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From Invisible to Visible: Documenting the Voices and Resilience of Central American Students in U.S. Schools

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It is predicted that by 2036, Latinxs<sup>1</sup> will constitute one-third of all youth in the U.S. (Gándara, 2015). Although we have seen a population increase, research indicates that Latinxs are still consistently being pushed-out of K-12 schools at high rates and are accessing and completing a post-secondary education at relatively low rates (Gándara, 2015; Pérez Huber et al., 2015). Given the demographic imperative and the necessity of critical research to alleviate these educational disparities, we expand on the existing literature in education by focusing on the experiences of 1<sup>st</sup>, 1.5, and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Central Americans in the U.S. The Central American population is severely understudied in the educational field (Coronado, 2013; Torres, 2004) and less attention has been dedicated to train educators on Central American experiences (Lavadenz, 2005). To contribute to what we know about Central Americans, in schools, we ask the following research question: (1) what are the experiences of Central American youth in the educational pipeline in the U.S.? This question is timely given the growing population of Central Americans in the U.S. and the current socio-political issues occurring that are currently affecting Central Americans. This article will engage in a discussion of the findings which note the discrimination and resilience of U.S. Central American youth in schools. It is our goal to shift the deficit narrative, to one of asset-based perspective that sees Central American students as “holders and creators” of their knowledges amidst adversity, displacement, racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and other forms of marginalization (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Inclusively, we aim to contribute to the growing body of literature by scholars who use critical lenses to examine and transform conditions for Students of Color in the U.S.

### **Central Americans in the U.S.**

According to Pew Hispanic Research Center, Central Americans from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are the

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<sup>1</sup> We utilize “Latinx” to move away from the prescribed gender binary of “Latina” (feminine) and “Latino” (masculine). Please see Reichard, R. (2015, August 29). Why we say Latinx: Trans and non-gender conforming people explain. Retrieved from <http://www.latina.com/lifestyle/our-issues/why-we-say-latinx-trans-gender-non-conforming-people-explain>

largest growing populations of Latinx immigrants in the U.S. (Cohn, Passel, Gonzalez-Barrera, 2017). Dominant narratives hold the immigration stereotype that Mexicans are the sole Latinx migrants in the U.S. However, since the 1980s the U.S. has seen an increase of Central American immigrants. In the 1980s there were roughly 354,000 Central Americans living in the U.S. (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). The 2015 U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey estimated that approximately 5.2 million Latinxs in the U.S. identified as Central American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Although there are seven countries that constitute Central America (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama), majority of immigrants are from what is referred to as “the Northern Triangle”, which include El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, constituting 85% of the total Central American immigrant population in the U.S. (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). The majority of Central Americans live in Southern California followed by New York and Washington D.C. (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017; Chinchilla & Hamilton, 1999; Lesser & Batalova, 2017).

Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla (1991) provide a useful sociological framework for analyzing migration by arguing that because of “capitalist penetration”, meaning the replacement of existing labor and economic systems in Central American countries by more traditional forms of capitalism by the U.S., millions of Central Americans were displaced. These processes are often preceded or accompanied by political repression and strife (Hamilton & Stoltz Chinchilla, 1991). For countries such as Guatemala, it was U.S. political and economic interventions that aided in the displacement of peoples. However, these same interventions impede many Guatemalans from gaining asylum or refugee status because the U.S. government “could not legally recognize refugees generated by a conflict it was financially and militarily supporting” (Menjivar, 2006, p. 101). Alvarado et al. (2017) inform us that the U.S. in conjunction with the state apparatus of El Salvador created communism “as an identity of villainy and insurgency” throughout the late 1900s (p.7). This criminalization of “communism” mainly targeted indigenous and poor people in El Salvador. Honduras was used as a “middle-ground” strategy for U.S. interventions into other Central American countries because it borders Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador (p.13). In the 1980s, the Reagan administration

used Honduras as military base during the Sandinista-Contra Wars in Nicaragua (p. 13). Panama, was used by the U.S. for its strategic positioning as a testing ground for military weapons that were used in Operation Desert Storm (p.18).

The economic, psychological, and emotional repercussions of such events are still present in the lives of Central Americans and Central Americans living in the U.S. For these reasons, many Central Americans flee their homes and lands they have known for years. Unfortunately, today in 2018, Central Americans (both abroad and in the U.S.) are being subjected to the same violent political actions that continue to separate families through immigration policy or at times, even death. Although largely ignored by media, Central Americans have been constantly targeted by the current U.S. presidential administration. In November 2017, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) was revoked for Nicaraguans in the U.S. (Beech, 2017). In May 2018, TPS was revoked for approximately 57,000 Hondurans (Lind, 2018). On May 10, 2018, Mariee Juarez, a Guatemalan toddler died while in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody due to a “irreversible brain and organ damage” caused by a respiratory infection developed while in custody (Rose, 2018). On May 25, 2018, Roxana Hernandez, a thirty-three year old Trans woman from Honduras, died while in ICE’s custody (Chavez, 2018). On May 26, 2018, Claudia Patricia Gomez Gonzalez, was murdered by a gunshot to the head by a Customs and Border Protection agent in Texas. Gomez Gonzalez was a twenty-year old, Indigenous woman from Guatemala, who was traveling to the U.S. to seek asylum (Lakhani & Dart, 2018). These are just a few of the recent events that have impacted the Central American community and speak volumes to the historical and contemporary issues that Central Americans grapple with.

### **Central Americans in the U.S. Education System**

For many immigrant children and the children of immigrants, the process of fulfilling their own dreams and their families begin at school (Orellana, 2001). Education is an opportunity that many of their parents may not have had in their countries of origin (as is the case for the Central American youth in this study). Educational experiences are greatly impacted by racist stereotypes and influenced by the treatment and

expectations of educational agents for Latinx youth, (Conchas, & Clark, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2005). For Central Americans, we hypothesize that their educational trajectories are also shaped by their immigration histories and the invisibilization based on identity they face in schools (see discussion section for more).

Research indicates that 9% of Central American immigrants obtained a bachelor's degree in comparison to the 29% average for the entire immigrant population (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). When disaggregated by country of origin, there is a clear divide in attainment rates for Central American immigrants— Panama (27%), Costa Rica (24%), Belize (21%), Nicaragua (17%), El Salvador (7%), Guatemala (6%), and Honduras (9%) (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). In relation to other Latinx groups in the U.S. (immigrant and native-born), Central Americans rank fairly low as 13% percent of Central Americans obtain a college degree in comparison to 25% of Cubans, 19% of Puerto Ricans, 17% of Dominicans, and 11% of Chicanxs (Pérez Huber et al., 2015). This data encourages further analysis about the factors that influence the Central American student experience throughout the educational pipeline in the U.S.

Few studies have researched Central American experiences within the educational system. In his anthropological study, Suárez-Orozco (1987) examined motivations for recently arrived Central American students finding that Central American immigrant youth found education to be a means of social mobility for themselves and their families. Other studies have focused on the navigational skills that students have adopted because they are often subjected to identity erasure and invisibility. For example, in a study of schools and literacy, it was found that Central American students and their families felt the need to silence themselves and their dialects as a form of survival and “fitting in” in California (Lavadenz, 2005). Lavadenz (2005) and Morales (2000) argue that this self-censorship is a survival skill that Central Americans developed meanwhile migrating to the U.S. to avoid being deported when traveling through Mexico. Menjivar (2008), examined how “liminal legality” affected the educational prospects for Guatemalan and Salvadoran youth in the U.S. She found that legal hardships influenced greatly the educational opportunities and outcomes of this particular population (Menjivar, 2008).

At a time when the Latinx population is rapidly increasing, it is important that scholars, educators, practitioners, and policymakers pay close attention to the differing experiences of this growing population (Nguyen et al., 2017). At this point, educational research has primarily focused on Mexican/ Chicana student experiences. However, it is also important to address the heterogeneity of the Latinx population by highlighting Central American student experiences (Nguyen et al., 2017; Torres, 2004). Understanding that not all Latinx students experience education in the same manner is important to building best practices and policies to alleviate educational attainment disparities (Torres, 2004). As two Guatemalan women who grew up in the U.S., we understand that the term “Central American” also creates a layer of homogenization. However, for the purposes of this paper we have chosen to use “Central American” because as we have found in our research and is corroborated by other scholars, “Central American” exists as a communal identity through which solidarity is created given the small but growing numbers of Central Americans in the U.S. (Alvarado et. al, 2017; Coronado, 2013).

### **Critical Race Theory**

A Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education framework allows us to highlight the experiences that Central American students have in U.S. schools. Simultaneously, CRT centralizes experiences of racism and other forms of oppression. CRT began in the field of Critical Legal Studies as way to challenge the race-neutral approach that prevalent in the field (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), argued that the field of education would benefit from integrating a CRT approach in research (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). The purpose of introducing CRT to education was to theorize, analyze, and challenge the ways in which race and racism affect schooling structures, policy, and practices (Ladson- Billings & Tate 1995; Ladson-Billings 1998; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). By outlining central tenets in a CRT in education framework, Solórzano (1997), has provided researchers with the framework necessary to center the experiences of Central American students in education. These tenets include 1) acknowledging the inter-centricity of race and

racism in schools, 2) challenging dominant ideology, 3) a commitment to social justice in education research, 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, 5) and utilizing an interdisciplinary perspective (see Solórzano, 1997 for a detailed description on CRT's tenets).

CRT's multi-pronged approach is especially useful in constructing scholarship used to address the needs and challenges for Central American students. The tenet drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives was useful in this study, given that literature on Central Americans in education is scarce. We drew from other fields and disciplines such as Migration Studies, Chicana Studies, Sociology, and Psychology for the research design and analysis. CRT's focus on the centrality of experiential knowledge, guides the centering of the narratives of the Central American youth who participated in this study to help us answer the research question of: What are the experiences of Central American youth in the educational pipeline in the U.S.?

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to document the experiences of Central American youth in schools. Stories are powerful because they are a method to learn from intergenerational knowledge to then share with new generations (Coronado 2007a; Coronado, 2007b; Coronado, 2013; Wilson, 2008). Creating space for Central American students' stories to be told and documented was one of the goals of this study. Another goal was to have the sharing of stories be an act of individual and community healing and empowerment for participants. The stories shared were done through the method of *testimonios*.

In this study, *testimonios* are a way to claim the intellectual genealogy of the ancestors and descendants of Central America. These ideas, documents, histories, and traditions have been attempted to be erased by colonization and systems of oppression (Perera, 1993). Scholars have found the use of *testimonio* to document and/or theorize experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance (Burciaga & Taveres, 2006; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2016). In Guatemala, one of the most known *testimonios* is that of Rigoberta Menchu. Her *testimonio* is an account of the

experiences of Indigenous peoples during the civil war in Guatemala in which more than 200,000 Indigenous people were murdered by the nation-state during the 1960s (Menchu, 1998). As demonstrated by Menchu’s *testimonio*, these are usually guided by the will of the narrator in order to relate events she deems significant and is often an expression of a collective experience against dominant, deficit-based narratives. The objective of the *testimonio* is to bring to light a story, a point of view, or an urgent call for socio-political action (Cienfuegos & Monelli, 1983). The *testimonios* of the students were a space for struggle and resilience to be heard and validated.

In this paper, the *testimonios* of 22 high school students and 13 college students enrolled at various schools in Southern California were utilized in the data analysis for this paper (Coronado, 2013). The *testimonios* with each participant lasted between 1-2 hours and were recorded, transcribed, and coded. The data analyzed and presented here comes from a larger qualitative study that explored family migration, educational experiences, aspirations, and ethnic identity development of Central American youth (Coronado, 2013). Participants were 17-25 years old at the time of the study, considered Central America as the region of family origin (see Table 1.), and identified as 1<sup>st</sup>, 1.5, or 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants living in the United States (see Table 2). The discussion section details important lessons learned about their experiences and their motivations to continue on their educational trajectories in hopes of success amidst systemic barriers.

**Table 1. Country of Origin Among Youth Participants**

<b>Country of Family Origin</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>College</b>	<b>Total</b>
Guatemala and Mexico	2	0	2
Guatemala and El Salvador	2	2	4
El Salvador	2	1	3



and Mexico			
Guatemala	8	5	13
Honduras and Salvador	1	1	2
Nicaragua	1	0	1
Honduras and Mexico	0	1	1
El Salvador	6	3	9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>35</b>

**Table 2. First, 1.5, and Second Generation Among Youth Participants**

First-Generation (Central American Youth <u>Not</u> Born in the U.S.)	<b>10</b>
1.5 Generation (Central American Youth Born in Central American and Migrated to the U.S. at a Young Age)	<b>3</b>
Second-Generation (Born in the U.S. to Central American-born Parents)	<b>22</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

## **Findings**

Through our analysis, various themes were found in the *testimonios*. For the purposes of this paper, we have chosen to highlight experiences surrounding ethnic identity, discrimination in schools, and student resilience. The themes answer the question of: What are the experiences of Central American youth in the educational pipeline in the U.S.?

### **Ethnic Identity in Schools.**

The majority of participants showed awareness from an early age about their Central American background. In schools, where the majority of the enrolled population were Latinxs, all Central American youth demonstrated a significant level of cultural awareness about their ethnicity and roots. Second-generation youth described “being from” their parents’ birth-country even if they had never visited the country, demonstrating a strong tie to their family’s cultural background. Lucas<sup>2</sup>, a U.S. born high school student from Salvadorean parents, speaks to the experience about feeling “different” even in a school with a large

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<sup>2</sup> Participants names have been changed.

Latinx population. He found solidarity and relief upon knowing that another Central American student was enrolled in the same class.

Lucas:

I have been always aware of my ethnicity in the classroom. Even though there are a lot of Hispanics at my school, it's nice when you find another person from Central America. I remember there was a girl who had a purse from El Salvador and I asked her if she was from there and I told her I was too. So, then we started talking about our families and how I had gone once when I was 6, the types of food and culture and everything. So, then people in the class would hear and they would say ...oh I am half Salvadorean and half Guatemalan or half Salvadorean and half Mexican.

What Lucas demonstrated in the above vignette of his *testimonio*, is not only the socio-emotional support felt upon knowing that there was another Central American student, but also how community-building happened for the other Central American students in the classroom. Central American students expressed that they often feel invisible in public settings and Lucas' own awareness of his ethnicity allowed him to build community with others. Lucas' sense of identification with other students increased a sense belonging in the school. Research shows this is a common issue that Students of Color experience in educational institutions (Cerezo & Chang, 2013). This sense of belonging with other students who have similar experiences allowed him to see his identity affirmed and valued.

Participants also explained what it meant for them to be Central American. A common theme was their teachers' assumption that Latinx students are of Mexican descent. Participants expressed their frustration that teachers and administrators did not have an awareness of Central Americans and their different experiences. Instead, school personnel guided their opinions by societal generalizations. Lavadenz (2005), writes that this is a common occurrence in classrooms and Yarborough (2010) writes how this happens outside of school contexts by showing the miscategorization of Central American immigrants in Georgia as Mexican immigrants. Lavadenz (2005) states that this sort of miscategorization and misrepresentation

is dangerous and further marginalizes and erases Central American students' experiences.

Janet expressed how she felt when teachers did not try to learn about her experience as young woman from Guatemala. Also expressed, was Janet's desire of seeing more Central American representation through professional role models.

Janet:

I understand that here, where I live, most of the Latinos students are *Mexicanos*. Some here in this area are either from Colombia or from Cuba, but teachers don't make connections with students who are *Centroamericano* there is no connection. Teachers and people at schools don't try to find out our history, they are not interested. I wish there was some kind of connections and I wish we also had more role models.

Throughout the interviews it was clear that Central American students felt invisible to their teachers and the school at large. Students did not find validation or understanding about the historical perspective, community memory and their personal experiences as working-class Central Americans in the U.S. Likewise, they felt there was an automatic assumption that if any student would "look" Latinx that their background was Mexican. The majority of students indicated their Central American background was not recognized, nor valued by school officials.

### **Discrimination in Schools.**

In addition to being mistakenly assigned a country of family origin, participants believed that society in general had negative stereotypes about Central Americans and expressed that stereotypes affect their lives in a negative way. Various participants observed or experienced some kind of discrimination at school, some as early as elementary. However, the majority started to notice more discrimination regarding race, class, gender, and immigration status during middle school. All participants felt the need to deal with race, class, gender and immigrations status discrimination, through racial microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) or explicit forms of racism in high school. Participants felt the pressure to

constantly explain their country of origin, traditions, immigration status, and reinforced the idea that yes, they were part of the Latinx group in the U.S. and that most importantly, they were Central American. Similarly, participants felt the need to consistently prove to school officials that they did not fit the negative stereotypes of Latinxs. Students felt immense pressure to succeed academically as a form of resistance against deficit views of Latinxs while experiencing discrimination, lack of educational access and tracking based on race and ethnicity at schools.

Gaby, a second-generation Salvadorean high school senior, expressed her concern with discrimination in school. She mentions that in her experience, Central American and Mexican students are more discriminated against than other groups. Gaby also believes that there is not enough information on how to acquire a higher education, specifically she notes the barriers and lack of assistance for those who are undocumented immigrants.

Gaby:

In society they do discriminate Central Americans and Mexicans, more than whites or Asians. I've seen how in school they put Latinos down. They always say we are bad and that only a few of us graduate. I understand that some people don't care but not all of us are like that. I would like for teachers, and leaders and people in power to give information so everyone can go to college. A lot of my friends are not going to college because they need help financially. My friend who is really smart and really wants to do something with her life, can't go because she doesn't have papers. It is just sad because there are so many bad news about immigrants.

For many participants there was the concern about immigration status, finances and documentation impeding opportunities in higher education. Abrego (2006) and Menjivar (2008) argue that this is not an uncommon fear for Central American students, especially for undocumented students whose educational aspirations and dreams are cut short due to immigration and

education policy that are unsupportive in terms of access, financial assistance, and information.

An additional concern for students, was the schools' lack of understanding in regard to their families and communities. When students were asked about the perceptions school had about their families' involvement in their education there was consensus that most school officials express the idea that these families did not care about their children's education. These school officials enacted a deficit lens on their students by believing that their students' parents did not value education or have the necessary skills or capital to succeed in education (Yosso, 2005). However, for the students, there was a lack of understanding by the school about the economic and social hardships of their community.

Julia, a U.S.-born high school student from Honduran and Salvadorean roots, speaks about the perceptions of Latinxs in society. When she speaks about this issue she does it with much passion and frustration in her voice to the point where her body language expresses a great deal of emotion. When she finishes speaking, she has tears in her eyes and had to take a break from continuing her *testimonio*. This *testimonio* speaks to the need for holistic, socio-emotional support for Central American students. Goodman & West-Olatunji (2010), write about the needs for counselors in schools to understand the trauma that Students of Color live with, due to the constant need to push through systemic and racist barriers in their lives. Central American youth in the study talked about the different types of trauma that their families had to endure from war in their countries of origins, their immigration journeys, and societal discrimination in the U.S.

Julia:

Society and even people in the schools don't know that my mom is teaching me how to be a good person. She teaches me about my culture and how to contribute in a positive way, she encourages to continue my education. People don't think about the good things in Mexicans, Salvadoreans, Latinos...like for example from the other Salvadorean kids I know the parents are very supportive in whatever they need for school. They do anything they can to help them pass their classes or in their education. My

parents are very supportive, and I know other Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran and Latino parents do whatever they can to be supportive. I know there are more struggles being Latino than being white because they don't get discriminated a lot but if you are not white, you look different, you are different. Society likes you better, and there are many more opportunities if you are white. Schools don't understand our history and struggles.

A great majority of participants expressed the need to prove to others those stereotypes were not true about them. Some expressed anger and concern about negative treatment and low expectations in schools. Despite a great deal of trauma for many, students had a strong sense of resiliency and motivation to demonstrate their true potential to be successful and felt an obligation to their families and community to show that despite struggles, Central Americans could be successful.

### **Student Resilience.**

As part of their motivation, participants mentioned motivating individuals and factors in their life. Different aspects that motivated them to succeed and create change included resistance to the discrimination they faced in school, the lack of Central American role models, their family's immigration stories, their resilience about living in poverty, and transforming the schools they attended which had limited educational resources.

In the case of Juana, she found knowledge about her family and community to be empowering. Her goal is to achieve the "American dream" for her mother whom she is eternally grateful for her sacrifice. Juana, like many other students, had a desire to become a role model for her siblings and other Central Americans and Latinxs. It is not uncommon for first-generation college students to feel like they are the ones *abriendo caminos* (opening pathways) for siblings, other family members, and their communities (Castellanos, Gloria, & Kimimura 2006). Amongst the youths' *testimonios* there was a strong sense of collectivism of them, their families, and communities. For Juana and many other students, their parents' sacrifices serve as inspiration. They also have a deep understanding that a college education knowledge is the road to empowering their communities and a tool in creating positive change in the world.

Juana:

Education is most definitely empowering, and it really is a form to build my identity... knowledge is power. So, for me, knowledge is a way to not only to be successful in society but it is a way to feed your soul, I love to learn. But most importantly I am getting my family out of that sacrifice, I am trying to achieve that American dream for this woman who gave her life for me. My mom, you know she did so much. So, I want to be a role model for my sisters but also to other Latinos, and Centroamericanos. I want to be able represent what it means to be Latino and carry that with me.

Many students had mixed immigration status families and demonstrated resourcefulness, resilience and strength in navigating the educational system. Cathy, an undocumented, high school senior who immigrated from Guatemala at nine years of age, remembers her parents' sacrifices, immigration story, and their hard work. In spite of conflicts with the family's immigration status, Cathy, like many students in this study, continues to pursue dreams of college. She remembers that their objective coming to this country was to have a better future.

Cathy:

My parents tell me they came here so I can have a better future and a better education. So that's one of my motivations, I also want to prove people wrong by making them see that Latinas can get an education. My dad has a work permit now and my mom can't really apply for it because when she came immigration got her and she has to go to court every so often. My little sister was born here, and I don't have any papers. I feel like it has stopped me from being one of the normal kids. I found out about AB540 through my college counselor so I am going to go to college, but I know it will be hard to pay for it. In spite of everything I will make it for my community.

Although Central Americans have typically been written about in terms of legacies of trauma and violence, there is an important



legacy of resilience in the Central American community. The youth who shared their *testimonios* for this study reify that notion through their resilience and persistence in the face of multiple forms of marginalization and erasure as Central Americans. This resilience is important to highlight because it allows us to challenge dominant ideology of Central Americans, and also lets educators and practitioners see students' lived experiences and experiential knowledge as sources of strength in the face of adversity (Solórzano, 1997). More importantly, students' resilience is tied to their families and communities which directly challenges the individualistic nature of schooling.

## **Discussion**

The people of Central America have undergone colonization for centuries and subsequent wars and economic hardships, yet they have developed a strong sense of resilience to continue transforming the lives of their communities in Central America and here in the U.S. As seen in the youths' *testimonios*, there was a high level of exclusion and discrimination in schools based on the racial and ethnic backgrounds. It is clear through the youths' *testimonios*, that they place an important meaning on their Central American identity and heritage through their connections to their traditions and culture. A factor influencing their motivations to continue on their educational trajectories in the face of barriers and racism is the goal to be the Central American role models that they need but are currently absent from their schools and curriculum.

Instead of continuing to see Central American youth and their families as culturally deficient, we must see them and their experiential knowledge (Solórzano, 1997) as resources that foster community, leadership and resilience in classrooms. Through the *testimonios* and supporting literature, we know that Central American youth do not exist in a vacuum outside of their lived realities. Issues with immigration and immigration policy had a high impact for Central American families, which affected various aspects of their lives in particular the psychosocial, economic, social, political and educational positionality of this community within U.S. society. With the current issues facing Central Americans, it is important that schools and practitioners acknowledge and provide holistic support for the youth.

In the midst of several forms of adversity, the students who participated showed a significant level of resiliency. Resiliency scholars, have identified several protective factors that promote academic resilience, such as family support, teacher and staff support, safe school environments, and having high self-efficacy (Coronado, 2013; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Perez, Ramos, Coronado & Cortes, 2009). Schools are a critical environment for children and adolescents to develop resiliency and become successful adults. For the participants of this study, resiliency means accessing and completing a high school education, social mobility for themselves and their families, and becoming *abre caminos* (those who open pathways) or role models for other Central American youth. Schools should be a place where opportunities are provided for individuals to overcome adversity and develop both social and academic competencies. Even though schools cannot create immediate change in the socio-political realities of Central American youth and their families, they can foster resiliency on campus by centering and caring for their students' lived realities and experiential knowledge.

As presented by the *testimonios* of all the participants in this study, Central American youth demonstrate resilience in an effort to overcome negative circumstances such as being "invisible" to their school officials because of their ethnic background, being undocumented, having undocumented family members, attending schools that are under-resourced, and racist stereotypes from educators and other school officials. Through the *testimonios* we see that there is a need to recognize the ethnic and racial heterogeneity of Latinx sub-groups to avoid having students feel further marginalized. There is power in representation. When students see themselves represented it positively influences their educational trajectories and further motivates them to become role models for their families, communities, and larger Central American population. We put forth a call to action to researchers, educators, practitioners, and policymakers to be more intentional in recognizing and learning about Central American students' lives, histories, and issues that affect their communities. Although Central American youth are extremely resilient, there is an urgent need to support this growing student population.



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