

Como Hablar en Silencio (Like Speaking in Silence)

Issues of Language, Culture, and Identity
of Central Americans in Los Angeles

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The words of Chabela (pseudonym), a young Guatemalan mother, begin the title of this chapter. The silencing she refers to is learning to pass as Mexican by masking her Central American language and identity, beginning with her trip from Guatemala through Mexico to the United States. The eloquent metaphor, speaking in silence, belies the complex and "expanding repertoires" (Zentella, 1997a) of language, culture, and identity that many Central American immigrants acquire in the United States. Although concealment or hiddenness is part of their experience, so is learning to speak new languages and dialects. Official institutions, including schools, know little of either of these aspects of Central American life in Los Angeles.

This chapter explores the ways in which language and culture affect the identity development of three Central American immigrant families residing in the Los Angeles area, based on focus group data collected at the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) in Los Angeles and participant observation. Interspersed within the participants' narratives are selections of traditional folklore, as well as writings by local Central American youth.

My interest in Central Americans began more than 15 years ago, when I was a bilingual first-grade teacher in Glendale, California, a Los Angeles suburb. During a meeting for teachers, a colleague who taught in the English segment of our program asked, "And how is Ruth doing, she's such a space cadet?" This derogatory comment about one of my students was a common label for children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. I was surprised because Ruth was not a poor student; her test scores were in the average range. As I observed her more closely, however, I noticed that she did have difficulty paying attention and completing her work on time; perhaps this was why the teacher referred to her as a "space cadet." I decided to devote my master's thesis and doctoral work to Central American immigrant children (Lavadenz, 1991, 1994) and learned that traumatically violent war-zone experiences increased the likelihood that those children would have difficulty staying on task, concentrating, and not daydreaming. The students who constituted my case studies reported that they were daydreaming about family members left behind—cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents who were not as fortunate as they had been. I also learned that Central American immigrant students were more likely to be referred to special education, despite the fact that they were not low-performing students. Suárez-Orozco (1989) attributed the "achievement motivation" of Central American students to an increased sense of responsibility and obligation because of survivor guilt; that is, they had

been able to escape the horrors of civil war but their relatives had not. Despite the time that has elapsed since that study, Central American experiences, history, culture, and language continue to be largely ignored in public schools and in teacher preparation programs. Central American students and families do not see themselves represented in the curriculum, nor are their "funds of knowledge" incorporated into classroom practices (Chapter 9, this volume). This study cannot do justice to all Central American immigrant experiences; it is an exploratory examination of the historical context of the language and cultural socialization practices in Salvadoran and Guatemalan families and some implications for practice.

CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S.

Central Americans, from the seven nations shown in Figure 10.1, represent 4.8 percent, or 1,686,937, of the 38.8 million Hispanics in the nation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000b). Salvadorans and Guatemalans, the two largest groups of Central Americans in Los Angeles and the nation, arrived mainly in the 1980s, at the height of civil wars caused, in part, by decades-long economic, political, and military interventions by the United States (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). Ignoring pleas from international human rights groups, the United States denied Salvadorans and Guatemalans political refugee status, while granting it to Cubans and Vietnamese. Three decades of political and economic turmoil in El Salvador and Guatemala resulted in unprecedented unauthorized immigration to the United States. The following historical and sociopolitical context is necessary to understand the experiences of Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants in the United States.



Figure 10.1 The seven countries in Central America

El Salvador

Guanacos, as the people from El Salvador refer to themselves, although the term is used derogatorily in other Spanish-speaking countries to mean “country bumpkin,” have a long history of political, social, and economic revolutions. A strong oligarchy of 14 families controlled the land and the governments since independence from Spain in 1821 until recent times, creating a quasi-feudal state composed of rich landowners and indigenous peoples and/or mestizos (Clements, 1984). Uprisings by the poor led to the murder of 30,000 indigenous peoples in 1932, known as *La Matanza* (the Massacre) in the collective consciousness, and resulted in a sharing of power between the 14 families and the military (Menjívar, 2000). In the 1970s and 1980s, the Roman Catholic clergy’s political and human rights involvement challenged those in power, who were supported by the economic and military intervention of the United States. The assassination of Archbishop Romero in 1980 triggered civil chaos, and many Salvadorans experienced violence firsthand. Torture, mutilation, and the disappearance of those suspected of siding with the pro-government or guerrilla revolutionaries were everyday occurrences. Death squads massacred entire villages, and migration through Mexico to the United States seemed the only escape. Today, Salvadoran exiles provide the main source of revenue for the country, in the form of remittances sent to family members. But more than a decade of terrorism left an indelible mark on Salvadorans everywhere (Menjívar, 2000).

Guatemala

Guatemala has the largest indigenous population of Central America; 80 percent to 90 percent of the U.S. refugee population are Mayan, and 10 percent to 20 percent are *Ladino* (European-origin or mixed indigenous/European Guatemalans). More than 10,000 Mayan Guatemalans live in Los Angeles (Loucky & Moors, 2000). Public schools do not request information regarding indigenous languages or origin as part of the enrollment process, ignoring Guatemalan-origin students who may speak one of the four primary Mayan languages and compounding the language-learning problems of this population. For Mayan speakers, Spanish is their second language and English the third. The diversity within the Mayan community is central to their identity. For example, the term *indio* (Indian) is derogatory to Mayans, as it negates their community of origin, listed here in order of predominance: Q’anjob’al (51 percent), Mam (16 percent), Chuj (16 percent), and Jakatek (7 percent) (Billings, 2000). The shift from being Mayan in Guatemala to being Guatemalan—or *chapines*, as Guatemalans are called—in the United States marks a transformation of language and identity that comes on the heels of years of traumatic deprivation, displacement, and violence.

Conflict in Guatemala was rooted in economic, social, and political imbalances similar to those in El Salvador. Indigenous social networks and organizations were violently suppressed by the U.S.-backed government, causing uprisings that the government blamed on leftists (Menjívar, 2002). In the guerrilla warfare that followed, hundreds of villages were destroyed, between half a million and a million people were displaced, and deaths exceeded hundreds of thousands. Because children were particularly vulnerable to kidnapping and induction into either the government or guerrilla armies during the civil war, many Guatemalan families were separated. Children and adolescents often emigrated alone in order to avoid transcription, as captured in the film *El Norte*. In 1996, following a 36-year period of civil war, a peace agreement was signed.

CENTRAL AMERICANS IN LOS ANGELES

Approximately 190,000 Salvadorans and 100,000 Guatemalans live in Los Angeles County as of 2000 (4.4 percent and 2.7 percent of the Latino population, respectively), although

organizations such as CARECEN claim the total is closer to 500,000 (see Table 10.1). Research regarding the resiliency, sense of community, and work ethic of Central American immigrant communities is very recent (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001; Loucky & Moors, 2000; Menjívar, 2002). Transnational networks link communities in the United States with immigrants' hometowns and provide major economic, social, and political resources (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). These networks are the key to the lived experiences of Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles because they are central to their sense of community and to their adjustment:

Primary activities and core underlying values relating to work, social interconnectedness and family priorities, as well as prior experience with hardship and even violence, enhance rather than inhibit their adjustment in Los Angeles.

(Loucky & Moors, 2000, p. 215)

The historical legacy of activism that infuses Salvadoran and Guatemalan networks in the Los Angeles area led to the establishment of CARECEN and other self-help and social service institutions (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). In addition, political groups were formed to support revolutionary movements in their countries of origin. The networks are both informal (personal contacts) and formal (organizations), including hometown associations—groups of first- and second-generation immigrants from the same towns and villages. Hometown associations provide opportunities to socialize and reminisce, and they raise funds for their hometowns (Menjívar, 2000). The adults in this study participated in formal and informal organizing, and their children attended some meetings and events.

The hub of the recently arrived Central American community is CARECEN, a cultural, legal, and educational center founded in 1983 by Salvadorans, U.S. church leaders, attorneys, and activists. CARECEN is located west of downtown Los Angeles, in an area where 95 percent of the residents speak Spanish, 35 percent live at or below the poverty level (as compared to 18.9 percent for Los Angeles as a whole), and the dropout rate for Latino students at the local Belmont High School is 56 percent (in contrast to the national Latino dropout rate of approximately 22 percent). Pico-Union, the location of the focus groups' interviews, remains a central receiving point for Central American immigrants, although Mexican immigration has also increased.

Table 10.1 Central Americans in Los Angeles County

<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage of Total Population N=9,519,338</i>	<i>Percentage of Hispanic/Latino Population N=4,242,213</i>
Belize	34,754	.4	.8
Costa Rica	6,232	.07	1.0
Guatemala	100,341	1.0	2.7
Honduras	20,029	.2	.5
Nicaragua	20,775	.2	.5
Panama	3,453	.04	.08
Salvador	187,193	2.0	4.4
Total	372,777	4.0	9.0

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census (2000b).

Focus group interviews and ethnographic observations were conducted at CARECEN during 2001, facilitated by the organization's president, Angela Sembrano, and interviews with three immigrant families took place in several locations in Los Angeles in 2002. Amarildo Osvaldo (all names of family members are pseudonyms), one of the Salvadoran fathers, is an employee at CARECEN. His family consists of five children, ranging in age from 5 to 20, and his wife, Betty. He and his wife immigrated 15 years ago. Betty stays home to take care of their youngest, who has Down syndrome, because of his special needs.

Roberto (age 28), Alberto (age 24), and Humberto (age 17) Méndez comprise the second family in this study. As is typical of many Salvadoran families with some resources, their mother remained in El Salvador and the boys were sent to "El Norte" to avoid conscription by either the military or the guerrillas. Dispersal, and subsequent reunification after many years of separation, is common in Central American families. Roberto had attended school only through the sixth grade in El Salvador in order to help support the family. He came to the United States when he was 12 years old and recently completed his General Education Diploma (high school equivalency), working continuously to send money regularly to his mother so that his two brothers could immigrate. While there is no longer a threat of military or *guerrillero* conscription, the brothers fled to escape the paralyzing poverty and economic upheaval caused by almost three decades of war.

The third family, the Grameldas from Guatemala, includes Chabela, the mother whose words provided the title for this chapter. In 1990 she traveled from Guatemala through Mexico without documentation; today she lives with her Guatemalan husband and two young children, ages 9 and 11, in a suburb of Los Angeles. Some of Chabela's family members immigrated to Los Angeles in the late 1960s, reflecting the multilayered experiences of many Central American families.

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY, CHALLENGES, AND CHANGE

The linguistic diversity that exists among Central Americans who immigrate to the United States serves to identify each group with its homeland and links compatriots to each other, but language links are stretched here in new ways. Central America is not uniformly Spanish-speaking, but indigenous languages like Guatemalan Mayan are ignored. Central American Spanish-speakers share some features that distinguish them from Mexicans and other Spanish speakers, but each country in the region also has distinctive vocabulary and pronunciations. In the United States, the Spanish of Central Americans changes under the influence of Mexicans, and every group's language changes as a result of contact with English. The push of language and dialect contact on the one hand and the pull of national or ethnic identity on the other characterize Central Americans' efforts against being silenced and complicate the teaching of English and Spanish to their children.

Regional variations in vocabulary reflect the "pluralistic cultural identity" that characterizes Latin America, which evolved as each country sought to separate itself from Spain's colonial linguistic domination (García, 1999, p. 20). Central Americans identify with their country's lexicon, but maintaining it marks them as non-Mexican during the migratory process through Mexico to the United States, which can cause them to be returned to Central America. For example, the silencing that Chabela Gramelda describes (*hablar en silencio* [speaking in silence]) refers to the monitoring and self-censorship she experienced both during immigration (to avoid deportation from Mexico to Guatemala) and in her interactions with her Mexican-origin friends and co-workers in the United States (as a way to "fit in" and be understood in Mexican-dominant Los Angeles). She recalled having to learn the Mexican national anthem and Mexican words, which she had to substitute for Guatemalan terms (see Table 10.2 for examples).

Table 10.2 Examples of Words/Semantic Differences

Salvadoran Spanish	Guatemalan Spanish	Mexican Spanish	English
<i>Food</i>			
casamiento minutas	arroz y frijoles granizada	arroz y frijoles raspado	rice and beans snow cone (shaved ice)
chompipe ayote	chompipe guicoy	guajolote calabacita	turkey squash
<i>People</i>			
cachibona chele cipote, bicho	mamita canche patojo, chiris	mi jefita güero chamaco, escuintle	mom, ma blonde child
<i>School-related</i>			
chaqueta pajilla bolsón diccionario	chumpa pajilla mochila amansaburros	chamarra popote mochila diccionario	jacket straw backpack dictionary

Chabela explains the constant burden of the double consciousness she feels—that is, having to suppress her Central American identity to pass as Mexican:

Siempre estoy conciente de con quién estoy hablando, desde entonces es como que una parte la tengo que silenciar para poder pasar, o que me entiendan.

I'm always conscious of who I'm talking to, since then [crossing the borders] there's a part of me that I've had to silence to get by, or so that I could be understood.

But it is not always easy to remember which words must be avoided or changed lest they give you away and which can serve to align you with the dominant group. (Re) learning common words for foods, people, and utensils (including items used in school) in the Mexican variety of Spanish is a common experience for immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala. Consequently, Mexican terms are substituted and ultimately replace equivalent words in Salvadoran and Guatemalan varieties of Spanish. The language variety to which Chabela was socialized and raised was suppressed and silenced as a result of immigrating to the United States. For Chabela and others like her, self-monitoring and censorship are primarily an attempt to avoid being marked for possible deportation to Guatemala by Mexican officials. (If they are deported to Mexico, the possibility of returning is greater.) Thus, Chabela's experience reflects many Central Americans' awareness of the dual problem that their national variety of Spanish represents; that is, it identifies them for immigration police and it labels them as outsiders in their Mexican neighborhoods.

Still, it is easier to work on not using particular terms than on changing the way you pronounce vowels and consonants. Several consonants distinguish Salvadorans and Guatemalans from Mexicans, such as the final /n/ that sounds like the velar <ng> of English *sing* instead of the standard alveolar /n/ of Mexicans, and the double <ll>, which is

pronounced /y/ but with more palatal friction in Mexican Spanish. Each Central American nation differs from the others in its pronunciation of one or more consonants (Lipski, 1994); for example, Salvadorans aspirate the <s> at the end of syllables, as in /ehpanyol/ for *español*. These few examples suffice to alert teachers of Spanish to expect differences that should be distinguished from errors in reading/decoding. Teachers of English should also be aware of the potential influence of the way Spanish is spoken in each country on the English of children from those nations.

The most important distinguishing feature of Central American Spanish is at the grammatical level. Salvadorans and Guatemalans use *vos*, an informal second-person subject pronoun (you) and its accompanying verb forms (known as *voseo*), instead of *tú*, which may or may not be maintained by the children of immigrants (Lipski, 1994). The more formal *usted* is used for politeness, consistent with other Spanish-speaking populations that use *tú* informally. Examples of *voseo*, which involves accent and root changes from Standard Spanish (SS), include the following (in bold):

- **¿Vos sos Salvadoreño, no?** (You are Salvadoran, no?)
(SS) *¿Tú eres Salvadoreño, no?*
- **¡Dejate de babosadas y hacé lo que te digo!** (Stop your foolishness and do what I say!)
(SS) *¡Déjate de babosadas y haz lo que te digo!*

Because second-person verb forms are so frequent and occur in common phrases—such as *Vení* (Come) and *Fijáte vos* (Look)—they are a dead giveaway and often avoided in public settings where Latino unity is important (Chapter 5, this volume). All of the Central Americans adopted the formal *usted* with me; when questioned about this, they responded that addressing non-Central Americans (I am Cuban) with *usted* was a sign of politeness.

Contact with English contributes to code-switching among the varieties of Spanish and English that are part of the expanded Central American repertoire. Hector Tobar captures the vitality of this mixing in his novel *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), in a section about Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles:

Fijáte vos, que ese voto (Imagine [Central American], that dude [Mexican]) from *La Mara* got in a fight with that dude from *La* (the) Eighteenth Street who lives down the block. Yeah, right there in the class. Real *chingazos* (blows [Mexican]). *El de La Salvatrucha estaba* (The one from the [Mara] Salvatrucha gang was) bleeding *y todo* (and everything).

(p. 59)

The overall effect of the contact between dialects and languages in Los Angeles is that the features of Central American (e.g., Guatemalan and Salvadoran) varieties of Spanish diminish over time (Parodi, 2003; Silva-Corvalán, 1994).

The most serious threat is not invisibility, however, but language loss. Where contact between languages occurs among more and less socially powerful groups, the result is monolingualism for the weaker language group (Romaine, 1995). Central Americans encounter language contact on a daily basis as a result of their interactions with the regional dominant variety of Mexican Spanish. They are conscious about the monitoring of their own language usage outside the home, and they are also aware of the pitfalls of language loss, as in the case of the Méndez family. Roberto Méndez, the oldest son, head of household, and guardian of his younger brother, reported that he feels that it is his responsibility to maintain language ties to his native Guatemala. He makes a conscious attempt to understand and be understood by non-Guatemalans, but it makes him very uncomfortable:

Cuando estamos oyendo un partido de fútbol, y quizás tengo que ir con los mexicanos . . . quizás lo haga—que tengo que hablar como ellos. Yo siento que no estoy hablando lo correcto. Siento que estoy fingiendo. . .

When we're listening to a soccer game, maybe I have to go with the Mexicans . . . I may do it—that I have to speak like they do. I feel like I'm not speaking correctly. I feel as if I'm faking.

All three brothers concluded that they preferred their own variety of Spanish to the Mexican variety, which they claim they do not use with each other. However, in an off-tape interaction as the brothers were preparing to leave, they used a typically Mexican expression: *¡Orale voto, vámonos*. (OK dude, Let's go.) Linguistic and cultural assimilation may begin as an adaptation to outside pressures, but it can end up transforming in-group practices.

PRINCIPAL CONCERNS ABOUT EDUCATION, LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

Pico-Union/Westlake is known as the most violent section of Los Angeles, where rival gangs, *Mara Salvatrucha* (originally restricted to Salvadorans and Guatemalans, it includes Mexicans now) and 18th Street, reside. It is a bustling area, home to the largest elementary school in Los Angeles Unified School District, Hoover Street School, which many of our families' children attended.

A total of eighteen parents volunteered for the three focus group interviews that took place at CARECEN. Content analysis of the data revealed four main themes that emerged from our conversations: (1) quality schooling and literacy practices, (2) child-rearing practices, (3) Spanish-language usage in the home, and (4) memories of war and immigration. The following sections summarize the key themes that emerged from the focus groups.

Quality Schooling: Supporting Literacy at Home and School

Quality schooling was the overriding concern voiced by Central American parents at the CARECEN meetings, corroborating recent research on Central Americans in Los Angeles (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001; López, Popkin, & Telles, 1996; Menjívar, 2000). The parents in our focus groups reported creating spaces, both physical and temporal, for their children to do homework, read books, and talk about school. In the Osvaldo household, for example, homework is often "apprenticed" to older children; the responsibilities are shared and distributed across family members so that the burden does not continually fall on the mother, who devotes most of her attention to her youngest son.

Mr. Osvaldo expressed his concern over the need to "re-educate" Central American families about the educational system in the United States:

Necesitamos campañas para reeducar a los padres de familia. No hay comunicación de la escuela. El decir "estamos abierto" no funciona. Tenemos que fortalecer el lazo entre el hogar y la escuela para forcer [sic] una nueva generación Salvadoreña.

We need campaigns to re-educate parents. There is no communication from the school. Saying "our doors are open" doesn't work. We need to strengthen the bond between home and school in order to forge a new generation of Salvadorans.

Most of the parents had not completed high school, but they were articulate about the differences between life in their country of origin and life in Los Angeles. They employed a "dual frame of reference" (Gibson & Ogbu, 1991), particularly concerning values, traditions,

and schooling. *Educación* (education) versus *escolarización* (schooling) is a key distinction in many Latino households that differentiates between the values taught in the home as compared to the process of being schooled (Afterword, this volume).

Child-Rearing Principles, Values, and Traditions

Group participants stressed the importance of raising their children (*educar a nuestros hijos*) to understand the value of being Salvadoran or Guatemalan and American, but they expressed concerns about the differences in schooling in both countries. For example, they commented on the informal dress of U.S. teachers, interpreting it as a lack of formality or seriousness on the part of teachers, which resulted in a lack of respect in the classroom (by students and teachers).

Spanish-Language Use in the Home

Transmitting and maintaining traditions, norms, and values as part of child rearing were important to the families; Amarildo Osvaldo notes the challenges to maintaining traditional Salvadoran values, especially Spanish:

Es difícil inculcar las tradiciones de nuestra cultura a nuestros hijos cuando no las viven. No es de inculcarles de lo que fue, sino de lo que viven aquí. Por ejemplo, el hábito del español se va desplazando por la preocupación del inglés.

It's difficult to pass on our cultural traditions to our children when they are not living them. It's not about teaching them what was, but rather about what they live here. For instance, the habit of speaking Spanish is being replaced by the attention paid to [learning] English.

Roberto Méndez also reflected on his high esteem for English, while maintaining traditions. He was a devout member of a Christian evangelical church attended primarily by Guatemalan immigrants, but in his comments, about the kind of wife he was looking for, he stressed English and work skills more than religion: "*que sepa inglés y que pueda trabajar en otro sector, menos el doméstico*" (who knows English and who can work in another profession, not a domestic worker). Roberto's dual focus combines the traditional Guatemalan value of finding a hardworking wife with prerequisites for succeeding in the dominant society: She must know English and have marketable skills.

Memories of War and immigration

Embedded in Central American *educación* is the transmission of feelings about war violence and violence on television. Referring to his experiences and memories of the war in El Salvador, one father of a 9-year-old reported watching the violence of the news on television with his daughter: "*¿Ves eso? ¡Yo viví peor que eso!*" (See that? I lived through worse than that!). This man spoke openly with his daughter, but most parents preferred not to discuss their war experiences too extensively, for fear of reviving painful memories (Lavadenz, 1991, 1994). Often compounding these memories were the memories and realities of immigration, as in Chabela's account of having to "fake" her true Guatemalan identity, and the ambiguity of immigration status.

VISIBLY HIDDEN

Central American immigrant parents/caregivers reported that they want their children to succeed in the United States but also to understand their histories, especially because these

are absent from the schooling of their children. However, the narratives of Central American immigrants' children reveal the challenges involved in responding to as simple a question as "Where are you from?" The following autobiographical excerpt by Marlon Morales (2000), an adolescent Salvadoran immigrant, illustrates how children are conflicted between hiding and expressing their true identity in school:

On my first day in Mr. Bax's fourth grade class, a little boy named Alex came up to me and asked me where I was from. . . . Where are you from? I had learned by the time I was nine that there were many answers to this question. I was searching for the one I'd give Alex. "Here" wouldn't work. . . . I learned that the hard way. Saying "here" always made me the fool of someone's joke.

"Mmm," I started. "Mmm," I continued looking him in the eye. I was going to say Mexico, add, "but born here" and leave it at that. My mom said I'm supposed to say this all the time, even at . . . school. Anything Salvadoran like *pupusas* [stuffed corn meal tortillas], *pacaya* [a vegetable], *flor de izote* [a mushroom] and Spanish was always left at home, never in public. Regardless, I looked back into Alex's eyes. "El Salvador," I blurted out. "I'm from El Salvador."

"Cool," said Alex approvingly. "What part of Mexico is that in?" . . . Was I really Mexican after all? Was El Salvador a state of Mexico? I really didn't know. Got to ask our moms.

(p. 66)

Marlon Morales's narrative describes the blurring and shifting of identities that occur in part from the fear of being "found out," as Chabela reported. The undocumented status of many Central Americans leads them to try "faking it," "passing as a (documented) Mexican," and becoming invisible to avoid deportation. Countless tales of deportation hearings reiterated the importance of avoiding identification as Central American, if only to increase the chance of being deported to Mexico rather than to El Salvador or Guatemala. This important facet of the socialization of Central American immigrant students is central to their social, cultural, and linguistic identities. It is illustrated with some humor by Raquel Josefina Gutiérrez, a young Salvadoran-Mexican writer who describes the struggle of being a "part-time Salvi." While she's "down with *La Virgen (de Guadalupe)* . . . To be Mexican in public and Salvadoran at home gets a little draining" (Gutiérrez, 2000, p. 29).

The following lyrical text, preserved today orally, is a fitting way to end a discussion of being visibly hidden. Originally passed down by the *Mayas* of western Guatemala, it is the legend of the Man of Lightning, a protector of the people of Jacaltenango. In it, the notion of being hidden as spirits of the ancestors, living and present today as their descendents, echoes a common thread in the accounts of the families in this study. The legend begins as follows:

<i>Pero primero me lavaré la cara y las manos</i>	But first I must wash my face and hands
<i>En la espuma del azul silencio</i>	in the foam of the blue silence
<i>Para luego, con paso firme, penetrar</i>	That I may cross with grace and
<i>airoso</i>	confidence
<i>A través del pórtico misterioso</i>	The mysterious portico
<i>De mis bravos ancestros, quienes viven hoy</i>	Of my valiant ancestors, who live today
<i>Opacos como el agua en el corazón de la</i>	Hidden like the water in the heart of the
<i>tierra.</i>	earth.

(Montejo, 2001, p. 33)

(Translation by Magaly Lavadenz)

REVERSING INVISIBILITY: TRANSFORMING CLASSROOM PRACTICES THROUGH TEACHER INQUIRY

Educators who use the emerging research on Central Americans to inform their practices can help lessen the psychological discomfort that results from self-censorship and invisibility. While there is no cookie-cutter approach to incorporating Central American language and culture into the classroom, we advocate sociocultural principles to advance culturally responsive teaching. These, in turn, foster classroom and school climates that value the uniqueness of each student, particularly the most vulnerable and ignored. Rather than creating or following a generic classroom/lesson script, educators can conduct their own research about and with students to build a more democratic classroom (Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995). Sociocultural principles, translated here into a teacher inquiry process, include the following:

- They should transform the role of the teacher to one that (1) facilitates and guides by building on the student's knowledge base while attending to high academic expectations; (2) establishes an inclusive classroom climate where multiple voices/perspectives are valued and shared; and (3) understands that conflict can be used as a learning opportunity through a Freirian model of inquiry, dialogue, and voice (Freire, 1998).
- They should transform a "transmission" model of teaching—that is, one in which only the teacher transmits knowledge—to an additive teaching model which incorporates students' "funds of knowledge" and through which teachers become students of students (Freire, 1998; González et al., 1995). Instructional materials should reflect the communities of the learners, as well as be authentic and relevant to the lived experiences of students (Lavadenz & Martin, 1999).

Concretely, teachers can ask their students to become part of an inquiry whereby teachers and student learn together about key aspects of students' histories, languages, and cultures. I propose a sociocultural/transformational model of teacher inquiry that expands on Alma Flor Ada and Isabel Campoy's (2004) critical literacy phases, elaborating Paulo Freire's model of transformational literacy instruction:

1. *Descriptive phase*: Teachers read, write, and record their observations of and with students and the related literature/resources about, by, and from Central Americans. The question posed here is: What do I want to learn about and with my students?
2. *Personal interpretative phase*: Teachers reflect on what they have written based on their own past experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. This connects the *text* with their own past. The question posed here is: What did I learn about my own history, socialization, and beliefs as a result of what I found in the descriptive phase?
3. *Critical phase*: Teachers engage in a collaborative evaluation with students. This collaboration occurs through dialogue with students. The question posed here is: How can I share what I learned about my practices and beliefs with my students in order for me to model this and learn from students?
4. *Transformational phase*: Teachers recursively reflect, self-evaluate, negotiate, and engage in dialogue with students. The questions posed here are: What did I learn from the entire process that allows me to make a change in the teaching/learning process for myself and for my students? How can I include more Central American voices in the teaching and learning process?

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented brief narratives and experiences of immigrant families from El Salvador and Guatemala, excerpts from the prose and poetry of Central American authors, and the sociopolitical reasons for immigration to the United States, for the benefit of all those who work with Central American families. The metaphor of silencing has been used to portray the sense of invisibility that characterizes the immigrant experiences of those who participated in this exploratory study, because they must monitor and censor their unique varieties of Spanish and other aspects of their national cultures. In addition, the U.S. government's refusal to grant refugee (legal) status to many Central American refugees (while granting it to immigrants from Communist nations) has caused this immigrant population to be targeted for deportation. Their underclass status and overall instability cast deep shadows of invisibility for Salvadorans and Guatemalans in their neighborhoods and schools. It is fundamental for educators to contribute to the resiliency and survival that their Central American students need to overcome the traumas of war and immigration. We must be sensitive to the psychosocial pain, expressed by Chabela and the Central American youth cited in this chapter, that results from linguistic censorship, cultural monitoring, and language loss. Teachers and educators have a pivotal role to play in avoiding and reversing the pain of invisibility. This can be accomplished by establishing a classroom climate where an additive approach to language learning prevails and where strong Central American and American identities can both flourish. Along with the inclusion of students' and parents' own stories, the addition of Central American images, literature, and languages varieties can be readily incorporated as a result of engaging in the transformative inquiry process.

The transformative inquiry process creates classrooms that are learning sites for democracy. It is through engagement with the lived histories, languages, and cultures of Central American students in our schools that teachers can exercise their power to practice what Paulo Freire termed a "pedagogy of freedom" (1998). This type of engagement leads us to examine, through reflection and action, locally situated policies and practices that maintain and perpetuate invisibility and silence. It calls us to question our individual roles in the perpetuation of oppressive and subtractive schooling as well as to respond in concrete ways by informing and arming ourselves with the knowledge and power of our students' voices. This process transforms traditional teaching methods into a model of teacher professional development that develops a disposition toward change and agency. This disposition is informed by a deepened knowledge of our students and their worlds. Transforming teaching practices from a transmission model to an additive model in this context invites Central American students and their parents to participate in, share, and construct new knowledge within the classroom community. The reversal of invisibility for students will occur, along with the enhancement of teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Note

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