

# **Visibly Hidden: Language, Culture and Identity of Central Americans in Los Angeles**

By

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The history, culture and practices of Central America are inadequately addressed in teacher preparation and professional development across the United States, and especially in California based on my analysis of teacher preparation (<http://www.ctc.ca.gov/html>, 2001). Information about the histories, cultures and practices add to the linguistic and pedagogic knowledge-base of bilingual and non-bilingual teachers of Central American immigrant students. To this end, this article documents the experiences of Central American immigrant families residing in the Los Angeles area and includes analyses from focus group data, participant observations and interviews collected at the Central American Resource Center, CARECEN, and with Central American families living in this area of Los Angeles. Selected folklore and writing by Central American youth in the Los Angeles area are interspersed within this article. Implications for practice conclude this study.

My interest in Central Americans began over 15 years ago while I was a bilingual, first grade teacher in Glendale, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. The elementary school had a reading “exchange” program, where students were sent to different teachers in order to be taught in the first language (Spanish or English). During one of the report card preparation meetings for the first grade teachers, a colleague asked “And how is Ruth doing, she’s such a space cadet?” This derogatory comment seemed to be a common label for certain children of Central American ancestry in our school. Ruth, the young girl in my classroom whom the teacher referred to as a “space cadet” was not a poor student; after the author observed her more closely, it was evident that she had difficulty paying attention and completing her work on time.

This curiosity also led the author to focus her master’s thesis and doctoral work on

Central American immigrant children (Lavadenz, 1994; 1991). Further work allowed the author to find that traumatic war zone experiences for Central American children, such as being witness to violence, increased the likelihood that they would have difficulty concentrating. Students who formed the case studies for my research on war trauma also reported that they daydreamed about the family members they had left behind, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents who were not as fortunate as they had been in coming to the U. S. The author also found that Central American immigrant students were more likely to be referred to special education, despite the fact that they were not “low performing students” in regard to academic achievement. Suárez-Orozco (1989) attributed the “achievement motivation” of Central American immigrant students to their success in school. He found that students felt an increased sense of responsibility and obligation in light of the fact that they had been able to escape the horrific war and violence of their native countries while their relatives had not.

Despite the time that has elapsed since Suárez-Orozco’s (1989) work, there continues to be little evidence that Central American experiences, history, culture and language have been attended to in public schools. Teachers receive little to nothing in their initial teacher preparation programs and Central American students and families do not see themselves represented in the curriculum, nor are their “funds of knowledge” incorporated into the discourse of the classroom (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992).

## Sociopolitical Background

Three decades of political and economic turmoil in El Salvador and Guatemala have resulted in unprecedented immigration to the United States. According to the United States Census, there are 3,372,090 Central Americans

living in the United States, accounting for 7.6% of the Latino population (2006). The two largest immigrant communities from Central America in Los Angeles County are from El Salvador and Guatemala (356,952 and 206,284, respectively). Their combined numbers comprise 98.4% of all Los Angeles residents from Central America. Los Angeles, the setting for this study, has the largest Salvadoran and Guatemalan population outside of those countries. The largest number of Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants to the Los Angeles area arrived in the 1980's, at the height of the civil wars in both countries.

Following independence from Spanish colonial rule, the United States engaged in economic, political and military interventions in those countries that resulted in incredibly divisive, destructive and chaotic conditions. Despite requests from international and US based human rights groups, the US denied giving refugee status to Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants (as opposed to the political refugee status granted to Cuban and Vietnamese immigrants), resulting in large waves of unauthorized immigration (Menjivar, 2002).

Figure 1 The seven countries in Central America.



Figure 1, the Map of Central America, identifies the region that was once known as the United Provinces of Central America, immediately following independence from Spain in 1821. Between 1821 and 1839 five countries, excluding Panama and Belize, formed part of this union.

### El Salvador

“Guanacos”, as the people from El Salvador are nicknamed, have experienced a long history of political, social and economic revolutions.<sup>1</sup> As the smallest country in Central America, the country was controlled by a strong oligarchy; fourteen families owned major land and agricultural concerns following

independence from Spain (Clements, 1984). The families maintained control over wealth, mostly in the form of agricultural land for coffee production, and subsequently power, in the nation from the 1860's forward. A quasi-feudal state existed between the rich landowners and poor peasants, mostly comprised of indigenous peoples, and/or mestizos, who worked the lands continuously until the disastrous depression in 1928. A very brief period of indigenous and peasant uprisings culminated in La Matanza (the Massacre) of 1932. The Massacre, an event that is engraved in the collective consciousness of Salvadorans to this day, resulted in the killing of

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, the in-group nickname Guanacos is now being used in derogatory ways in other Spanish-speaking countries. The term is roughly equivalent to being called a “country bumpkin”.

over 30, 000 indigenous peoples and virtually reinstated the shared oligarchy-military rule in Central America, which lasted until recent times (Menjívar, 2002)

The involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1970's and 1980's resulted in communication and political involvement of the clergy and a rising awareness on the part of Salvadorans. The Catholic clergy's political and human rights involvement, along with the increasingly complex economic and military intervention of the United States, resulted in one of the hemisphere's most violent periods.

In the ensuing civil chaos in El Salvador, it was not uncommon for Salvadorans to experience and/or have first-hand or family encounters with violence. Torture, mutilation and disappearances of any person suspected of siding with either the pro-government or guerilla revolutionaries were everyday occurrences. Entire villages were massacred by these death squads, resulting in migration through Mexico to the United States. The twelve year cycle of terrorism left an indelible mark on the Salvadoran community, both in El Salvador and in the United States (Menjívar, 2002). Today, Salvadoran exiles provide the main source of revenue for the country, in the form of remittances sent to remaining family members.

### Guatemala

Anthropologist Loucky estimates that there are over ten thousand Mayan Guatemalans living in Los Angeles (2000). Guatemala has the largest indigenous population of Central America, primarily Mayan in origin. Billings (2000), citing CIREFCA (1992) claims that 80-90% of new immigrants from Guatemala are Maya, with 10-20% *ladino* (European-origin or mixed indigenous/European).

Although public schools do not request information regarding indigenous languages or origin as part of the enrollment process, many Guatemalan-origin immigrants may speak one of the four primary Mayan languages upon entrance to American, public schools, based on the Home Language Survey ([http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?\\_pageid=33,47493](http://notebook.lausd.net/portal/page?_pageid=33,47493) & dad =ptl& schema=PTL EP). Guatemalan immigrant children who speak an indigenous language as their first language experience difficulties in learning English, or

Spanish in a bilingual classroom. In the case of the latter, Spanish would be the second language, English the third, both of which have important implications for language learning and teaching. Teachers need to be aware that the diversity within the Mayan community is central to their indigenous identity (for example, the term '*indio*' (Indian) is derogatory to Mayans, as it negates the nature of belonging to the community of origin, listed here in order of predominance: Q'anjob'al (51%), Mam (16%), Chuj (16%), and Jakatek (7%) (Billings, 2000). The shift from being Maya in Guatemala and to being Guatemalan in the United States marks a transformation of language and identity for this immigrant community.

In 1996, following a thirty-six year period of civil war, a peace agreement was signed by the Guatemalan government. The conflict was a result of similar economic, social and political imbalance as in El Salvador. According to Menjívar (2002), social networks and organizations formed by indigenous communities were met with strong suppression by the government. The Guatemalan government, with support from the American government, believed the indigenous uprisings were leftist in ideology and reacted with an intensely violent campaign. Guerilla warfare resulted in the destruction of hundreds of village, the displacement of between half a million and one million people, and estimates of deaths exceeding in the hundreds of thousands. Because children were particularly vulnerable to kidnapping and induction into either the government or guerilla armies during the civil war, the separation of Guatemalan families is much more marked. As characterized by the film *El Norte*, children and adolescents from Guatemala were often sent to immigrate alone in order to avoid transcription in armies of either the guerillas or the government (Menjívar, 2002).

Guatemalans, nicknamed "Chapines", have a well-established history of political organizing. The Guatemalan transnational networks linking with the hometowns of immigrants constitute a major source of economic, social and political re-sourcing. (Hamilton & Chinchilla 1999) These networks are part of life for Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles. The strong sense of community for Guatemalans is a very important

consideration in understanding their challenges and successes in American schools.

*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, 2000, p.215).*

### Central Americans in Los Angeles

The hub of the recently arrived Central American immigrant community in Los Angeles is CARECEN, a community service

organization. It serves as a cultural, legal and educational center since 1983, the year of its founding by a group of Salvadorans, US church leaders, attorneys and activists. CARECEN's outreach programs have evolved with the community's transitions; once heavily Central American in the 1980's and 1990's, it is now shifting to include more recent arrivals from Mexico. Located just west of downtown Los Angeles, in the Pico-Union/Westlake area, where 95% of the residents in the area speak Spanish, 35% of the population lives at or below the poverty level (as compared to 18.9% for Los Angeles as a whole), and the dropout rate for Latino students at the local Belmont High School is 82% (in contrast to the overall dropout rate of 22%) (LAUSD, <http://notebook.lausd.net>)

### **Methodology**

The data used in this paper come from two sources:

- 1) focus groups interviews conducted at CARECEN in the Spring of 2001, and
- 2) participant observations during several family events that occurred between 2002 and 2004, conducted in several locations in Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup>

This study is not intended to be representative of all Central American immigrant experiences, particularly because of its small number of participants. Rather, it intends to portray an exploratory examination of the family language and cultural socialization practices for a community for which these issues are not too often explored.

### Language Contact in Los Angeles

*In language-contact situations, developing languages, receding languages, and maintenance ... are characterized by constant and rapid changes which may be observed as they arise and spread in the linguistic and social systems. (Silva-Corvalán, 1992)*

Silva-Corvalán addresses the shifts in language that occurs where languages, cultures and people live in close proximity. García (1999) suggests a response to a traditional "purist" approach to language use in defining a Latin American ethnolinguistic culture that is so diverse. García suggests a focus on traits that address the plurality and diversity of language use that counters traditional (Spanish) purist attitudes. These three traits are important to highlight in regard to the varieties of Spanish spoken by Salvadoran and Guatemalan students in American schools. The Mayan first languages spoken by many Guatemalan immigrants and the specific linguistic features of Salvadoran and Guatemalan Spanish are integrally related to notions of cultural identity.

The complexity involved in the languages spoken in Latin American countries is further heightened when languages and language varieties come into contact as a result of immigration. Language contact and language shift have been well-documented in sociolinguistic research (Fishman, 1999; Pease-Alvarez & Vásquez, 1994; Zentella, 1997; Romaine, 1995). Unfortunately, scholars of language shift have found that, where language contact occurs in bilingual communities with more "socially powerful groups", the result is monolingualism (Romaine, 1995, p.51)

Parodi (2003) points out that the contact with English contributes to code switching

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<sup>2</sup> To a degree, this represents the distribution of Central American families away from the Pico Union/Westlake area after initial arrival after immigration to the United States. Two of the families were volunteers from the initial focus groups, the remainder were contacted through referrals from Salvadoran or Guatemalan acquaintances, from CARECEN or through schools.

among Spanish speakers in Los Angeles, a phenomenon that is well documented (Zentella, 1997, Perisintono, 2003). Lipski (1994) maintains that across Latin America and Spain, there are “no pan-Hispanic norms which unerringly select preferred variants, nor is there any one country or region universally acknowledged as the repository of the linguistic standard...” (p. 136). Thus, as language contact occurs between varieties of Spanish, and between those varieties and English in Los Angeles, the differences become increasingly less noticeable over time, according to Parodi (2003) and Silva-Corvalán (1994). This means that Central American Spanish shifts to become more like the dominant regional variety of Spanish in Los Angeles (Mexican/Chicano Spanish). Fictional author Hector Tobar describes the confusion about language contact

in Los Angeles through one of his main characters—a Guatemalan death squad soldier, who observes the following of second generation Guatemalan youth:

*Fijáte, vos, que ese vato from La Mara got in a fight with that dude from La Eighteenth Street who lives down the block. Yeah, right there in the class. Real chingazos. El de La Salvatrucha estaba bleeding y todo.* (Hector Tobar, *The Tattooed Soldier*, 1998, p. 59)

The shift described by Romaine and others is becoming apparent in this brief excerpt. The differences and similarities between Central American varieties of Spanish as they come into contact with Mexican varieties of Spanish are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of words/semantic differences

Salvadoran Spanish	Salvadoran Spanish	Mexican Spanish	English
Casamiento	Arroz y frijoles	Arroz y frijoles	Rice and beans
Cipote	Patojo	Chamaquito, escuincle	child
Piscucha, barrilete	Barrilete	Papalote	kite
minutas	Granizada	raspado	“snow cone”; shaved ice
La cachimbona		Mi jefita,	Mother, mom, ma
Globo	Vejiga	Globo	balloon
chele	Canche	Güero	blond
Chompipe	Chompipe	guajolote	turkey
ayote	Guicoy	Calabacita	Zucchini squash
Chaqueta	Chumpa	chamarra	jacket
pajilla	Pajilla	popote	straw
Bolsón	Mochila	Mochila	backpack
Diccionario	amansaburros	Diccionario	dictionary

Table 2 provides a selection of the specific pronunciation/phonological differences in Salvadoran and Guatemalan Spanish (Lipski, 1994; Canfield, 1981). While this list is not exhaustive, it highlights those differences in

order to distinguish them from potential errors in reading/decoding for those students who receive reading instruction in Spanish through a bilingual program.

Table 2: Examples of pronunciation/phonological differences.

Salvadoran Spanish	Guatemalan Spanish	
<b>Ado</b>	<b>[aːo]</b>	Sounds like “ao”(sentado=sentao)
/s/? / aspirated/	/s/? /s/	Sounds like hard “s”; Salvadoran (español= eɣpañol)
/n/? ?	/n/? ?	Sound like “ng”, esp. after vowels and pauses (en =eng)
/b, d, g/? / <b>b, d, g</b> /		Over-emphasis of consonants
/y/	/y/	Weak pronunciation (silla= sía)

Typical among Salvadoran and Guatemalans is the use of “vos” (*voseo*), a form of address that may or may not be maintained by the children of Salvadoran immigrants.<sup>3</sup> The more formal “usted” is used for politeness, and is consistent with its use in other Spanish-speaking populations. Examples of *voseo* include:

- ¿Vos sos Salvadoreño, no? (You are Salvadoran, no?)
- Vení conmigo a bailar esta noche (Come with me to dance this evening).
- Fijáte, vos, que mañana tenemos la cita con el doctor. (Listen (you), we have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow).
- ¡Dejáte de babosadas y hacé lo que te digo! (Stop your foolishness and do what I say!).

All of the sessions with participants were conducted in Spanish and all of the informants used the formal “usted” with the interviewer. When questioned about the non-voseo use, they all responded that as a form of politeness towards a non-Central American, Central American parents in this focus group preferred to use the other form of address.

#### Findings: Blurring and Transforming Language, Culture and Identity

The author began her study in the Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrant

barrio/community known as Pico-Union/Westlake; the neighborhood is centered around MacArthur Park and the Rampart Division of the Los Angeles Police Department, known as the most violent section of the city (Los Angeles Police Department, [http://www.lapdonline.org/crime\\_maps\\_and\\_compstat](http://www.lapdonline.org/crime_maps_and_compstat)). Known as the territory where rival gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (originally only open to Salvadorans and Guatemalans, but now ethnically mixed with Mexicans) and 18<sup>th</sup> Street. It is a bustling area, home to the largest elementary school in Los Angeles Unified School District, Hoover Street School. The popular documentary “Fear and Learning at Hoover Street School” was filmed there shortly after the passage of Proposition 187. Quality schooling is a key concern for the Central American families who participated in the focus groups. The summary of the central themes that emerged from the two focus groups is reported in the Table 3 below:

<sup>3</sup> Cotton & Sharp (1988) describe the use of *vos* in Central America as a specialized use of second person singular with the shift from the Spanish second person plural use of *vosotros* (i.e., *vosotros habláis* becomes *vos hablás* in Central America).

Table 3: Focus Group Findings (N=18)

Theme	Examples
Child-rearing principles	-Lack of respect-talking back to parents is not customary in country of origin -“scaffolding” of parental responsibilities due to the need for both parents to work” -Children are seen and not heard
Spanish-language use in the home	-Concern over loss of Spanish -Decreased use of Spanish in the home in hopes of a better professional future for children
Literacy practices	-Homework (in English). -Salvadoran literature (poetry, novels) -notes/letters to family members -Children’s literature (in Spanish), -bibles -notes/letters to family members
Memories of war	-Surfacing during conversations, esp. for Salvadoran informants -not discussed openly in the home
Immigration status	-concerns over length of time to establish residency, paperwork, etc. -more outreach on the part of US, especially for Guatemalans
Schooling	-need for teachers to communicate in Spanish with parents -Teachers casual/unprofessional dress -need for school uniforms

Results from the focus group interviews are consistent with the recent research on Central Americans in Los Angeles (Menjívar, 2002; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001; López, Popkin & Telles, 1996). Central American families are highly interested in their children’s education. The parents who participated in the focus groups created spaces, both physical and temporal, for their children to do homework, read books and talk about school. While none of them was highly educated (most had not completed high school) they articulated their concerns about the differences in schooling and the informal dress of teachers in American schools. John Ogbu (1978) referred to this as the “dual frame of reference, the comparison between what it is like to live in the country of origin with living in Los Angeles. One father of a 9 year-old reported watching the violence of the news on television with his daughter “¿Ves eso?, yo vivi peor que

eso (“See that? I lived through worse than that.”). He was referring to the experiences and memories of the war in El Salvador, which he openly shared with his daughter. Parents stressed the importance of raising their children to understand the importance of being Salvadoran or Guatemalan and Americans. In these ways, the Central American immigrant families who participated in the focus groups revealed that their children are socialized both culturally and linguistically to understand their histories. This important facet of the socialization of Central American immigrant students is key to understanding the socio-cultural knowledge that is a marker of social identity (Ochs 1993; 1986). These markers can be captured by some of the writings of Central American immigrant youth, as well as by the excerpts from the families that I interviewed as part of this study.

What part of Mexico is El Salvador?

*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. I’ll never forget his name. Little Alex—a boy I had never seen*

*before—looked me right in the eye and smiled. It was an honest smile, unlike how boys smile when they’re about to size each other up. Although a nine-year-old boy’s smile can never be trusted, I was captivated by his enchanting honesty.*

*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 the Union Avenue Elementary School. Anything Salvadoran like **pupusas**, **pacaya**, **flor de izote**<sup>4</sup> 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.*

(Marlon Morales, 2000, pp 66-67.)

This excerpt describes blurring of identities that occur in part from the fear of being "found out". Because of the lack of legal status of some Central Americans, "faking it" meant "passing as a Mexican" in order to avoid deportation back to Central America. These experiences are similar to those cited by Zentella (1997), who discusses the complex and "expanding repertoires" of language, culture and identity.

#### Visibly Hidden

As educators, we seek to create classrooms that are learning sites for democracy. In our classrooms, we can create opportunities for coherence with principles that value and

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<sup>4</sup>*Pupusas* are a traditional Salvadoran (and Guatemalan) dish that consists of thick corn meal tortillas, filled combinations of sausage, cheese and beans. *Pacaya* is a type of vegetable and the *flor de izote* is a type of mushroom that grows from the national flower of El Salvador (izote). The title of the book *Izote Voz* represents the national flower and a play on the use of *voseo*, the typical, more formal use of address in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular, used here also to "give voice to".

respect the dignity of human experience of all of our students. Through engagement with the lived histories, languages and culture of Central American students in our schools, teachers have the power to practice what Paulo Freire termed as a "pedagogy of freedom" (1998). The type of engagement leads us to examine locally-situated policies and practices through reflection and action. It calls us to question our individual roles in the education of students in the perpetuation of oppressive and subtractive schooling, and to respond in concrete ways to inform and arm ourselves with the knowledge and power of our students' voices to create change. This process transforms traditional methods of reflection and inquiry into a model of teacher professional development that develops within us the ability to develop a disposition of change agency. This disposition is informed by a deepened knowledge of our students and their worlds, as well as a deepened knowledge of the pedagogic principles and content.

#### Classroom Implications: A Sociocultural Approach

Teachers and other educators need to use the emerging research on Central Americans to inform their practices. They can also generate their own research about and with students in their classrooms to build a classroom environment using an approach to teaching and learning based on sociocultural/constructivist principles (Wertsch, Del Rio & Alvarez, 1995). This approach maintains that academic success involves the interaction of multiple factors mediated through a particular context, and that the relationship between the teacher, student and the task at-hand is paramount. Lavadenz and Martin (1999) identified the following aspects of sociocultural/constructivist practices:

1. Teaching and learning are inter-related and additive processes which should incorporate the funds of knowledge of the participants through which teachers become students of students (Freire, 1998; Gonzáles, N., Moll, L. C., Tenery, M., Rivera, A., Rendon, P., Gonzáles, R., and Amanti C., 1995). This can occur by including instructional materials that reflect the communities of the learners, and are authentic and relevant to the lived experiences of students.



Varying the participation structures based on multiple learning/teaching styles of students is another example of the incorporation of concept of funds of knowledge.

2. The role of the teacher is
  - a. one of a facilitator and guide to build on the student's knowledge base while attending to high academic expectations so that all students do achieve;
  - b. to establish an inclusive classroom climate where multiple voices/perspectives are valued and shared; and
  - c. to understand that conflict can be used as a learning opportunity through a Freirian model of inquiry, dialogue and voice (Freire, 1998).
3. Issues of social justice and equity permeate the teaching/learning process. The classroom becomes a location of democratic coherence, where the educator's commitment and consciousness acknowledge the dignity of human experience.

The sociocultural approach can serve to bridge the information void that exists about the Central American communities in the U.S. In the next section, I provide examples of the method of transformative inquiry as a Freirian and sociocultural approach for teachers.

### Transformative Inquiry

The inclusion of students' languages and cultures into the curriculum in the discussion of the sociocultural approach is one step to shifting the apparent invisibility of Central Americans in our schools. To close, I propose a model of teacher inquiry which expands upon Alma Flor Ada's critical literacy phases (2004). Ada elaborated upon Freire's model of transformative literacy instruction. In the model

for transformative inquiry proposed here, I identify the following:

1. Descriptive Phase- Teachers read, write and record their observations of students, the related professional literature. The question 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. Transformative Phase- Teachers' recursive reflection, self-evaluation, negotiation and dialogue with students. The question to be addressed is "What did I learn from the entire process that allows me to make a change (praxis) in the teaching/learning process for myself and for my students?"

Finally, through this process, educators exemplify the model of professional, ethical and democratic authority in fostering more equitable learning for the students they serve. For the Central American immigrants, who are often ignored in US classrooms, enacting transformative inquiry processes on the part of their teachers can reverse the hidden nature of the hybrid identities they experience as they become participatory citizens.

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