part of our conversations, he decided to share with me how he started being involved in gangs and drugs. As he stated during his narratives, one of the reasons why he started selling drugs was to support his mother. He mentioned that there were times when his mother could not even afford to pay the monthly leasing contract. He shared,

There were days we didn't have nothing to eat. So, I started hanging out with the wrong people, you know ... and I started selling drugs ... I was in middle school. First time I did it, I was in River (pseudonym). I used to go to Spirit Middle School (pseudonym). Ok ... and all of sudden the job goes down at the place, it goes down, so we started having money problems.

When Julio came to Ceniza High School, he already had a police record for being gang-affiliated and racial confrontations with White and Black boys in middle school (Conchas, 2001; Constantine et al., 2007; De Genova & Ramos-Zayas, 2003; Golash-Boza, 2015; Lopez, 2003; Vigil, 2010). He had already been sent to Juvenile Detention of Randolph County (JDRC), so he had to attend JDRC after breaking the law. In the following narrative, Julio shared how he became gang-affiliated and how he ended up selling illegal drugs in school.

I was still going to the JDRC thing and I met a couple of people there. I met all my friends (laughing) you can say ... that used to go to Ceniza High School. Since they were already gang affiliated, there was this White dude at the JDRC center, who was harassing me because I was Mexican. When I was in high school, I talked a little bit of English but didn't have a good accent, so my English was a Mexican English, you know. He told me, "man, you can't talk." The guy made fun of me all the time. So, I was like ... I don't like this kind of thing. That harassing and all that stuff ... so I got in a fight at the JDRC. By this time, I was already friends with these guys and then I got out. They went to pick me up and I started hanging out with them more often.

After Julio became a Latin King member, he became more popular. When he started attending Ceniza High School, he already had some social capital in the community as a Latin King. Students at school knew who he was. Julio had been living in the same county since he was eight years old.

Unfortunately, Julio continued getting in trouble in the community and school. During the first interview, he mentioned how difficult it was for him to be surrounded by many negative environments, making it difficult for him to pay attention to his studies.

As I mentioned previously, it was obvious that Julio's internalized behavior as a bad youth led him to develop hypermasculinity in order to survive. He was tough, rude, and very disrespectful to school authority and law enforcement. He knew he was racially and gender profiled for being Latino and undocumented like most Latino students at Ceniza High School; however, as a gang member, he was targeted even more since law enforcement officers and school administration exchanged information about students breaking the law in the community. Cammarota (2008) claims that "the image of Latino youth conjures fear in many; it is a fear based on assumptions of criminality" (p. 142). There were times when he came to school wearing Latin King colors. Even though he knew he was not supposed to wear those garments in school, he tried to challenge school authorities. In his dialogue journal titled "Maybe I don't try hard enough," he explains his experience once he moved to Ceniza High School. He wrote,

When I moved to Ceniza, I had to start going to ninth grade, but it was a hard time trying to get enrolled into this school. The reason was because of my record in my [previous] school, and it's hard to get back into the school system whenever you have been kicked out [from] a school.

Unfortunately, Julio's good behavior did not last too long. Instead, he and another Latino youth got involved in a fight; as a result, they both got suspended for 10 days. Julio felt discouraged and disappointed since he had promised his mother that he was going to do better at Ceniza High School, but he did not do. He wrote,

I know I had failed and that I didn't do what I was supposed to. When I went back to school all the teachers looked at me as if I was a bad person. The way teachers started to treat and had a different attitude with me made me feel like all my efforts to change didn't please anyone.

It is important to highlight how Julio ended up embracing negative expectations from his teachers and school administrators. It was evident that this type of hypermasculinity affected his self-esteem and sense of belonging in school. Schools do not provide culturally sensitive counseling programs and/or classes that provide spaces for students like Julio. It seemed like adults in the school building ignored Julio's internal struggles.

After being caught by the police one more time, Julio spent 2 weeks in the county jail, pushing him to drop out since he missed many days of school. He said,

Besides that I was still dealing with drugs, I dropped out of high school 'cause I got in trouble with the police so I got in jail ... I was in jail a couple of weeks, so whenever I tried to go back to high school, they (school staff) Okay, you can come back, but you've got to do all of these things, so we can validate your classes.

By that time, Julio was already in 10th grade. His goal was to continue his 11th grade if he was able to catch up with his missed assignments. He tried to catch up but did not pass to the 11th grade. Instead, they suggested that he needed to repeat 10th grade. *"I said, 'I will never gonna finish it, so I just decided to stop going to school.'"* Besides having problems with the law and school, Julio thought it was better for him to drop out and start helping his mother financially. That same year, the police searched his apartment and found drugs and a firearm. He was arrested and sent to jail before his voluntary deportation process back to México. He shared,

They (the police) found a little bit of drugs and a firearm. The police took me in. At this time, I was already on probation, so this time, I got to jail. I was in juvenile for possessing firearms and possession of drugs, so I was locked down and I did 4 months in G-POT. Then, they sent me to Charlotte before I signed my voluntary deportation paperwork.

## Deportation

After spending some time in the county jail, Julio was sent to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina. He shared that the place was full of undocumented immigrants. A month later, he was released but still had to do probation. He shared,

I felt I stopped caring for myself and I started using drugs more often ... and I started getting drunk ... I started having a life that I knew that if I keep doing it, I would end up either stay in jail for very, very long time or was gonna get killed for all the stuff I was doing ... and I didn't decide to move.

Julio had to wait a couple of days before his court appearance. On that day, he also realized that he had been charged for hitting a police officer the day he was arrested.

Before I had court that day with my probation, I had to go to Charlotte to ICE office and they gave me a paper where they told me whether you want to depart voluntarily or either whenever you are eighteen ... you were ... me iban a juzgar como si fuera un adulto [they would judge me as an adult] ... 'cause I had a felony for assaulting a government official. The day I got arrested, I think I hit a cop. I didn't want to get arrested, I resisted the arrest and hit a cop that day. So, they even had me for assaulting a government official. They were straightforward with me, "You have two choices, you either go back to your place you are from or you stay here, and you pay for what you did. But after you pay for what you did, your felony and all judge charge stuff,



either way, you will be deported because you're illegal. Okay, you pay your felony, you pay your charges, when you are eighteen, and as you're an illegal person, you gonna get deported, so what do you wanna do? You wanna leave voluntarily and all your felonies and charges are gonna be erased, I don't know whatever they call the computer thing. Your records. We gonna delete your records, but you've got to go back.

Ultimately, Julio decided to leave the United States and returned to México by himself.

### **Life's second chance**

Once in México, Julio moved back to Córdoba, Veracruz, where he was born and raised until he immigrated to the United States. At first, he experienced misplacement and loneliness since he was used to living in North Carolina. *"The food tasted differently; the people looked differently. The way they talked, the way they dressed, the way they looked at you. So, it was kinda of hard. The first year, I didn't do anything."*

After an argument with his father, it took Julio a year to reflect on his situation. He started to think differently about his life. He realized that he needed to find a job. He tried to apply at different department stores, but most of them required him to have at least a high school diploma. At the beginning, it was not easy to register at a high school in Córdoba since Julio did not have any high school records from North Carolina with him. He said, *"we can't sign you up here 'cause you got papers from the United States, we can't valid your high school."* Julio felt very frustrated when he realized he had to start high school as a freshman. During that time, Julio was already working with one of his neighbors' garage. Even though he was not making enough money, he could still afford to go to school. Within 3 years, he completed his high school diploma. While in high school, Julio became interested in studying auto mechanics. After he finished high school, he decided to pursue a technical career. This time Julio decided to study auto mechanics. He found a job as a mechanic at a farming machinery company in Córdoba.

During the interview, Julio reflected on his life back in North Carolina. He recalled,

That's how I ended up changing my mentality ... whenever I saw I was getting here alone. I didn't have my friends anymore. I wasn't selling shit like that anymore. So, I decided myself to make things better. I remember officer Palma always tell me, "People always deserve a second chance. The thing is that you never know when your second chance is until you're in the moment. When you see things are not working out and you have another opportunity and that's when you decide to change your mentality.

It is interesting to point out how Julio remembered Officer Palma's advice about life's second chance. Officer Palma became the role model who caused Julio to reflect on his life actions. Julio gave himself a second chance by pursuing his high school diploma and technical career. However, his thirst for pursuing higher education came after he became a certified auto mechanic. He expressed,

When I started working at that place, over here there's a university ... is called Universidad Tecnológica del Centro de Veracruz. Es una escuela del gobierno, no es una escuela de paga, es del gobierno. Y veo en la internet que abren la carrera de ingeniería en mecánica automotriz. Y yo me intereso por la carrera, pido información, traigo mi ficha, hago el examen de admisión, y entró a la universidad. Ahorita estoy en el sexto semestre de ingeniería en mecánica automotriz ... (It is a government school, it is free. I saw on the Internet that they opened a new engineering in automotive mechanics. I became very interested about this area, asked for information, brought my documents, took the admission exam, and registered at the university. Right now, I am in my junior year in engineering in automotive mechanics) and is going very well.

Julio seemed to be very content with his successes in life after he decided to move back to Córdoba. By the time I interviewed Julio, he shared with me about becoming a father.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Using dialogue journaling as a strategy in the ESL classroom, I was able not only to support my former students' writing skills, but also provide a space for them to express their immigration

experiences before and during their educational journey in the United States. Julio's journals allowed me as his former teacher to pay more attention to him and his life challenges. Although I supported him while he was in school, there were times when I was not there to reach out to him, especially if he was in trouble out in the community. After he dropped out of school, I worried about him and his life since I never heard about him again. Thanks to social media I was able to reconnect him and to hear from him all of the answers to my critical questions about his difficult phases as a teenage Latino.

Julio's life was not easy from the very beginning of his childhood. First, his father moved to the United States looking for a new beginning away from alcohol and lack of money. Afterward, his wife joined him, leaving Julio behind under his grandmother's custody. Later, when he was eight years old, he was brought to this country with somebody else's passport.

Julio's narratives also reveal how boys of color are targeted as "bad" early in life and how they carry that stigma until adulthood. This is confirmed by fact that Julio still recalls how his teachers and school administrators singled him out when he moved to Ceniza High School. It was clear that local law enforcement and school administrators share information about students breaking the law, especially when they were involved in gang or drug-related activities. However, Julio never received counseling therapy by culturally sensitive professionals. Instead, he was sent to juvenile detention centers and jail, places that reaffirmed his hypermasculinity and vulnerability as a young man of color. All of these obstacles obliged Julio to request voluntary deportation, since he already had a bad reputation in schools and the community.

It is saddening to analyze how Julio's misbehavior and lack of support started when he entered the school system in this country. First, he was bullied for speaking English with a Spanish accent, pushing him to find protection and community with the wrong people after he was sent to a juvenile detention center. This first incident is a clear example that sending boys of color to those centers do not help them to reintegrate into society as better citizens, especially if they meet other youth or men with more experience breaking the law. Second, Julio was singled out throughout his education since elementary school until he dropped out in 10th grade at the age of 17. Being in jail put him behind in his education and when he came back, he did not get the type of support he needed in order to catch up with his peers.

Interestingly, while analyzing Julio's counter-storytelling narratives, he mentioned Latino/a people who influenced his education and his life. Although it was not part of this study, I feel it is important to mention. Julio talked about Ms. Miranda, a Colombian elementary school teacher; Officer Palma. He referred to Ms. Miranda as his best teacher, Officer Palma as the person who talked to him about life's second chance, and me as someone who always believed in him. Like many Latino/a scholars have previously done, I truly believe that there is a better sense of community and empathy, especially among Latino/a teachers and community leaders.

While there are many noted turning points in the participant's life, each with varied importance, Julio's narratives showed two turning points that appear to carry more weight than the others. First, the fact that Julio had no option but to drop out of school led him to internalize social and school expectations as a drug dealer and gang member (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Flores-González, 2002; Gonzales, 2016; Hurtado & Sinha, 2016; Rios, 2011, 2017). These negative messages pushed him to develop hypermasculinity as a survival mechanism. Like most boys and males of color, Julio became a social target. His bad choices led him to get into trouble with law enforcement on different occasions. As a consequence, he was deported back to México. Julio understood that he needed to put his life together. Both turning points were significantly meaningful in Julio's life. First, being a school dropout led him to perpetuate school and social assumptions about boys and men of color, especially undocumented Latino boys. Second, moving back to México forced him to reflect deeper on how his bad choices back in North Carolina had severe consequences.

Once in Córdoba, México, Julio recalled Officer Palma's *consejo* (advise) and how that made him realize that there is always a way to get back on track. Julio's critical thoughts and understanding about life allowed him to go back to school and to complete his high school education and then pursue higher education. His lived experiences and resilience caused him to challenge

teachers, school administrators, and the U.S. immigration policies toward undocumented immigrants. Julio's determination to prove people wrong pushed him to work harder to accomplish his life goals.

Using Julio's counter-storytelling narratives has allowed me to challenge majoritarian stories about Latinx students in education. Most studies have documented the counter-storytelling narratives of Latinx students in education (Fernández, 2002; Ríos-Vega, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Yosso, 2006b), but few have documented what happened to these individuals after they are forced to push out, especially after they have been targeted as gang members and/or drug dealers (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Flores-González, 2002; Perez, 2009; Rios, 2017; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Using counter-stories as part of CRT and LatCrit methodology, it is my intention to echo the experiences of Latino boys and males like Julio to theorize how issues of race/ethnicity, gender, immigration status, and English language acquisition shape the experiences of Latinx students. Julio's second chance at life and resilience challenged majoritarian studies about boys and men of color, who are usually seen as targets, especially when they refuse to conform to school rules and regulations.

Julio's counter-storytelling narratives also serve to explore what happens to Latinx students during their K-12 experiences and what happens to those who have no choice but to abandon school due to a lack of a supportive system and culturally sensitive teachers, school administrators, and staff. As a former ESL teacher, the use of dialogue journals allowed me not only to better understand the inner world of my immigrant/ESL students, but also to reconnect with Julio and to reflect on his school experience in the United States and México. It is my hope that Julio's narratives can help to develop better strategies in order to support Latinx students within schools and beyond the classroom. As Julio's former high school teacher, I found the urgency to document the counter-storytelling narratives of Latino boys and males to understand how his life, like many other Latinx students, is impacted from the first time they start attending our schools and communities of color. High expectations lead Latino boys and men to develop their own survival strategies (although not all of them are the correct ones). Unfortunately, many boys and men of color get trapped in negative social expectations; however, others, like Julio, decide to challenge mainstream society.

## Disclosure statement

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