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To cite this article: Luis Javier Pentón Herrera & Nicole Obregón (2018): Challenges facing Latinx ESOL students in the Trump era: Stories told through *testimonios*, Journal of Latinos and Education, DOI: [10.1080/15348431.2018.1523793](https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2018.1523793)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2018.1523793>



Published online: 10 Oct 2018.



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Challenges facing Latinx ESOL students in the Trump era: Stories told through *testimonios*

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, two ESOL teachers reflect on the implications of the DACA program and the DREAM Act for undocumented Latinx ELs, their families, and their communities in the United States. Six *testimonios* from real undocumented ELs are shared with the vision of illustrating the real-life struggles these students and their families are exposed to in the Trump era. The authors' vision is that these *testimonios* will shed light on the realities their students experience and will combat stereotypical beliefs that Latinx ELs/immigrants are uneducated, do not value education, cannot learn English, and have a poor work ethic.

KEY WORDS

DACA; DREAM Act; education; ELs; Latinx students; *testimonios*

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.
—Emma Lazarus

Introduction

President Trump's election has set into motion a new reality for Latinx immigrants in the United States, especially for Latinx students who are undocumented and seeking a pathway to a safe and secure life without barriers to education and employment. The DACA program was established under President Obama's leadership in 2012 with the intention of protecting undocumented immigrant minors who entered the U.S. before the age of 16 and allowing them to stay in the country legally without the fear of deportation. In addition to DACA, President Obama sought to enact the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act of 2017 with the objective of providing a path to residency, and eventually citizenship (Graham, 2017) to those who qualified. Although the DREAM Act has bipartisan support, it still has not passed, putting the lives of Latinx minors and other DREAMers at risk for deportation and separation from immediate family members. Since the 2016 presidential election, educational and non-educational policies that directly attack the rights, opportunities, and equality of Latinx immigrant students in the United States have been implemented.

The DREAM Act and DACA programs are vital for communities to thrive. DACA gives undocumented immigrants who arrived as minors temporary legal protection from deportation and the opportunity to obtain lawful employment, whereas unprotected undocumented immigrants must seek a source of income that typically involves manual, lower-skill and lower-paying occupations (Uwemedimo, Monterrey, & Linton, 2017). While DACA provides temporary legal

protection from deportation and the lawful provision of employment, the DREAM Act specifically addresses the necessity for undocumented minors to continue living a productive life as part of an American community in the United States. DREAMers would be granted permanent resident status in the country if they are actively enrolled in public school or higher education, have secured employment, or have served in the United States military (Graham, 2017). Additionally, the DREAM Act would improve college affordability by allowing recipients to pay in-state college tuition and gain access to financial aid that is currently inaccessible to unprotected youth (Wong et al., 2017).

Due to the uncertainty of safety within educational institutions and the overall hostility towards undocumented immigrants, students are experiencing negative consequences. Data are beginning to show that the type of policies being implemented and the rhetoric used throughout our country by the leadership are hurting academic performance and attendance of vulnerable student populations in schools (Gándara & Ee, 2018). Patricia Gándara and Jongyeon Ee with The Civil Rights Project, based out of The University of California, Los Angeles, conducted a national survey in which more than 5,000 educators were asked 14 questions. Their results paint an anxious and stressful situation for undocumented students, as well as students who could be perceived as undocumented. According to their research, 75% of educators who responded reported that their “immigrant students (whether they were US born or not) were terrified that their families and friends, and occasionally themselves might be picked up by ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]” (Gándara & Ee, 2018, p. 7). The negative impact of fear of deportation does not stop at simply feeling anxious; its impact is also seen academically. A majority of participants (57%) reported an increase in absenteeism due to concerns about immigration enforcement, and 60% of respondents indicated that they have noticed a decline in their students’ academic performance (Gándara & Ee, 2018).

The DACA Program sought to address all of these concerns; however, the program is not accepting any new applications (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2018). Since its first announcement in June 2012, more than 800,000 undocumented minors have been granted DACA status. In August 2017, Tom K. Wong from the University of California, San Diego, along with United We Dream (UWD), the National Immigration Law Center (NILC), and the Center for American Progress, conducted a national field study to analyze the economic, employment, and educational outcomes of DACA recipients (Wong et al., 2017). Their results paint a picture of hope and prosperity for the youth who received DACA status. Authorization to obtain legal employment is vital for DACA recipients to earn an income and sustain their lives in the United States. According to the study, 91% of DACA recipients were employed. After receiving DACA status, 69% of recipients moved to a job with better pay (Wong et al., 2017).

Not only did the personal lives of DACA recipients improve, but their communities were also positively affected. Many other DACA recipients became a more grounded staple in their communities by opening up their own business in their community. It was reported that 5% of recipients started their own business, compared to only 3.1% of the general population (Wong et al., 2017). Part of thriving in the job market is earning a high salary, which has held true for DACA recipients. The hourly wage of DACA recipients increased by an average of 69% since receiving DACA status (Wong et al., 2017). Wage increases not only benefit the recipients’ families, but add to the economic health and tax revenues of the community in which DACA recipients live. With the increase of wages comes a greater increase of purchasing power. Of those studied, 65% were able to purchase their first car (Wong et al., 2017), and of respondents 25 years and older, 24% purchased their first home (Wong et al., 2017). This study also delved into the educational experiences of undocumented youth who were granted DACA protection. Of those surveyed, 45% were currently enrolled in school, with 72% of those currently enrolled pursuing a bachelor’s degree or higher (Wong et al., 2017). More importantly, among those who are currently enrolled in education, 94% of them report that, due to their DACA status, they pursued educational opportunities that they previously could not (Wong et al., 2017).

The reality is that the continuation of the DACA program and the implementation of the DREAM Act would improve the lives of Latinx English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students, their families, their school systems, and the communities in which they reside and have built a life. Nonetheless, there are political and societal forces that are emerging within the United States that forcefully perpetuate the stereotypical ethos that all Latinx English Learners (ELs)/immigrants are uneducated, do not value education, cannot learn English, and have a poor work ethic. In this essay, two ESOL teachers share their students' stories, or *testimonios*, with the vision of shedding light on the realities our Latinx ESOL students face in the Trump era in order to combat those stereotypical ethos. To many, these stories may only serve to solidify their support for or opposition to the policies we have discussed. However, for the authors of this essay, these *testimonios* have faces, aspirations, dreams, and the desire for a productive life within the community in which they are currently living, which, for some of them, is the only community they know.

The purpose of this essay is to use *testimonios* as a tool to shed light on the realities our undocumented ESOL students experience and to combat stereotypical beliefs that all Latinx ELs/immigrants are uneducated, do not value education, cannot learn English, and have a poor work ethic. Our goal is not to hypothesize what can be learned from these *testimonios* or speculate on possible solutions to these real-life challenges. Instead, we hope that our essay will serve as a springboard for meaningful dialogue and actions that benefit undocumented Latinx ELs by learning about their stories and lives.

Why *testimonios*?

Throughout our essay, we purposefully use the term *testimonio* to make reference to the legacies of reflexive narratives of emancipation used by Latinx people inside and outside of the United States. As explained by Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012), “the objective of the *testimonio* is to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action” (p. 525). Hence, *testimonios* are intentional and have the unique characteristic of “being a political and *conscientized* reflection that is often spoken” (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p. 525). Thus, information is collected through interviews (orally) and transcribed into written text, which is how we learned from and collected our *testimonios* in this essay. In our view, *testimonios* have the power to engage listeners and readers in the discourse of justice, social equity, and education by providing a reflective space with the possibility of “*unlearning* and challenging the dominant stereotypes concerning the lives of undocumented students and their families” (Wong, Crewalk, & Velasquez-Soto, 2018, p. 2).

Testimonios: Our ESOL students' realities

In this section, we share six *testimonios* of our students and the challenges they are facing to remain in school and balance their lives. These *testimonios* candidly and explicitly narrate the many challenges ESOL students are experiencing in the Trump era due to the implementation of policies that directly and indirectly affect them, their family members, and their future opportunities for a successful career and life in the United States. All of the names used in these *testimonios* are pseudonyms and no identifiable material has been disclosed in order to protect students' identities and personal information.

Testimonio #1: Herson (elementary school)

Herson is five years old and is currently enrolled in kindergarten. He arrived to the United States with his mother, Mirna, from a very dangerous state in Mexico, where they were escaping the certain threat of murder and torture from local drug gangs. Gangs in Mirna's home state in Mexico have taken over the district and have even infiltrated the local and state government agencies. It has become increasingly difficult to report news, file a missing person's report, or even take public

transportation. Herson's grandfather (Mirna's father) was the head of public transportation in his state, so local gangs targeted him. He was kidnapped and murdered, and the rest of his family members were targeted as well. Mirna decided that her only hope to save her child's life was to brave the journey to the United States. They made it here and were detained at the Texas border. There, they were held in a prison cell for over two weeks, but at least they were together. While in prison, Mirna explained her case and motives for leaving Mexico, and submitted a formal request seeking asylee status. She had brought over with her all of the documents and proof she could imagine to build an asylum case. It was enough evidence that the border authorities let her and Herson enter the United States to complete their process.

Soon after they were released into the United States, Herson began having violent seizures. Doctors would later discover that, although Herson showed absolutely no physical signs of epilepsy upon routine physical examination, his epileptic events were triggered by traumatic events and major disruptive life changes. Mirna sought out medical assistance, but without medical insurance or Medicaid, many healthcare providers turned her away. Herson's health got worse and worse. She was able to find a pediatric neurologist who volunteered to take on Herson's healthcare and, upon hearing their story, also assisted her in applying for and being granted Medicaid for Herson, but no such protection was available for Mirna. Herson was enrolled in kindergarten, but as he had never attended any formal schooling in Mexico, he had a very difficult time adjusting to American classroom expectations, let alone the added challenge of learning them in a language he did not understand. Additionally, the trauma he had been exposed to in Mexico and the violent loss of his beloved grandfather brought out defiance, anger, and confusion in Herson.

Armed with all of the documents she had collected to build an asylum case, Mirna sought assistance from a lawyer in the area, but was unable to find someone who would help her pro bono. You see, although Mirna and Herson were released into the United States to await a decision for their legal status, Mirna was not authorized to work; therefore, she was not allowed to find a job and earn money. She eventually obtained a job illegally and was paid in cash. That job gave her the opportunity to pay for rent, food, clothes, and basic necessities to survive. Mirna is still searching for an immigration lawyer who can assist her and Herson in their asylum case.

Testimonio #2: Esteban (middle school)

Esteban, a 12-year-old middle school student, came to the United States with his older brother, Mario, from Guatemala. Both of them were raised by their single mother, have never met their father, and have no other relatives alive (that they know of). A year ago, Esteban and Mario's mother was diagnosed with leukemia; she died a couple of months later. From that moment on, Mario, who was 17 years old at the time, had to become the head of the household and take care of his younger brother, Esteban. As such, Mario stopped going to school and started working to provide for Esteban and also to ensure that his brother could continue going to school. However, the word that Esteban and Mario were by themselves quickly spread in their neighborhood and members of a gang approached Esteban at school and told him that they were coming for the two boys.

When Esteban shared what had happened with Mario, they decided to escape Guatemala and come to the United States, seeking refuge and protection. Upon their arrival to the United States, a Catholic organization provided initial support to the brothers, but they did not have any family or friends who could take them under their wings and provide permanent shelter. Currently, Mario is 18 years old and is working to provide food and economic resources for himself and his brother. Mario had enrolled in high school with the vision of learning English and completing his high school diploma, but not having money to pay for rent and food forced him to stop attending school. Mario works very hard to pay for the room where they currently live and to provide food and clothes for Esteban and himself. Esteban is now 12 years old and is currently enrolled in middle school. Esteban is an excellent student, but he does come to school often hungry, with a dirty uniform, and shows signs of lack of personal hygiene.

Esteban and Mario's legal case is currently under review, but they are very worried about the outcome. They both arrived to the United States as unaccompanied minors seeking refuge. They are struggling financially. Mario has told Esteban not to report or share their undocumented status with anyone at his school for fear that they may be deported. As such, Mario and Esteban continue to face their harsh reality by themselves without any support from Esteban's school or other local and non-profit organizations. The future is not looking very positive for Esteban; he has shared with his teacher that he might stop attending school after he graduates from middle school. Mario wants Esteban to continue studying and graduate from high school, but Esteban confesses that "I feel sad seeing my brother work so much for us, and I cannot help right now, I want to start working to help."

Testimonio #3: Franco (middle school)

Franco is like any other typical middle school boy in eighth grade. He loves video games and Air Jordan shoes, is painfully shy around girls, and his favorite part of the day is gym class. On the surface, this smiling kid seems just like the rest of his carefree peers, but behind those piercing black eyes hides a story of pain and despair that most adults would have trouble handling.

Before moving to the United States to live with his aging grandmother in a rural part of Maryland, Franco had been in hiding. Four years ago, before coming to a new country and culture, Franco saw his own father murdered by gang members right in front of his eyes outside his home in El Salvador. A little over four years ago, Franco's mother was sent to jail for gang-related charges and has not been heard from since. Four years ago, Franco's great aunt took him in and hid him from the violence and terror that plagued the streets of his small, poor city. Four years ago, Franco used to go to school and loved math and playing soccer with his friends on the playground. Four years ago, Franco was just like every other fourth grader, but now everything has changed.

To say that American middle school was an adjustment for Franco is putting it lightly. Franco had limited language skills, could not communicate with his peers or teachers in English, and was recovering from the trauma of leaving his family back in El Salvador. Franco was an unaccompanied minor who was seeking refuge with his grandmother, who had been in the country for four years and had secured her status as a resident. Franco's family was doing the best with the limited resources and English skills they had to make a better life for Franco, but it was not an easy path. The legal costs to secure Franco's safe haven were becoming difficult for his grandmother, as she worked two jobs just to make ends meet. Often, Franco came to school hungry or in the same outfit as the day before because he only had a few items that fit his growing, adolescent frame. Despite all of these factors, Franco came to school happy and ready to learn. He always had a smile on his face when he walked into homeroom.

Academically, Franco was four years behind his peers, but he made efforts and his language skills began to flourish. In math, he tried desperately to understand the new concepts being presented and practiced his skills diligently. Despite his best efforts, Franco was so far behind his peers that he was barely making passing grades. Soon things began to change and his smile began to fade. It started with issues on the bus. Other kids began making fun of his worn-out clothes, pointing out his fading jeans and smelly, old sweatshirt. Some kids went so far as to tell him that he should be "sent back to where he belongs." In the busy middle school hallways, kids started pushing into him on purpose and using racial slurs. Franco began to turn for the worse. He became reserved and quiet, no longer practicing his broken English or raising his hand to volunteer in class. He quickly stopped taking notes or even trying to keep up with the rest of his classmates. The once happy kid who smiled at everyone now walked into homeroom despondent and alienated.

Then, one day during lunch, an administrator was called to the boys bathroom. A fight had broken out between Franco and another boy. Franco had slammed the boy into a stall, knocked him to the ground, and kicked him in the ribs. He told the boy that he was going to get his family who were gang members to come for him. The school had to take action, and Franco was kicked out of school. They had a strict policy regarding fighting and gang threats. The other boy's family said that

they were going to press charges and hired a lawyer. They came into school and complained to the administrator, so actions against Franco had to be taken. It was only found out afterwards that the boy Franco was fighting had started the fight and had been bullying Franco on the bus for weeks. The boy told Franco, that day in the bathroom, “Trump will send you back where you belong,” and Franco finally snapped. Franco’s grandmother could not do anything about the unfair accusations and suspension from school. She could not speak English, and she could not afford legal representation, so she felt that she could not approach the school to explain her grandson’s side of the story. She did not want any trouble because she knew her family was already a target in this small, unforgiving community that had no compassion for immigrant children or families.

Franco tried to carry on the best he could for the remainder of the year, but it was a daily struggle. He began to tell his grandmother that he was “sick” so he could avoid school altogether. Soon, he was missing several days for court hearings regarding his immigration status. As he missed school, his academics and social development suffered. Although Franco hoped to join the soccer team in high school, he was not able to due to the fact that his grandmother worked so many hours and he could not get a ride home. He could not get the required physical because his grandmother did not have affordable health insurance and could not find a doctor who spoke Spanish. Franco is trying hard to achieve resident status under the DREAM Act, but it is a slow and hard process when limited resources are available to him.

Testimonio #4: Juanita (high school)

Juanita recently arrived to the United States from Honduras with her mother and father, fleeing persecution from gang members who wanted to make her part of their group. After arriving to the United States, Juanita and her mother ran away from their house to another state after Juanita’s drunk and abusive father beat both of them. Upon their arrival to the new state, they were received and aided by a church which provided initial support and lodging. Soon afterwards, Juanita enrolled in school and her mother started working; they were ready for a new beginning. After only a month, Juanita’s mother was caught by members of the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, who placed her on house arrest with an ankle monitor (also known as *grilletes* or shackles) awaiting trial. Due to her house arrest, Juanita’s mother could not get out of her house and had to stop working. As a result, Juanita and her mother could not afford paying for their rent and were evicted from their apartment.

Juanita, a straight-A student who has been recognized for her academic achievements on the Honor Rolls and Principal Honor Rolls since she began school, was faced with the hard choice of dropping out of school to become the provider for her household. At only 17 years of age, she had to face a situation beyond her control and knowledge. Because both Juanita and her mother are undocumented, her school was only able to provide limited resources and support. Thankfully, Juanita did not drop out of school and, through religious organizations, Juanita and her mother were provided temporary shelter until their immigration case is resolved. Juanita is continuing to excel in her academics and her passion for learning English is now driven by her goal of helping her mother stay in the United States. For Juanita and her mother, staying in the United States is the only opportunity to be safe and have a future; the other two options are reuniting with Juanita’s abusive father or returning to Honduras, where gang members undoubtedly await her return.

Testimonio #5: Pablo (high school)

Pablo arrived to the United States several years ago from El Salvador with his father and mother after gang members threatened to kill them for failing to pay *renta*. The reality is that Pablo’s family had previously experienced the brutality of gang members firsthand. A few years earlier, Pablo was sexually abused by gang members and was told that they expected him to join the gang once he was older. As a result, Pablo and his parents were fearful of this latest gang threat and decided to run

away in order to give Pablo the opportunity to have a better and brighter future. Upon their arrival to the United States, Pablo and his family stayed with acquaintances who had been in the United States for a few years. During his first year, Pablo excelled in school, earned honors, and even received a scholarship to attend summer school. However, during the summer vacation that first year, Pablo was sexually abused by an acquaintance where his family was staying. Pablo did not tell anyone about what had happened. Instead, he tried to end his life by taking pills. The first week of class, Pablo had to be rushed to the hospital, where, thankfully, he was saved.

During the process of anger, grief, and acceptance, Pablo's parents moved to a new apartment, but failed to report this incident to the authorities for fear of political retaliation because Pablo and his parents are undocumented. During this process, Pablo received limited mental counseling and support and found the strength to tell his parents that he is gay. Pablo's mother did not accept her son's reality and abandoned the family. Pablo's father became blind with anger and started to physically abuse him on a weekly basis. Pablo's educational institution reported these events to child services once teachers became aware of the situation. However, due to Pablo's fears of being deported, he stopped attending school and decided to start working to have enough money to afford an apartment away from his abusive father. Today, Pablo is living on his own and maintains little to no communication with his father; he does not know where his mother is. He is still dealing with the mental pain and grief of everything that has transpired during the past two years and the fact that he was abandoned by his mother, physically abused by his father, and is undocumented and alone in a foreign country. In the future, Pablo hopes to save enough money to start a General Equivalency Degree (GED) program and begin college. However, Pablo knows that, because of his undocumented status, there are few options for economic and social support.

Testimonio #6: Jorge (community college)

Jorge arrived to the United States 17 years ago from El Salvador. He migrated to the United States after experiencing the devastating earthquake from 2001 that scarred the nation, destroyed thousands of houses, and injured and killed thousands of people. After surviving this life-changing event, Jorge was left with a psychological residue that could only be improved in the company of his mother and siblings and treated by medical professionals. For that reason, he decided to migrate to the United States to reunite with his family members and seek medical support. After his arrival, Jorge improved significantly and excelled in school. He quickly learned English and graduated high school with honors. When he graduated from high school, due to his excellence in academic achievement, he received a letter of recognition from an elected official of his state. Similarly, the National Honor Society (NHS) offered him a grant for his grade point average (GPA) and school performance. However, because Jorge did not have a social security number (SSN) and was not a citizen, the NHS told him that he did not qualify to receive this honor.

Presently, Jorge is attending a community college and will soon graduate with an Associate's Degree in Accounting. Due to his excellent academic performance in college, he has been accepted as a member of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars and the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. He is also a manager at a hospitality company, where he has been offered many opportunities to move up within the company, but he has respectfully declined because his dream is to become a certified public accountant (CPA). Jorge is a DREAMer and a DACA recipient, but his DACA is expiring later this year. In his words, "DACA has been a blessing and has given me the opportunity to demonstrate that DACA recipients have the opportunity to improve ourselves, work, go to school, get opportunities to be better, and contribute to the economy. DACA has given me the opportunity to have a better job, get a license, and live a normal life in a society where I contribute as an outstanding member."

Upon his DACA expiration later this year, Jorge faces the challenges of potentially losing his job, losing his health insurance, and losing the opportunity to continue contributing to his community. Losing DACA means a change of his life's reality, personally and professionally. "I used to feel like I

was in a box because I did not have opportunities, but with DACA I was given the opportunity to explore my full potential and my dreams of pursuing education and professional careers. Now, in a blink of an eye, all of that could be taken away from me.” Returning to El Salvador would mean certain jeopardy for Jorge. Gang members in El Salvador murdered a cousin a few years earlier, and since then, Jorge’s family has been targeted. Additionally, because Jorge is gay, he faces even greater risks of becoming a sought-after victim. Although he loves his Latino heritage, he feels American and has lived in the United States for most of his life. He does not know how to live anywhere else. For him, returning to El Salvador is just not an option.

Conclusion

Latinx ESOL youth in the United States have the drive to succeed and are able to soar when the fear of deportation is removed and the authorization to work and gain an education is present and nurtured. As elucidated in the edited book by Wong, Sánchez Gosnell, Foerster Luu, and Dodson (2018), undocumented students have a difficult life in the United States. The glimmer of hope for them is that we, as educators, can transform our practices and become their allies, inside and outside our classrooms. “We [educators] cannot solve the problem alone, but we can be part of the solution with the choices we make in our pedagogy (encouragement, relationships, believing in our students, judgement-free decision making), our use of community resources, and our political action” (Foerster Luu, Dodson, Andrade-Ayala, & Cevallos Rodríguez, 2018, p. 168).

In this essay, we sought to shed light on the realities our Latinx ESOL students and their families face in the Trump era through real-life *testimonios*. For educators such as ourselves, witnessing our beloved students deal with these unbelievable challenges is heartbreaking, and due to the lack of resources offered within the system, many teachers feel helpless. Latinx ELs are faced with far more social (see Pentón Herrera, 2017) and academic (see Pentón Herrera, 2018) challenges than their non-ELs counterparts. However, the DACA program and the DREAM Act are two policies that give hope and offer support and opportunities for recipients of all age groups. It is our hope that, in this article, we have given a voice to those affected by the current political climate who are not being heard. Furthermore, we also hope that the DACA program and the DREAM Act become a reality so that our students can finally live free.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express appreciation to our colleagues and contributors for making this project a reality. Most importantly, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to our ESOL students and their families. Thank you for your candor in sharing your stories, for trusting us as your teachers and advocates, and for your continued perseverance in the face of adversity. We hope that, in this essay, your stories and voices will be heard.

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