

# Beating the Odds: the Undocumented Youth Movement of Latinos as a Vehicle for Upward Social Mobility

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## Abstract

Drawing upon ethnographic research of in-depth interviews, life histories, attendance at rallies, festivities, and informal conversations with over 150 undocumented Latino youth activists in Los Angeles, we argue in this paper that the political and civic engagement of marginalized and stigmatized undocumented youth enables them to have social mobility prospects. Contrary to the U.S. literature on undocumented Latino 1.5 generation, which tends to focus on their socio-economic and educational disadvantages and overlooks the ways in which undocumented youth movements in the US enhance their social mobility through higher education, our findings indicate that Latino youth from low income neighborhoods embrace their undocumented identity, to become individually and collectively de-stigmatized and empowered. Re-appropriating education to their advantage, they develop professional activist dispositions that fuel their self-confidence, and overcome fear of governmental authorities. Moreover, they also use the movement's networks for jobs, internships and funding, which in turn enhances their collective action towards beating the odds and climbing the ladder of social mobility.

**Keywords:** undocumented youth, the DREAMers, social mobility, social movements, educational advancement

## Introduction

Undocumented Latino youth activists, commonly known as DREAMers, have become a powerful political entity in the United States. They have developed a strong voice within the public sphere through their mobilization against the deportation policies of the Obama administration and through their struggle to create a pathway to citizenship by mobilizing for the DREAM Act. The federal Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is an immigration reform bill that provides undocumented youth the opportunity to seek citizenship status. The Migration Policy Institute (2010) estimates that roughly 825,000 of the 2.1 million DREAM eligible youths within the US will actually be able to obtain permanent legal status under the pro-

posed bill. Yet even though the DREAM Act was proposed in 2001 and has been reintroduced many times, it has not yet been passed.

Much of the literature on this generational cohort, described as the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2012), focuses on the socio-economic and educational disadvantages these undocumented Latino youths face (Chavez 1998; Portes and Hao 2004; Solorzano, Villalplando and Oseguera 2005; Arbona and Nora 2007; Abrego 2008; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2009; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Perlmann 2011; Portes and Rivas 2011). Research shows that public schools in deprived neighbourhoods are underfunded, have limited resources, are overcrowded, and have high numbers of students with poorly

educated parents (Solórzano, Villalplando and Oseguera 2005; Arbona and Nora 2007). Only between 5 and 10 percent of the undocumented 1.5 generation goes on to college or the university (Gonzales 2007; Frum 2007).

This literature also provides insights into why some undocumented youth in the United States are able to present themselves openly in the public sphere. Research shows that many undocumented Latino youth grew up with a sense of belonging in the USA because they were socialized in the receiving country rather than in the country of origin (Rumbaut 2012; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Abrego 2011; Gonzales 2011; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). In contrast to their undocumented parents, who migrated to the US as adults, many of these youths came to the United States at an early age, participated in the US educational system and only realized they were undocumented during adolescence, as higher education became a possible prospect.

More importantly, research demonstrates how access to higher education can provide opportunities for *some* of these highly marginalized and stigmatized undocumented Latino youth to transcend the subjective life-worlds and educational and occupational prospects of their parents (Pérez 2010; Stanton-Salazar 2011).

While some scholars of the undocumented Latino 1.5 generation have shown how access to higher education can improve the prospects of undocumented youth, the research on the 1.5 undocumented generations has overlooked the importance of social movement organizing for upward social mobility.

Through our ethnographic research on undocumented Latino youth activists in Los Angeles, we describe how the political and civic engagement of highly marginalized groups can enhance the social mobility prospects of such groups. In this case study, we claim that the undocumented Latino youth movement has given rise and benefited the social mobility of such youth, providing them access into higher education. We examine the role of social movement organizing for the prospects of undocumented Latino youth in the

US and combine the literature on the 1.5 generation with recent developments in the literature on social mobility.

### Literature Review

#### *The Undocumented Latino 1.5 Generation*

Much has been written on the undocumented Latino 1.5 generation in the United States and many of these studies predominantly address the difficulties these youths face. On multiple levels, undocumented Latino 1.5 generation youth in the United States are disadvantaged (Chavez 1998; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2009; Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Perlmann 2011; Portes and Rivas 2011). Undocumented parents and their children live in segregated neighbourhoods with low socio-economic status, experience poor quality schools, and have high crime, incarceration and unemployment rates (Ibid.). Both Abrego (2006) and Gonzales and Chavez (2012) note how this undocumented status keeps individuals from legally being incorporated into the receiving country, since they are blocked from basic amenities such as obtaining a drivers' license, a bank account, medical insurance, and cannot be hired within legal occupations. They also are not able to travel outside the United States and have to deal with the possibility and the fear of detention and deportation (Abrego 2011). Nonetheless, even though these youths were brought up to fear authorities and remain silent about their immigration status, they knowingly risk possible detention and deportation and to remain by publicly presenting themselves as "undocumented and unafraid".

Undocumented Latino youth also face educational disadvantages. Not only are public schools in these deprived neighbourhoods underfunded and overcrowded (Solórzano, Villalplando and Oseguera 2005; Arbona and Nora 2007), but these youths are raised by parents with low educational levels which significantly contributes to not having the embodied cultural capital that helps them advance at school (Willis 1977; Bourdieu 1986; Fernández-Kelly 2008). Often, working-class parents have limited knowledge of how

education functions and how their children can navigate the public educational system. In addition, their children may also behave in ways that their middle-class teachers consider inappropriate. The working-class habitus of these children clashes with the middle-class habitus of their teachers (Ibid).

Research shows that youth from ethnic minorities experience subtle negative prejudices and discrimination towards their cultures and languages that are very hard to counteract. Over time, these prejudices become cumulative, thereby leading to subsequent differences in the educational attainment of ethnic minorities and non-minorities (Montero-Sieburth 1996, 2000; Gandara et al. 2003; Cohen et al. 2009). Portes and Hao (2004) show that among Latinos, "...Mexican immigrants ...have the lowest average levels of education and occupational skills of any sizable immigrant group in the United States and ... experience, in addition, a negative reception by the host society and government (2004: 11927).

Despite the socio-economic and educational disadvantages, some undocumented Latino youth nevertheless find ways to attain a higher education. In the Plyler versus Doe case in 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution, no state is to discriminate between documented and undocumented residents living under their jurisdiction. Therefore, all children in each state gain unrestricted access to free public education at the elementary, middle and high school levels (Olivas 2005; Frum 2007).

However, for many undocumented Latino children, their educational trajectories begin without feeling differences between themselves and their documented peers. Scholars signal the importance of this sense of belonging for undocumented Latino children at the beginning of their lives (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Abrego 2011; Gonzales 2011; Gleeson and Gonzales 2012). Yet, while most undocumented parents continuously fear US authorities, their children start their lives in relatively safe educational institutions.

Nevertheless, it is when such youth transition from high school to higher education that they find out they are undocumented and become aware what this means for them within mainstream society. Undocumented Latino youth who were previously unaware of the significance of their migration status find out that they are undocumented when they want to apply for financial aid for college or when they want to obtain a drivers' license. This "awakening to a nightmare" (Gonzales and Chavez 2012), or moment of "shattered dreams" (Wong et al. 2012), signifies a phase in life in which they have to learn what being undocumented really entails. They learn to deal with the insecurity of not being able to legally work travel outside the US, and fear detention and deportation (Gonzales 2011).

While in many ways the legal and political context in the US is highly restrictive for undocumented Latino youth, it can also be enabling. Essentially, states are not allowed to decide on migration issues, but they are permitted to make their own choices on educational access. One of the enabling legislative opportunities that allow undocumented students in California to access higher education concerns California Assembly Bill 540 (AB540). This law allows undocumented youth, who have gone to a Californian high school for at least three years before graduation, to pay in-state tuition fees at community colleges and public universities. Since 2001, twelve states have signed similar laws, allowing undocumented students under certain requirements to pay in-state tuition (Abrego 2008). For many undocumented youth, AB540 is much more than just a bureaucratic category allowing them financial access to higher education. Being an AB540 student has become a de-stigmatizing and empowering identity that provides undocumented 1.5 generation youth the legislative backing to continue with their educational trajectories. Because of AB540, undocumented youth are considered to be California residents and are encouraged to go to college or university. As such, this law grants to them a socially accept-

able identity and fuels their sense of belonging (Seif 2004; Abrego 2008).

In addition to the importance of this piece of state legislation, Pérez (2010) notes that community colleges allow undocumented youth to transition into higher education after graduating from high school, serving as a bridge into university, since their moderate tuition rates make them more accessible for youth from underprivileged positions. Undocumented Latino students who enrol in a community college often describe their experiences at community college as an eye-opener, as they start learning about the world beyond their deprived neighbourhoods, poor quality schools and working-class communities.

Some undocumented students become passionate about a particular subject or profession due to the influence of community college experiences or because certain college teachers energize them through a particular topic or profession or simply because they develop a sense of self-confidence at being good at something.

Researchers also note the importance of the relationships between undocumented Latino youth and relative outsiders to the community and the neighbourhood (Abrego 2006; Gonzales 2010; Stanton-Salazar 2011). Establishing trustworthy relations with college or university teachers and administrators does not only aid undocumented Latino students in getting access to important knowledge and resources, but it also helps them feel comfortable with and able to relate to adults who are relative outsiders to the community (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales 2010). Stanton-Salazar (2011) calls these teachers and administrators “institutional agents”, as they function as institutional brokers that make the transition into higher education possible and relatively smooth through their being of high-status, non-family members, and occupying key positions that provide institutional and social support. These brokers’ interventions empower marginalized youth and broadens their horizon. Institutional agents often motivate certain undocumented Latino youth to pursue

higher education by inciting confidence in them. As Stanton-Salazar points out: “When low-status youth do overcome the odds, it is usually through interventions that embed them in a network of institutional agents connected to services, organizations, and resources oriented toward their empowerment” (2011: 1097).

Such a process becomes a stepping-stone in the greater moving up process of the social mobility ladder. It is a time when such youth realize that they are worthwhile and capable of achieving things, or as Suarez-Orozco (1987) states, “being somebody”. Needless to say, with such an evolving process through education, the sense of empowerment and gaining of self-confidence contributes to their having a place in US society and in being able to beat the odds.

While many researchers tend to focus on the mechanisms that help undocumented marginalized youth obtain a higher educational degree, they are less focused on how activism expands upon the benefits of higher education. It is through educational spaces that undocumented youth come together in a collective that advocates against their precarious situations. By continuing with political activism after community college or university, stigmatized and marginalized undocumented Latino youth build upon the foundations of their higher education trajectories to become empowered and self-confident professional and politicized activists. In stressing the subjective transformation and empowerment of these youth through the social movement, we seek to go beyond traditional conceptualizations of social mobility.

#### *A Qualitative Approach to Social Mobility*

Often, social mobility scholars use quantitative approaches to explain social mobility and predominantly conceptualize it as educational attainment and occupational prestige (Miller 1998; Ganzeboom 2010). However, in recent years, qualitative researchers have sought to move out of this narrowly defined explanation of social mobility by exploring the subjective and symbolic definitions of social mobility that

their respondents propose themselves (Bertaux and Thompson 1997; Zhou et al. 2008; van den Berg 2011). While we regard it relevant to measure social mobility through educational qualifications and occupational status, we argue that social mobility can be a subjective experience that deals with how persons give meaning to the world. The educational qualifications of politically active undocumented youth often far exceed those of their parents, and their political engagement strengthens the benefits of their educational trajectories.

By conceptualizing upward social mobility of undocumented Latino youth through a qualitative ethnographic study, we delineate four elements of social mobility that distinguishes these undocumented youths from their undocumented parents. Through their political and civic engagement in the undocumented youth movement, undocumented and educated youth 1) overcome their fear of migration authorities and feel empowered; 2) enhance their collective status by transforming highly stigmatized youth into successful and legitimate political subjects; 3) acquire a professional activist disposition; and 4) gain access to a large and open network that offers them job-, internships- and funding opportunities.

Firstly, for many educated undocumented Latino youth that are active in the movement, the undocumented youth movement functions as an important safety net. If they are detained in order to be deported, they are assured by the collective that they can call upon their social, political, legal, and emotional support needed to help get them out of the deportation proceedings. This aids them in overcoming their fear of migration authorities and supports them in coming out of the shadows as “undocumented and unafraid” (Wong et. al. 2012). By presenting themselves as confident, educated and eloquent political activists, and by sharing their stories with other important political actors, they develop further feelings of self-confidence. These educated and politicized youths feel empowered because they are recognized as worthy human beings by their

fellow activists and by the broader public. Additionally, the interactions within the movement generate solidarity, collective effervescence and emotional energy for the member activists, which add to feelings of empowerment and transformation (Collins 2001).

Secondly, because politically active and educated undocumented Latino youth are recognized as legitimate political subjects within the media and the larger public sphere (Nicholls 2013), undocumented youth have been able to redefine the image of a particular group of undocumented immigrants; these educated, undocumented youths are known as DREAMers. Within the larger immigrant rights movement, these youths have been put forward as the poster children of the immigrant rights movement, because they resonate with the larger general public as “deserving”, assimilated and contributing immigrants (Ibid.). While the media often depicts undocumented immigrant groups as “illegals”, “occupiers” and “criminals” (Portes and Hao 2004; Cohen et. al. 2009), DREAMers are considered powerful political actors. Through their organized and disciplined public performances, undocumented educated youth move from being marginalized and stigmatized immigrants to powerful political actors, thereby “turning shame into pride” (Jasper 2011). Through this process, the collective identity and status of undocumented youth is enhanced.

Thirdly, by participating in the movement, individuals acquire the necessary skills and mentality of professional activists. Through the movement, they operate in a professional environment and learn from each other how to talk to the media and how to organize a political campaign. By organizing campaigns, writing media advisories and participating in professional meetings, and through their protest actions and media trainings, undocumented Latino youth learn how to behave as professional political activists. By gaining this knowledge on how politics work and how to behave within these professional, political spaces, they acquire the professional activist disposition. In this process, they also receive



information on immigration laws and -history. By learning that their precarious situation came into existence through the power-play of politics, they become irreversibly politicized.

Fourthly, the movement also informs undocumented Latino youth about job, internships and funding opportunities. Following the literature on social capital and networking processes, it is evident that politically active undocumented youth strongly benefit from the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973) and from the vast amount of social capital (Bourdieu 1986; Lin 2001) that is embedded within the movement. The participants are embedded within a very large and open network of immigrant rights-, human rights- and labour organizations, legal representatives, local politicians and media organizations. Through these large networks, participants benefit from the flow of information, resources and contacts that are embedded within these networks. Through these networks, undocumented Latino youth have access to job-, internship- and funding opportunities that create higher chances of attaining better statuses and occupations. On 15 June 2012, President Obama used his executive power to grant DREAM eligible youth temporary relief from deportation and temporary work permits. This Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) has allowed undocumented, educated youth to make use of their educational qualifications, political activist dispositions and the job opportunities provided by the networks of the movement.

### Methods

The empirical findings presented in this article stem from six months of intensive ethnographic research of the undocumented Latino student movement in Los Angeles, during September 2011 to March 2012, helped by Walter Nicholls, who had been studying the DREAMers for several years (Nicholls 2013). The researchers spent time establishing rapport and gaining the trust of these youths by participating and volunteering their skills, time and energy. By collaborating with the third researcher, a Latin American

scholar seasoned in studying Latinos and Mexicans within the US educational system, the constituted team was able to further contextualize the research experiences and findings.

Los Angeles is an appropriate locality for studying undocumented youth, because Southern California has the largest number of undocumented youth. Moreover, the DREAM movement is highly active and well developed in the city of Los Angeles. Dream Team Los Angeles (DTLA) is one of the most influential and active Dream Teams in the country, functioning as a major hub of activity in regard to the undocumented student movement and the larger immigrant rights movement.

The fieldwork centered on “deep hanging-out” (Bryman 2004), mobilizing, conversing, celebrating, eating and living with undocumented Latino youth who are members of prominent Californian Dream Teams, such as Dream Team Los Angeles (DTLA), San Gabriel Valley Dream Team (SGVDT), San Fernando Valley Dream Team (SFVDT) and Orange County Dream Team (OCDT). As the DREAM movement is a national movement with Dream Teams all across the country, DREAMers in Los Angeles are strongly connected to DREAM organizations on a federal and state level, such as, United We Dream (UWD) and the California Dream Network.

Engagement in the activities of close to 150 DREAMers within the wider Los Angeles area and following a core group of 60 DREAMers made up our ethnographic study. Most of the DREAMers were born in Mexico, or in other Latin or Central American countries, and are between the ages of 18 to 30.

In the six months of ethnographic fieldwork, the first two researchers conducted participant observations of 82 different events, ranging from formal meetings, protests and press conferences to informal meetings such as Christmas, wedding and birthday celebrations. They also conducted nine life-history interviews with DREAMers, with a focus on life trajectories in terms of border-crossings, childhood experiences, and educational involvement in the movement -linking their personal lives to the movement.

In addition, the research team filmed and photographed many DREAMer events and collected the movement's documents that were distributed or circulated digitally. The analysis of data was based on fieldwork reports and notes, interview transcripts, photographs and documents supported by using Atlas.TI, a qualitative data analysis program. Since the field research became the basis for a Masters' thesis supervised by the third researcher, she suggested and added key literature on Latino educational issues and highlighted issues confronted by Mexican students, which were consolidated into this article.

Although this is an ethnographic case study of DREAMers in Los Angeles, the similarities, collaborations and exchanges between the different Dream Teams that make up the structure of the national movement suggest that the findings within the LA context may be representative of those experienced by DREAMers in other states and cities across the US. While the researchers participated in particular actions in Los Angeles, DREAMers in other parts of the country were also doing similar actions with the same political agenda, framing strategies and organizational structure.

### **Beating the Odds through Higher Education**

Schooling is not only critical in providing undocumented youth with a sense of belonging, but it also allows some undocumented Latino students to establish important relationships with institutional agents at high school or community college. A case in point is provided by Nadia, Raj, Grace and Jorge, who all started with English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, but were noticed by a teacher who recognized their talent and placed them in the so-called Advancement Placement (AP) classes. Such extra attention by a teacher boosted their self-esteem and taught them that they could achieve something in life by doing well in school. For these students, this was the start of a successful educational career; they began getting good grades and believing that they were capable of fulfilling the American meritocratic dream.

My teacher placed me in the gifted classes. (...) So I was labelled a gifted student, right. (...) Me knowing that I was smart, that I could do a lot of things that just pumped me up and made me very excited about my education; always seeing myself with a brighter future (Grace).

Many DREAMers did not even know that it was possible for undocumented youth to go to college. In poor, working-class neighbourhoods, some community members and parents may view education as a luxury; people are more focused on trying to get a job to make ends meet than on ensuring that they get into college. Alejandro: "I grew up in a neighbourhood where it was the same mentality. People were just scared to get detained and deported. They didn't worry about having to go to school, because like: no, I don't need to go to school, I need to go to work." For these adolescents, having an outsider as a role model is important in encouraging them into higher education. Ernesto sheds light on this:

And honestly, it wasn't until three years after high school of doing the street vendor thing and just like doing side things here and there, that I met somebody. His name was David (...) He just brought this completely different energy and like environment of like that supportive, male role model. (...) And it wasn't till 2005 that his daughter just graduated from high school and was going into college. (...) And then he asks me: "Hey, why don't you apply?" I was: "Ooh I don't know, like, I don't have papers", blablabla, excuse, excuse, excuse. And then it came to the point of: "Why don't you just try?" (...) and the next thing I knew I was a student at East LA college (Ernesto).

Although being encouraged by an institutional agent is an important factor in determining whether undocumented youth transition into higher education, getting access to higher education through AB540 is essential. Raj: "If it wasn't for the AB540, I don't think I would have been able to make it through my undergraduate". Through AB540 and funding opportunities for AB540 students, undocumented youth are able to go to community college, which often motivates them to transfer to university and continue on their path of upward social mobility. Nadia:

“community college was where I became like the crazy nerd, like, getting the good grades”. As such, community colleges serve as an eye-opener to the larger world outside of the poor working-class world that most undocumented students know.

I started taking classes and I started to get exposed to things that I didn't even know. I remember taking a psychology class, which I didn't really know what it was, but I was like, I'll take this psychology. And taking philosophy, which I didn't know what it was (laughs). It just opened my mind to a lot of things, right. College really changed my mind, my life, I guess (Jorge).

College gives them the feeling and self-esteem that they can also become part of this larger world. Julio states: “That [enrolling in college] moment in history marks where I left the neighbourhood that I knew of, as just inner-city, dysfunctional schools, bad neighbourhoods, into wealth. This is what the world looks like: I want to see more of it! Yeah”. At community college, Ernesto realized that he was a good writer and started writing for the college newspaper. “That was my first time around in any kind of environment where I was like having a really good time. I was like really proud of myself: like, wow, I got something published in the school newspaper”. Additionally, undocumented youth often become members of campus based immigrant rights organizations, which teach them the power of social movement organizing.

There was a group on campus that was about to be formed that advocates for undocumented students. So I joined that club and that's when I started learning a lot more about AB540, the federal DREAM act, the California DREAM act. So I started learning about all that stuff. I started learning more about politics and how it works. I started understanding politics and politicians. (...) I started understanding the importance of me sharing my experience, my stories. So I started doing a lot of different interviews, I started speaking in public a lot. (Alejandro)

### **Beating the Odds through the Undocumented Youth Movement**

#### *Empowerment and Overcoming Fear*

Through political activism, undocumented youth learn how to defend themselves against anti-immigrant sentiments and how their story can be used as a tool for lobbying and as a means of pulling resources. This process of publicly coming out as undocumented and collectively calling attention to their precarious limbo situation is an important step towards overcoming the fear and stigma that comes along with being undocumented. Being able to come to this point is derived from the growing self-confidence and motivation that comes through their educational success. At this stage, their educational capital and self-confidence are extended by their active involvement in the undocumented student movement, which is then leveraged into individual empowerment and the embracing of a collective undocumented identity.

The big moment for me was at UCLA IDEAS and becoming undocumented and unafraid. Really embracing what it means to be undocumented. (...) When you can stand up and say, I'm undocumented and this is my story, and this being a powerful tool. I embraced it and I became like a full on organizer. (Nadia)

Clearly, Nadia made the transition from *just* being an undocumented student to becoming an undocumented student *and* a political activist who is not only okay with her undocumented status, but she embraces it fully. This is similar to what many other undocumented students experience when they join the undocumented youth movement. The campus based undocumented students movement serves as a springboard for becoming a full political activist beyond the campus walls. After they graduate, undocumented youth continue their organizing and advocacy work for undocumented youth by joining a Dream Team. Dream Teams, such as Dream Team Los Angeles, provide a platform through which they can continue their upward social mobility path.

The importance of individual feelings of empowerment that are generated by the col-





Figure 1: Alejandro could not stop smiling while getting arrested.  
Source: The Authors © The Authors.

lective actions of the undocumented student movement cannot be underestimated. Many DREAMers see it as the key aspect of their active involvement in the movement. Esperanza echoes this clearly: “So that’s another thing, again that empowerment, right. I’ve been able to be okay, be more than okay, be proud of being undocumented”. These now self-confident and educated youths come together to create a space in which they can empower each other through the collective of the movement. The connections and resources within the movement’s networks make it possible for DREAMers to overcome the fears that their parents endure on a daily basis. While their parents often stay in the shadows, these undocumented youths are publicly presenting themselves as undocumented, showing their faces and names in actions and interviews recorded by the media.

This process of overcoming the fear of the authorities is especially enlightening in terms of the movement’s organization of civil disobedience to raise awareness to their precarious situation of legal limbo. During the fieldwork, DTLA undertook a civil disobedience action for the administrative relief campaign. In this action,

five DREAMers got themselves arrested by doing a sit-in in the office of the chief prosecutor of Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE). Maria, Alejandro and Nadia were the DTLA members who were arrested in this action. The fact that these youths dare to face their worst fears head-on by performing such an action shows that they feel safe, self-confident and empowered enough to place themselves at such risk (see picture below). Alejandro explains that, despite the fact that he was facing possible deportation by being arrested, he felt really powerful during the action of civil disobedience because he could feel the energy and support of the movement behind him.

So, 8 floors beneath us we could hear the crowd downstairs cheering, chanting and it was just a very beautiful moment. And then as we walked outside the offices and everyone was just there and it was. As soon as I saw everybody, I just started smiling because it was just so beautiful, like: Wow, this is amazing. I just could not stop smiling. I just had to smile, because it was just all the energy that was in the air. It was just beautiful. (...) It gave me a boost of energy and it gave me a confirmation that what I was doing was the right thing to do. (Alejandro: see figure 1)

Some DTLA members call these civil disobedience actions “sacred acts”. They function as key moments in the transformative process from being fearful and “closeted” to becoming fully empowered and liberated from their fear of the authorities. In other words, it is the complete “embracing of the undocumented identity” that causes them to feel stronger than ever. Maria explains how she felt after she participated in this action of civil disobedience:

I was building for it, I knew it was going to happen and so when it finally did, I felt liberated. (...) So, it was multiple levels: at a personal level I felt really liberated, ehm, I was worried about my mom, mostly because she was really sad and worried, but she was also very proud (...) So, I was very happy to be in there [ICE office], very proud.

*Collective Status Enhancement:  
De-Stigmatization*

The individual process of empowerment and overcoming fear that DREAMers go through leads to an enhancement of the status of the collective. Because the individuals present themselves as powerful and capable personas in the

public sphere, the collective identity and status of the DREAMer is enhanced. The persona of the DREAMer becomes synonymous with educated, powerful, assertive and capable human beings. They are no longer un-worthy “illegals”, but a powerful and legitimate political group.

Through their public performances in the media and at protests and rallies, they are publicly asked about their opinions on particular political issues. Not only are they asked to give their opinions on particular migration issues, but they are also asked to give their positions on more general political issues. Their voice and political position as a legitimate political group becomes valuable for the general public. During one of the DTLA meetings, the group was asked whether DTLA could send two representatives to attend a press-conference in which the local LA union, the LA County Fed, would publicly announce their support for President Obama and comprehensive immigration reform. Two DREAMers went to the press-conference and presented their personal stories (see figure 2).

The DREAMers have become such a powerful political group that they have many contacts



Figure 2: Two DREAMers (on the left) are asked to share their personal story and to take a political position. Source: The Authors © The Authors.



Figure 3: Dream Team Los Angeles (DTLA) receives the Community Leaders Award for their notable advocacy. Source: The Authors © The Authors.

among significant Los Angeles politicians. Even the mayor of Los Angeles came and visited DTLA at the UCLA Downtown Labor Center for the celebration of the passing of the California DREAM Act. During this celebration, DTLA was presented with the Community Leaders Award, granted by the California Immigrant Policy Center (see figure 3).

As a result of the national administrative relief campaign described earlier, a small group of DREAMers from all over the nation, including DTLA member Nadia, was invited to come to the White House to discuss the demands of the campaign with Cecilia Muñoz (Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council). DREAMers have become such a powerful political collective that they are even on the cover of TIME magazine<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Acquiring a Professional Activist Disposition*

That's when I became the media person. (...) So that's when I developed my first press-release and that's when I started calling media up and starting developing those relationships. (Nadia)

By participating in the movement, individuals learn the skills and mentality to acquire a professional activist disposition. Through the DREAM movement, undocumented students learn how to behave and perform as political activists and start to speak the social movement language. Words such as “educating”, “messaging”, “framing”, doing “outreach” and “advocacy work” have become a normal part of their vocabulary.

I was advocacy chair, before I was co-chair, so I think at that first march, that first rally, the student of colour conference; I just really liked that feeling of being able to share my story in front of such a huge crowd. And so I kinda just kept going with that. I was involved with the external vice-president's office and so that also exposed me to a lot of different issues, just in case of like, educational accessibility and budget cuts everywhere right. So, I think that showed me what a movement was. From there it just grew. I mean you go to retreats, you go to like meetings, you just kinda get in it, that's the only way to really learn about it is to immerse yourself in it and I did just that (Esperanza).

DREAMers operate in a highly professional environment. Because DTLA is located at the UCLA Downtown Labor Center, their weekly meetings are held in a professional office space with all the necessary facilities. This professional atmo-

<sup>1</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20120625,00.html>



sphere and DTLA's connections to the university and professional activist organizations, connects undocumented youth to the world outside their deprived neighbourhoods. Dream Teams function as highly professional organizations. At Dream Team Los Angeles, weekly Monday meetings are very important to keep track of ongoing business. Every week, they discuss what is happening the upcoming week, who is doing what, which protests are on the agenda, what DTLA's stance is on upcoming political issues, and how the national campaigns are going. DTLA's activities are organized in different committees: the legal committee, the community education and outreach committee, the development committee, the media committee, the policy committee, the self-care and healing committee, and the arts committee.

These committees all have their say through committee chairs. These chairs "report back" to DTLA during the weekly meetings, so the other DTLA members know what is going on and how their activities are proceeding. Through their active involvement in the movement, undocumented students learn about legal issues, immigration policies and how politics work in general. Maria: "So we had to do so much educating of ourselves, from like these three branches, how does the executive branch work? Who has the power? Do all these legal research on it".

In this process of becoming more aware of the policies and legal issues surrounding their political causes and campaigns, undocumented youth become politicized. Through this politicization process, undocumented students become aware that their problematic position is not given by nature, but is created through more restrictive immigration laws and policies and the tightening of the border. This political awareness is important, because it encourages undocumented youth to fully immerse themselves in the world of political organizing. This process of politicization enables them to feel confident and secure in speaking to politicians.

### *Job-, Internship- and Funding Opportunities*

The way that I got into Good Jobs LA was via an internship during this summer. The UCLA Labor Center and United We Dream were able to collaborate and put the Summer Internship together which hosted about 104 individuals across the country. I was one of the fortunate ones who were admitted into the program. We were placed with Good Jobs LA and we were doing a youth project. The project went really well and they ended up calling us back and told us that they wanted us to work on their campaign and since then I've been working with them. (Julio)

As Julio's quote illustrates, the movement also informs undocumented students about job-, internships- and funding opportunities. Having a professional activist disposition helps them gain entry into jobs and internships within social justice organizations. As Ernesto states; "We are creating roads into other paths like working with unions, working with non-profits. (...) Like creating and building those resources and expanding those support networks that we work so hard to build up". Through these large networks, individual participants of the movement can benefit from the flow of information, resources and contacts that are embedded within these networks. Through these networks, undocumented youth within the movement have access to job-, internship- and funding opportunities that create higher chances of attaining better statuses and occupations. The internships themselves are also important ways of acquiring the professional activist disposition. The website of the UCLA Downtown Labor Center details what the internship entails.

Dream summer is a ten-week, full-time internship program that places undocumented student leaders with social justice, labour and queer/LGBTQ organizations. This internship experience provides leadership development and training for undocumented leaders and strengthens multigenerational social-justice movements. Each participant will receive a \$5,000 award to support her or his educational goals. (Website UCLA Labor Center)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Website UCLA Labor Center: <http://labor.ucla.edu/>, website visited on 4 June 2013.

Jorge, Nadia, Esperanza, Maria, Julio and Ernesto all participated in this Dream Summer internship. Through these experiences, they were able to get new positions at other activist organizations. In many ways, the UCLA Downtown Labor Center helps DTLA members build their resume by offering jobs or internships. During the fieldwork, Nadia and Esperanza were interns there and Jorge worked as a paid staff member.

Since DREAMers have recently been granted temporary work permits, they have actually been able to use the skills, internships and job opportunities they acquired through the networks of the movement. They can now legally use both their educational qualifications, as well as the resume-building work they have done within the movement in professional jobs within professional activists' organizations.

So I currently work at the UCLA Labor Center (...) In October I was able to start to work there as a staff person (...) because I knew the project director and the director of the Labor Center. They had been supporters of the DREAM Act and the DREAM movement, so I had known them and done work with them before and they were able to offer me, or like accept me as an intern at the UCLA Labor Center and now I work there, I am regular staff. I run, or I coordinate, the DREAM Resource Center project, which is a project that focuses on issues affecting undocumented students. (Jorge)

The DREAM movement itself also creates many career building possibilities that offer undocumented students that are active in the movement opportunities to expand their skills and knowledge within a professional environment. Esperanza:

I'm a board member for United We Dream, I was recently elected, which is really a big privilege. I gave a speech in Congress and I was elected into that position end of last year. And so I'm gonna be focusing more on the organizational aspect of organizing. (...) You know, being a board member of UWD, which has become such a huge organization in such a small period of time, I think is a very unique role that I have never taken on before. I'm excited to learn and continue growing as a person and as an activist.

Actively participating in the movement, thus, offers undocumented youth the possibility of upward social mobility. As their dispositions and life possibilities have changed so much, doing the jobs their parents do is no longer an option. Ernesto reflects on this: "If they want me to become a supermarket manager, if they think that is being a success, well that's their problem." Often, their parents do not really understand what their lives as professional activists entail. Nadia states: "My mom does not understand what I do, so she just tells people I'm a secretary."

### Conclusion and Discussion

In this paper, we have shown how the undocumented Latino youth movement functions as vehicle for upward social mobility for the educated and undocumented members of the movement. We have argued that the political engagement of these undocumented youths builds upon and amplifies the benefits of their successful educational trajectories. By conceptualizing upward social mobility of undocumented youth through a qualitative ethnographic study, we delineate four elements of social mobility that distinguishes these undocumented youths from their undocumented parents. Through their participation in this movement, they move up on the ladder of social mobility through four specific elements of social mobility generated by the collective actions of the movement: 1) They become empowered and overcome their fear of migration authorities; 2) They achieve and enhance their collective status by transforming highly stigmatized youth into successful and legitimate political subjects; 3) They acquire a professional activist disposition; and 4) They gain access to a large and open network that offers them job-, internships- and funding opportunities.

The subjective experiences of these youths through the movement differ significantly from those of their parents. This is a major practical, mental and symbolic step on the ladder of social mobility. Moreover, the social advancements within the lives of these youths can also be considered elements of upward social mobil-



ity in the classic sense of occupational or educational social mobility. The described processes, in which stigmatized and marginalized undocumented youth become empowered and self-confident professional and politicized activists, give these youths the know-how and mentality to transfer these acquired skills and dispositions into other domains of social life. Due to the acquisition of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), undocumented migrants can leverage their educational capital in the social movement, which allows for them to transfer these skills into occupational spheres and other social movement settings, thus allowing for upward mobility.

The insights presented in this study can be used for future research to study whether other social movements also function as vehicles for creating upward social mobility for highly stigmatized groups. Moreover, while the researchers suggest that these findings may be generalizable to DREAMers in other cities and states in the US, the question to what extent similarities or differences may exist between DREAMers – especially contrasting LA and California to more repressive states and cities in the US – is worth exploring. Although ethnographies usually do not make grand sweeping statements about other localities and groups, the researchers see clear connections between DREAMers in California and DREAMers in Arizona. When DREAMers in Arizona are threatened by more repressive immigration laws, DREAMers from all across the US protest and mobilize. Additionally, this research could compare these findings on the experiences of social mobility with other segments of this highly stigmatized group, such as the parents of these undocumented youths and undocumented youths not part of this movement.

Moreover, whether DREAMers will be able to transfer some of their political skills and successes to their communities, which they are bent on doing, remains to be seen, as will what happens to these empowered youths and their parents and communities in the future. Neverthe-

less, this study speaks to their current ability to beat the odds.

The protest actions of the DREAMers mentioned in this article have definitely helped them to change their prospects for the better. The civil disobedience action already described for Alejandro, Nadia and Maria – the DREAMers who were arrested for this action – as well as other undocumented Latino youth has had important consequences. After their release from prison, a few hours after being arrested, they continued to fight for administrative relief which led to President Obama's granting DREAM eligible youth temporary relief from detention and deportation, as well as temporary work permits (DACA). Alejandro, Nadia and Maria are still quite active with Dream Team Los Angeles. Alejandro recently completed his Bachelors in Deaf Studies, and will continue with a Masters' degree while Nadia and Maria are now legally working as paid staff for an activist organization within the greater Los Angeles area.

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