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Sojourners in Mexico with U.S. School Experience: A New Taxonomy for Transnational Students

VICTOR ZÚÑIGA AND EDMUND T. HAMANN

Millions of students attending U.S. schools were born in Mexico, as is well known, and many millions more are the American-born children of Mexican parents. What is less widely known—and less considered in educational research, policy, and practice—is that there are likely hundreds of thousands of students in Mexican schools who have previous experience in U.S. schools. There are many school-age children involved in the transnational movement of peoples between the United States and Mexico. Among those currently in Mexico (typically regarded as a sending country rather than a receiving country), most expect to return to the United States someday, although not necessarily permanently, and they variously identify as Mexican, Mexican American, or American. This suggests that the prospect of enduring geographic mobility affects the complicated work of identity formation and affiliation. Central to this negotiation are Mexican schools, which, like U.S. schools, are not deliberately designed to consider the needs, understandings, and wants of an increasingly international, mobile population. One purpose of this article is to build an understanding of transnational students from those we encountered through school visits in the Mexican states of Nuevo León and Zacatecas in 2004–5. The students in our study are transnational, because they have moved internationally, but they do not conform to the common assumption that immigrant students face only the challenge of integrating themselves to their new host country. For many, the challenge goes beyond becoming fluent in the language of their host country or learning its norms, because they may eventually return to their sending country, where they will need to relearn language and cultural norms. In our essay, we first consider the labels through which transnational students are seen or, to some extent, not seen. We then trace our research methodology, describe typologies and the distribution of the transnational students we en-

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countered in visits to more than 1,600 classrooms, share those students' varying takes on their previous U.S. school experience, consider how their mononational peers (i.e., those who only know Mexico) regard them, and depict some ambiguous perspectives on transnational students offered by Mexican teachers. The article concludes with a consideration of both policy implications and next steps for research on this student population.

The Labels through which Students Are Seen

The identities that students assume and the labels schools apply to them powerfully shape how they act, are responded to, and are understood. These socially constructed categories shape teachers' presumptions of needs and opportunities and thus shape the very tasks of schooling. Schools and educational systems in very different regions of the world are now enrolling new categories of transnational students, categories that in the past did not exist, were not visible, and/or were subsumed under other categories. These new categories of transnational students are not readily accounted for in most nations' school systems nor described by dominant pedagogical and curricular narratives. These students are ignored or misunderstood because typologies are not available in the school-policy vernacular for considering them. Moreover, there is some evidence that this lack of recognition, as well as students' circumstantial challenges, creates challenges to their academic success.

Consistent with the logic of recommending more accurate typologies, Hamann (1999, 2001) proposed a new category of transnational student in U.S. schools—the sojourner student—and defined sojourner students by contrasting them with permanently settled students, that is, natives and immigrants who intend to stay within their national context for a long time. Sojourners can be easily identified, after the fact, because they disappear from the schools, often during the school year. Their geographic mobility, precipitated by global economic trends, immigration enforcement, low-cost transportation, and/or the coping strategies by working-class families, produces “extra acculturative challenges.” Sojourners “need not only learn how to negotiate *this* new place (i.e., the community surrounding their present school), but more fundamentally *any* new place, as the prospect looms that they will sooner or later be headed someplace else” (Hamann 2001, 38).

The most remarkable traits of sojourner students are their susceptibility to dislocation and plural sense of belonging or partial belonging. As Hamann, Zúñiga, and Sánchez García (2006) noted in an article drawing from the same data set used for this essay, sojourner students represent a useful theoretical characterization or way of talking about the different schooling needs of those who could expect dislocation. The extant experiences of 500 students who formerly attended school in the United States but now go to school in Mexico empirically support this theoretical proposition. The task changes

from describing those who are susceptible to dislocation to describing the relocated, with relocation an accomplished fact and often a continuing future prospect.

Migrant and *immigrant* are other terms that can describe relocated students with plural geographic attachments. Migrant students,¹ who move within one national space, and immigrant students, who cross international borders, also face disruptive school experiences and are forced to adapt to new social conditions. Yet, in traditional receiving countries, the case of transnational youth is conceived of as a one-way accommodation by schools to help newcomers successfully transition to their new environment. Indeed, analyses, debates, and studies in receiving countries have long focused on the capacity of institutions, particularly schools, to facilitate the assimilation process of immigrant students and families (e.g., Dewey 1902). A common concern among policy makers, researchers, and educators is that “schools are failing to properly educate and ease the transition and integration of large and growing numbers of immigrant youth arriving in Europe and North America; many quickly become marginalized as racially, ethnically, religiously, and linguistically marked minority groups” (Suárez-Orozco and Sattin 2007, 3).

In the above quote, Suárez-Orozco and Sattin (2007) describe a substantive challenge: the extant label *immigrant youth* draws attention to circumstances and vulnerabilities of many transnational students. But Hamann (1999, 2001) chose the term *sojourner* to highlight that some dislocation-susceptible students cannot be framed in terms of school adaptation, cultural assimilation, or social integration because their schooling cannot be described by some unidirectional pattern. Sojourners are continuously negotiating and trying to connect to “here” and to “there” (Smith 1994), because it is not easy for them or their parents to define which is the receiving community and which is the community of origin.² Destination and origin become interchangeable or equally misleading. In some cases, the geographic instability is voluntary, a product of economic and/or family concerns; sometimes, however, it is forced by deportation.

Reyes (2000), who studied mainland-educated youth who moved back to Puerto Rico, identified students in her study as returned migrants (see also McConnell 1988). Returned migrant refers to youth born and first schooled in one country, who then move to another country and attend school for at

¹ The U.S. Department of Education has a formal definition of *migrant students* that refers to students who have moved within the last 3 years because of their family’s involvement in food production. Our definition would encompass many such students, but we at once mean it more expansively (food employment is not a criterion for us) and more narrowly (we use a different term for those who move internationally).

² As Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) note, not all transnational students live internationally with their biological parents, nor do they necessarily move with those parents. Here we are using “parent” more encompassingly to refer to guardianship (i.e., the adults who make caretaking decisions related to a particular child).

least 1 year, and then return to the country of origin. A different transnational student case occurs when children are born in their migrating parents' country of destination. In many cases these children gain different legal citizenship from their parents because of birthplace in the receiving country. These children can move to their parents' country of origin, but they cannot be considered returned migrants. Rather, they fit better with the category of international migrant. Their case is the reverse of the expected process, as these children move from receiving countries (e.g., the United States, Germany, United Kingdom, Japan, Spain, and Canada) to sending ones (e.g., Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines, Dominican Republic, Turkey, and Vietnam).

For immigrant, returned migrant, and international migrant students, schools act as intermediaries between them and their local/national societies in two senses. First, per the common schooling script (McAndrew 2007), schools are meant to prepare good citizens who are loyal to the host community and feel a sense of belonging to the nation. In pursuing this purpose, all other countries are subordinated in the curricula. This script was advocated by Horace Mann in the United States and by Jules Ferry in France (Gautherin 2000). It was a key purpose of both elementary and secondary schools in the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth-century periods of mass immigration from Europe, and this purpose remains salient today (Fass 2007). The common schooling script now coexists with a fragmented schooling script (McAndrew 2007). Per the latter, schools are the institutional instruments of modern economies for providing workers who can be productive in the face of changing labor market needs (see also Spener 1988). Schools have to respond to local and regional demands for a labor force because they receive funds from public sources. The fragmented schooling script does not always rationalize full welcome (Gitlin et al. 2003) and social integration of newcomer students.

Neither script fully aligns with the student circumstances we describe in this article. Sojourner students, whether from immigrant, returned migrant, or international migrant backgrounds, do not fully fit in the intermediary school functions mentioned above. For this reason, they may be described as "don't-fit" students (Deschenes et al. 2001); that is, they constitute student typologies that the school system does not anticipate and for whom the system was not consciously designed. Typically, school responses to don't-fit students are modest adaptations and do not call into question the taxonomies of the system's larger organizing logic.

For some, being a transnational student is or will become an asset; they gain proficiency in the languages, cultural mores, and means of living in more than one national context and thereby have broader opportunity horizons than their mononational peers. Transnationalism for such students refers to the capacity to build, understand, maintain, and reinforce a network of useful contacts and "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al. 1993) that surpass

national boundaries. Nina Siulc (2008, personal communication) has noted that Dominicans with U.S. school experience who have been deported from the United States are more employable in some sectors of the Dominican economy, for example, tourism and call centers. For others, however, transnational experience is a drawback because it places them between cultures and behind mononational peers in academic proficiency, a dynamic that can spiral into school failure.

In some senses, many of the students we studied could as readily be called binational as transnational because they affiliate with just two nation-states—the United States and Mexico. As with transnational students, affiliation with one nation-state is viewed as impeding, or even disqualifying, in terms of affiliation with other states (in this case, just one other). However, like the term mononational, binational obscures the interplay and contestation of identities, labels, and/or affiliations. In terms of how they were talked about and/or viewed themselves, many of the students described here had a pan-ethnic/pan-national identity as Latinos or Hispanics when they lived in the United States (Oboler 1995; Hamann and Harklau, forthcoming). In addition, binational seems less apt than transnational at describing students who found themselves affiliating with or being lumped with Guatemalans, Salvadorans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Ecuadorians, and others while they were in the United States.

One challenge of transnationalism arises from the fact that the schools in most countries have been institutionally conceived as serving national/local interests, goals, and visions. School curricula—the languages, values, traditions, narratives, and symbols—have been territorialized since the nineteenth century or beginning of the twentieth century. In essence, they have been territorialized since schooling became a popular expectation. Even in countries with highly decentralized school systems, like the United States and Switzerland, we can find several traits that promote a single, national, cultural self-understanding, for example, “land of the free and home of the brave,” social continuity (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990), and community cohesion. This is true even when there are intrasocietal tensions about what schooling should be and what the country should become. As Hunter (1998, 2) pointed out, “Likewise, the quarrels over textbooks in public schools are more than conflicts over the politics of educational curricula. Instead they are disagreements over the national ideals bequeathed to America’s next generation. . . . These ideals are not mere political ideologies, reducible to party platforms. Rather, they are the moral visions that fuel vehement disagreements over policy and politics.” Thus, whereas the kind of society schools should produce is the subject of inevitable contestation, the fact that schooling is the vehicle for shaping the social ideals for the next generation is not.

The mononational intent of schooling is even more evident in countries that have developed and reinforced centralized school systems, for example,

Mexico and France, where the curriculum is nationalized, and teacher-training expectations are described at a national level. In these instances, too, the system-design question is How can schooling help craft the future national society that current generations think is desirable and necessary?

This is where the most important rupture related to transnational students emerges: transnational children are transnationals because they received an education in two or more national/local frames that are not formally articulated with each other. With minor exceptions, including the migrant student transfer document that a handful of students and teachers we met referenced, American and Mexican curricular frames have no bridges between them, and no school actor is energetically trying to build them.³ The most visible effect of this is discernible in the words of many of the Mexican teachers we interviewed. Often, they stated that “those students”—coming from U.S. schools—“do not know” geography and history. What they meant, of course, is that these students had not learned Mexican geography and history. This provides a striking illustration of how schools are mononational institutions (Zúñiga and Hamann 2008). Similarly, when immigrant students enroll in U.S. schools, American teachers often say and think, “That student does not know how to read.” Of course, what they mean is that the student does not know how to read in English.

In the text that follows, we describe new categories of transnational students based on data from surveys we conducted in Mexico, the most important migrant-sending country to the United States and the origin of most of one of the biggest international migratory flows in the world. Why did we decide to conduct our surveys in a country more associated with sending than receiving? It was a means for escaping the paradigm that immigrant children are arriving in richer societies, and the challenge is to integrate them. Our data suggest such an understanding is incomplete. In one sense, our task is to identify new labels that highlight the plurality of transnational students’ circumstances and their educational needs and potentials. In a second sense, however, our task is to highlight existing labels—some emic, or self-asserted, such as *Mexican American*, and some etic, that is, not created by the designee, such as *U.S. citizen*—and highlight that there are students with these identities in unexpected places, such as Mexican schools.

Recently, some California demographers asked whether the high proportion of second-generation Latino student dropouts is partially due to the fact that some of this school-aged population leaves the United States. Based on census population sample data, they found that “the prevalence of childhood emigration to Mexico is low but far from negligible, involving around

³ In making this claim, we acknowledge the efforts of the Education Working Group of the U.S.-Mexico Binational Commission (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2003) and a few similar efforts but argue that, so far, they have had little apparent impact on what we saw in Mexican schools or in Mexican teacher training (Zúñiga et al. 2008).

1 in 10 children born in the U.S. to Mexican-born mothers. . . . [A]mong those that do emigrate from the U.S. to Mexico in childhood, rates of return migration to the U.S. are high and follow a strong life-course pattern” (Rendall and Torr 2007, 2). These findings align with our observations; although there is more movement from Mexico to the United States, there is significant movement in the opposite direction.

Mixed-Method Inquiry in Two States

Mexico is organized politically into 31 states and the Federal District of Mexico City. The states vary significantly in terms of their participation in international migration to the United States. A well-known classification of the regions describes four types of states: (a) the historical main migration region, with more than 100 years of experience and high densities of movement, mainly the states located in west-central Mexico; (b) the historical minor regions, with a century of low-intensity migration, primarily in the northern states of Mexico; (c) the new regions with less than 30 years of migratory experience with medium/high intensity, mainly in central Mexico; and (d) new regions with low-intensity migration, generally in southern Mexico (Durand and Massey 2003).

Taking into account our funding possibilities and other variables, we decided to select two states. One is classified type “a,” and the other type “b.” The former, Zacatecas, is more rural and agriculturally oriented. The latter, Nuevo León, is one of the most industrialized states in Mexico; the bulk of its population is urban, and it absorbs a lot of internal migration. Despite proximity and robustness of economic ties between Nuevo León and the American states to its north, most of Nuevo León is not classified as having high participation in international migration flows to the United States. Only two out of Nuevo León’s 51 *municipios* (counties) have been classified as having high or very high density international migration by the Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), Mexico’s census bureau. By contrast, among the 57 *municipios* in Zacatecas, 42 are classified as having a high or very high density of international migrant households (Tuirán et al. 2002).

Public and private schools in Nuevo León enrolled 704,604 students in the 2004–5 school year, the year of our study there. There were 497,795 students enrolled in the 2,528 *escuelas primarias* (1st–6th grades) and 206,809 in the 782 *escuelas secundarias* (7th–9th grades) (Secretaría de Educación Pública 2004). From this universe of schools, we selected a stratified representative sample of 173 schools, taking into account education level (90 *primarias* and 83 *secundarias*), degree of international migration density according to the census bureau’s classification, and rural/urban location.

We selected our sample in Zacatecas following the same steps and criteria used in Nuevo León. Zacatecas has a much smaller school system than Nuevo León, enrolling 280,000 students, but it has almost as many schools (4,803)

because its population is much more dispersed. Consequently, in order to get an adequate sample size, we included more schools (110 *primarias* and 104 *secundarias*) but not more students than in Nuevo León.

We collected data from 689 classrooms in Nuevo León and 984 in Zacatecas, including some from the early grades of *primaria* (1st–3rd grades). Classrooms were randomly selected. In Nuevo León we surveyed 14,444 students, of whom 4,382 were youngsters in the first three grades of *primaria*. In Zacatecas, we surveyed 11,258 students, of whom 3,639 were in the first three grades. Our surveying of the youngest students was modest: entire classes were orally asked if anyone present had ever gone to school in the United States. We recorded numbers of affirmative responses and numbers of children in these classrooms, but the rest of our data come from older students (4th–9th grades) who completed written surveys.⁴ We collected surveys from 10,062 older students in Nuevo León and 7,619 older students in Zacatecas. In addition, we conducted semistructured interviews with 46 transnational students in Nuevo León and 75 in Zacatecas. We also interviewed 25 teachers.

Since our research was completely school based, we did not reach school-eligible youth with U.S. educational experience who were not enrolled in the Mexican schools. Accounting for this missed population, we recognize that our study may show a more optimistic picture of Mexican and U.S. schools' responsiveness to transnational students than is warranted.

Transnational Youth in Mexican Schools: A Description

Typologies and Distribution

For the purpose of our study, we defined a transnational student as a minor who has matriculated in schools of at least two countries. By that measure, we found 512 transnational students in the classrooms we visited in Nuevo León and Zacatecas. Yet during those visits, we also met 119 students who were born in the United States and thus are U.S. citizens, although all of their schooling to date has been in Mexico. Owing to their legal status in the United States and early experience there, members of this second group are more likely than their peers to become transnational students in the future. As such, our survey found a total of 631 children who may be more expansively defined as transnational youth.

To be sure, U.S.-born students (the second and fourth categories in table 1) represent a low proportion of the school population in Nuevo León and Zacatecas. Nevertheless, they were more than 1 out of 100 students in our sample, or 1.3 percent of 4th–9th graders. Mexico's school population as a

⁴ We found that even when children attending early grades knew that they studied in the United States, they often could not reliably answer where they studied, how many years, and other important indicators of their school trajectories.

TABLE 1
STUDENTS ENROLLED IN NUEVO LEÓN (2004) AND ZACATECAS (2005) CLASSIFIED BY THEIR
TRANSNATIONAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Type of Student	Description	Number	Percentage
Mononational school experience:			
Born in Mexico	Attended schools only in Mexico	17,106	96.9
Born in the United States	Attended schools only in Mexico	119	.7
Transnational school experience:			
Returned migrants	Born in Mexico, attended schools in the United States, and returned to Mexican schools	296	1.7
International migrant students	Born in the United States; schooling in the United States and Mexico	117	.7
Total		17,638	100

SOURCE.—UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–5. Sample of 4th–9th grade transnational students (Nuevo León: $n = 10,062$; Zacatecas: $n = 7,619$).

whole stands at more than 20 million students (1st–9th grades). If the national average for such students in Mexico is even two-thirds of what we found in Nuevo León and Zacatecas, then there were 200,000 such students in Mexican schools in the middle of this decade.⁵ In other words, a measurable part of the Mexican-American second generation is presently being educated in Mexican schools, as Rendall and Torr (2007) have suggested in their studies.

Among the transnational students (the third and fourth categories in table 1), we make a distinction between those who were returned students, because they were born in Mexico, enrolled in U.S. schools, and then came back to Mexico, and the U.S.-born international migrant students. Generally, the returned students started their schooling in Mexico and then attended U.S. schools for just 1 or 2 years before returning to their country of origin. However, about 15 percent of them attended U.S. schools for four or more years. As figure 1 shows, 77 percent of the Mexican-born transnational students had 2 years or less of U.S. school experience.

We call the U.S.-born transnational students *international migrant students* because they moved from their country of birth to a new country of destination, although that country (Mexico) was usually the country of origin of their parents. As we could expect, these students had spent a large portion of their lives in the United States and had matriculated in several years of school there. Seventy percent had 2 years or more of U.S. school experience (see fig. 1).

The distribution of transnational students in rural versus urban areas in

⁵ The point here is not to come up with a careful estimate, an impossibility from our current data set. That would require an analysis of whether the association between migration participation rates in new sending regions (the “c” and “d” of Durand and Massey’s [2003] formulation) is akin to what we found in our study of one “a” state and one “b” state. Rather, we want to highlight that when taken to scale, this very rough estimate adds up to a lot of students. If even 1 percent of Mexican students are U.S.-born, then Mexico would be the “41st state” by enrollment of U.S. citizen students in that there are 10 U.S. states that have fewer than 200,000 students enrolled in K–12.

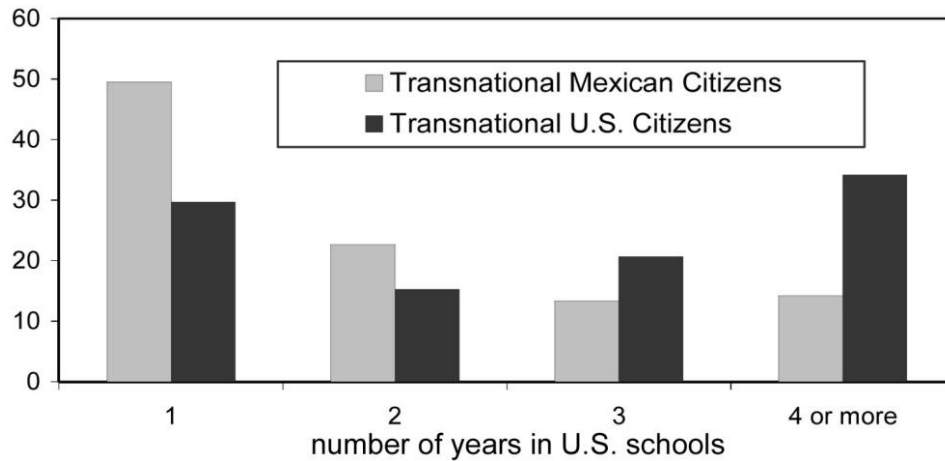


FIG. 1.—Percentage of transnational students by number of school years in U.S. schools. Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–5. Sample of 4th–9th grade transnational students (Nuevo León: $n = 156$; Zacatecas: $n = 179$).

Mexico tells us which parts of the Mexican educational system enroll most of the students with transnational profiles. In Mexico, like other Latin American countries, the contrast between rural and urban locales in terms of access to general benefits and school resources is dramatic. Rural is often synonymous with impoverished. It is interesting to note that we observed little difference between rural and urban areas in terms of the proportion of Mexican transnational students in the schools (table 2). Our data challenge the general idea that schools with transnational students are more common in rural areas than in urban ones. Although we can only speculate reasons for our observation, we suggest that although the economic needs of rural areas precipitate much international migration, as has been historically true in Mexico, returners do not always go back to the rural countryside. In the two largest cities of Zacatecas, Fresnillo and Zacatecas, both home to less than 200,000 residents, we likely observed a family migration pattern from rural Mexico to the United States, and then to urban Mexico. Such a pattern exists in Nuevo León. Using different methods at different historic moments, Álvarez (1973) and Zúñiga (1993) have both shown that the metropolitan area of Monterrey is the final destination of rural transnational migrants from different regions of Mexico.

The schools where transnational students matriculated were not evenly distributed. We found that 42 percent of schools in Nuevo León and 46 percent in Zacatecas had no transnational students, or so few that none were in the sampled classrooms. In the rest of the schools, we found at least one. The proportion of students with U.S. school experience varied significantly from one state to another. In Nuevo León, 93 percent of the schools had no transnationals, a very low percentage (0.5–3), or a low percentage (3.1–6).

TABLE 2
RURAL/URBAN DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BY TYPE OF SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

	Mexican-Born Transnational	U.S.-Born Transnational	Mexican-Born Mononational	U.S.-Born Mononational	Total
Urban	145 (1.6%)	41 (.5%)	8,673 (97.4%)	44 (.5%)	8,903 (100%)
Rural	151 (1.7%)	76 (.8%)	8,433 (96.5%)	75 (.8%)	8,735 (100%)

SOURCE.—UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–5. Sample of 4th–9th grade transnational students (Nuevo León: $n = 10,062$; Zacatecas: $n = 7,576$).

This was true of 87 percent of the schools visited in Zacatecas. However, 13 percent of the visited schools in Zacatecas and 7 percent in Nuevo León, that is, about 1 in 10 schools in our sample, had a transnational enrollment of 6 percent or more. If we lower our threshold of interest to 3 percent instead of 6 percent, we see that almost a third of Zacatecas schools (32 percent) and a sixth (16 percent) in Nuevo León had a significant transnational presence.

There are a substantial number of Mexican schools in which the proportion of transnational students is significant and in which Mexican teachers are therefore facing unexpected challenges. Most Mexican teachers were trained at *escuelas normales* (teacher-training normal schools), where they were taught to distinguish rural from urban students, indigenous-language speakers from Spanish speakers, and special needs children. In other words, although their professional formation considered student heterogeneity, it did not anticipate children coming from another country.

Transnational Students' U.S. School Experience

We also surveyed transnational students about their experience in U.S. schools. In addition to forced-choice responses about number of years in U.S. schools, the learning of English, and whether students liked U.S. schools, we also left space for open-ended responses. In Nuevo León, our open-ended question was rather general: “Is there something else about the U.S. schools you want to comment on?” In our Zacatecas survey, we decided to ask two more specific questions: “Could you please describe a significant experience you had in your schools in the U.S.? Could you please describe a hard experience you had while you were attending school in the U.S.?” The Zacatecas questions provided us with much more detailed information than did the one from Nuevo León.

Not surprisingly, many students described the most visible contrasts between U.S. and Mexican schools. One of the common answers was that the schools in the United States were perceived as better in terms of resources, materials provided, lunch and cafeteria services, athletic programs, and facilities. Students described bigger schools than those they attended in Mexico. As one student responded, “Everything is inside.” Their statements were emphatic: “They are great; they have gymnasiums, infirmaries, music class-

rooms; I mean, everything is wonderful, if you feel bad, you go to the infirmary, if you have free time, you go to the library and you get points.” One of the Nuevo León students, a 15-year-old with 2 years of school experience in Austin, Texas, who was enrolled in a private school in Monterrey, offered: “If one compares a private Mexican school with the U.S. public ones, the Mexican school is better, but comparing a U.S. public school with a Mexican public one, the American one is better.” It is interesting to note that very few transnational students pointed to computers and Internet access as a resource characterizing their school experience in the United States.

Students, particularly those who were born in the United States, noted differences between systems of recognition in the schools of the United States and Mexico. Describing the United States, the students reported: “They gave me a diploma for my good behavior,” “I was on the honors roll,” “I got a lot of awards for my achievement,” and “I got a diploma for having only As.” Many who noticed and valued the meritocratic or award-oriented U.S. school ethos identified not being as nourished with individual recognition in Mexican schools. They reported that their experience in Mexico was much more communitarian and impersonal in terms of teacher-student relationships.

Caring teachers, personal encouragement, good treatment, and respect were also described by the students as frequent qualities of the U.S. schools. Many expressed this without ambiguity, writing: “Teachers cared for me,” “Teachers were kind to me,” “I had a lot of teachers who loved me,” and “I miss Ms. Ana.” These testimonials about caring were more common among transnational students born in Mexico but were also mentioned by several who were born in the United States.⁶ These descriptions of teachers’ welcomes were accompanied by students’ memories of the friends they made during the time they attended U.S. schools: “a lot of friends,” “a special friend in the U.S.,” and “my best friend” were frequent phrases they wrote summarizing their significant experiences.

Transnational children also expressed that schooling in the United States was often celebration oriented: “Everyday we had parties” and “It was funny to see teachers dressed up for Christmas.” Described school activities in the United States included parades, field trips, dancing, and playing. These features were particularly emphasized by transnational students who started their schooling in Mexico, suggesting a different experience in that system.

Often, students wrote that acquiring a second language was an advantage of their education in the United States. They acknowledged the benefits they would probably get from learning English and from being bilingual. In their words: “I liked to speak English, I do not know why I could not speak it here

⁶ “The feeling that ‘no one cares’ [in American schools]” discussed by Valenzuela (1999, 5) did not appear in our transnational students’ surveys. This finding did not contrast with Valenzuela’s observations but reinforces them, as she subsequently points out: “Schooling is a more positive experience for immigrant than for non-immigrant, U.S.-born youth” (10).

in Mexico,” “The best thing for me was to talk and write in English,” “It was important for me to learn English,” and “It was in the U.S. school where I learned to speak English.” However, the experience of facing a school with a dominant language different from the language spoken at home was often a troublesome experience that was noted equally for those born in Mexico and in the United States. For example, “Learning English was the most difficult thing for me.”

The experience of racism—a word some students used—featured also in the feelings of some about the schools in the United States. Some of them claimed that they were rejected by other students because they were Mexicans, for example, “Fights with a ‘gringa’ when she mocked me because I am Mexican,” “I felt rejected for being Mexican,” and “They did not want to talk with me because I was Mexican.” But such ethnic/racial encounters in the schools mainly referenced peer relationships. Only rarely did students describe teachers’ prejudices or stereotypes. In those cases, transnational students usually pointed out a singular case of a “bad teacher” or “one teacher.”

Older transnational students in our sample seemed to be sensitive to other difficult U.S. school issues, such as adolescent pregnancy, suicides, drug use, gangs, and fights. None, however, mentioned the presence of police in the schools, an issue that surprised the lead author of this article when he first began working with Georgia schools. Nevertheless, these difficult issues were less frequently mentioned as obstacles to school achievement than more overtly academic issues. Particularly challenging for some transnational students while they were in the United States were exams in English (in various content areas), reprimands they did not understand, and challenges in using and/or getting support in computer laboratories.

As a result of varying experiences, memories, feelings, and current circumstances, transnational children were divided between those who expressed a desire to return to U.S. schools (78 percent) and those who did not want to return (22 percent). It is interesting to note that there were no differences between the transnational students born in Mexico and those who were born in the United States in terms of desire. The distribution of “want to return” and “do not want to return” was the same in both cases. Is this related to their positive and negative experiences, the number of years they spent in the United States, or the reasons they moved to Mexico? None of these variables could be definitively related with students’ desire to return. Even of the students who explicitly talked about racism or discrimination in U.S. schools ($n = 12$), half expressed their wish to continue studying in U.S. schools in the future. Similarly, among the 14 students who said they were deported, nine expressed their wish to continue studying in the United States.⁷ There did appear to be a correlation between number of years at-

⁷ Expecting that this could be a painful topic for students to discuss, none of our questions explicitly

tending U.S. schools and students' desire to continue studying in the United States, with more U.S. experience correlating with greater likelihood to desire further schooling there. However, even among the students who studied all or almost all their schooling in the United States ($n = 28$), we found 15 percent who did not want to return there.

Surprisingly, two variables were found to be clearly associated with students' vision of their school futures. One of them is the self-perception of English proficiency. The second is the national label with which students self-identified: Mexican, American, or Mexican-American. Fifty-eight percent of the transnational students who claimed "I did not learn English at all" did not want to return to the U.S. schools. This contrasted with those who said they "learned very much" English; only 13 percent in this latter group claimed that they did not want to return to U.S. schools. Similarly, 94 percent of the students who choose American as their national identity wanted to continue studying in the United States, versus 73 percent of those who selected Mexican.

Mexican Mononational Students' Attitudes toward Transnational Children

Reyes (2000, 54), in her article "Return Migrant Students: Yankee Go Home?" about mainland-born students who transferred to schools in Puerto Rico, pointed out that

all but one of the students [Puerto Rican returned migrant students] considered themselves Puerto Rican. However, for the teachers, staff, and peers, they were not Puerto Rican but rather *gringos*, *bilingües*, and "Newyoricans." Comments were made by teachers, staff, and other students to point out the traits that, according to them, distinguished the RMs [returned migrant students] from the rest of the students. These traits included not knowing Spanish (or English) well, aggressiveness, "walking shrugging their shoulders," "having an attitude," not being interested in Puerto Rican language and culture, thinking they are better, being more liberal (girls), being ganglike (boys), and not wanting to be in Puerto Rico.

Similar observations were made by McConnell (1988), showing that the efforts of Japanese parents residing in the United States to preserve their language and culture at home for their kids were not enough. When they returned to Japan, teachers and peers in Japanese schools claimed the returned students lacked some of the proper behaviors for being fully considered Japanese children. Following these examples, our study also inquired into mononational students' and teachers' reception of transnational students.

Welcoming transnational children in Mexican schools is not only a normative matter realized through binational agreements, school transfer documents, language policies, contents, materials, curriculum design, and tests. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, a subjective process in which students and teachers are involved. It is interesting to note that almost one in four

asked why students had come (back) to Mexico or about deportation. Beyond the 14 who voluntarily brought this up, we have no idea how many (if any) had to negotiate issues related to deportation.

TABLE 3
MONONATIONAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS

Answer	Frequency	Percent
Do you know students in the school who were previously in the United States?		
Yes	5,403	51.1
No	5,036	47.6
No answer	131	1.3
Total	10,570	100.0
What are transnational students like?		
The same as me	2,522	23.8
Different from me	3,276	30.9
No answer	4,772	45.3
Total	10,570	100.0
How do they speak Spanish?		
Poorly	488	4.6
Average	2,613	24.7
Well	3,413	32.2
No answer	4,056	38.5
Total	10,570	100.0

mononational students felt that there is no difference between them and those who studied for some time in the United States ($n = 2,522$; see table 3). However, the group of mononationals that defined transnationals as “different” ($n = 3,276$) was larger. Why did some mononational students regard themselves as similar to transnational students? The answers offered by 1,403 Zacatecas students ($n = 1,858$) are unexpected.⁸ Thirty percent referred to universal values like sharing human qualities, being created by God, having the same rights, and/or being children. Fifteen percent insisted that schools in the United States teach similar content, use similar methodologies, and have comparable dynamics to Mexican schools: “They [transnational students] learn the same things at the school (there) that we learn here.” A similar proportion was convinced that transnational students shared behaviors and customs with them. They did not identify differences in terms of practices, habits, and way of life. Other less common responses pointed out aspects of shared identity, such as kinship, friendship, generosity (“They are nice”), language (“They speak like us”), capacities (“They have the same capacities we have”), and school-work orientation.

Special attention should be paid to a particular, frequent response of mononational students. Many (154 of 1,403) wrote that transnational students are “the same as me because they are Mexicans.” Several further clarified

⁸ While table 3 includes data from both Nuevo León and Zacatecas, we asked mononational students in the Zacatecas group for more explanation of their opinions of transnational students than we did of the first group in Nuevo León. Thus, the larger characterizations—“they are like me,” “they are not like me”—reflect our whole sample, but the rationales for why mononational students felt the way they did comes only from Zacatecas respondents.

that transnational students are Mexican even if they speak English, even if they spent several years in the United States, and even if they were born in another country. From their view, transnational students' biographies did not change anything. According to this understanding, Mexican-ness is a national identity that transcends nation. Such an idea echoes the logic, extant in recent Mexican politics, which has expanded the *Mexicanos en el extranjero* program and has extended the right to vote in Mexican elections to many of Mexican descent in the United States (Zúñiga 2003).

In contrast, we collected 2,511 responses from Zacatecas students describing why mononational students considered transnational students to be different from them. The most important reason was language, which was described in very different ways: "They speak English," "They speak more English than Spanish," "They use different Spanish," "They speak a strange language," "They (he/she) speak another language," and "They do not speak correctly, or cannot speak like us, or cannot speak well." Forty-one percent of the answers that differentiated mononationals and transnationals pointed out aspects related to oral language, with very few mentions of written language.

Many mononationals asserted dissimilarity but viewed it as positive. Of the Mexican students with sole experience in Mexican schools, 247 described American schools, curricula, or teachers as more caring or better than Mexican ones. As one student observed, "They learned more, or better, more advanced things in the U.S. schools." Mexican mononationals (124) also asserted that students who had matriculated in U.S. schools were smarter than mononational students. Finally, 43 mononationals characterized their transnational peers as more academically oriented, more responsible, more respectful of rules, and/or more hardworking.

Some mononational respondents ascribed negative features to transnational students. For example, 235 answers attributed arrogance to transnational students, expressed using 11 different adjectives. Other negative characterizations were related to moral traits or habits, such as bad, crazy, gang-affiliated, aggressive, and egotistical, or personal characteristics such as rough, ugly, fat, silent, shy, quiet, strange, and embittered. Finally, there were students who thought that education in the United States was worse than in Mexico, for example, "especially in mathematics."

However, all of these negative descriptions together represented less than 15 percent of the answers. Neutral responses were almost as frequent as negative ones. These included claims that transnational children had different behaviors, traditions, mores, ideas, or skin color but avoided evaluative adjectives. In very few instances, mononational students observed that transnational children were richer than them.

In summary, the construction of otherness for transnational students in the micro-society of Mexican schools appeared less than solidified or unanimous; different viewpoints coexisted, creating a paradoxical mix of welcome

and unwelcome (as Gitlin et al. [2003] observed in the United States). Inclusive assertions of all students being “Mexican forever” contrasted with exclusionary remarks like “They are gringos.” In many classrooms we visited, mononational students were in the process of building their school and community identities while informally encountering transnational students. This identity construction at a personal scale through quotidian interaction perhaps explains why 84 percent of mononationals’ answers describing similarities or differences with transnationals used singular pronouns, and only 16 percent adopted a social category, talking about transnationals as a group.

Teachers’ Ambivalences

Our research included 25 interviews with teachers who were working in schools with transnational students. From this sample of convenience, we draw four preliminary conclusions. First, transnational students are usually invisible to teachers. The case of María, a teacher at a school in a small city in Zacatecas well known for its participation in international migratory flows to the United States, is typical and illustrative. She told us, “There are very few students who come back, those who are matriculated in American schools and then return to here; there are very few. I can talk with you about Alejandra who was my student last year in second grade. She is a very kind girl, really mature, but I just learned now [because of this study] that she was in the U.S. I did not know it [before].”

Second, when transnational students were visible to teachers, most teachers claimed that the transnational students were behind their native Mexican peers. In one sense this can be true; many transnational students are not as literate in Spanish. According to a Zacatecas teacher, “There are a lot of those children who can express their ideas well in Spanish, but when we ask them to write something, you can see they cannot write; they do not know how to write it. Look at their notes! Look at their homework, it is impossible to understand! . . . There are a lot of mistakes. They change the words; they cannot distinguish a ‘b’ from a ‘d.’” Sometimes, teachers offered no evidence about transnational students’ language skills but still classified transnational children as “Spanglish” speakers. As a Monterrey primary school teacher asserted, “They mixed both languages; they speak Spanglish.” A third teacher told us, “They speak unacceptable Spanish.”

Except for a few cases where English-as-a-foreign-language teachers turned to transnational students for help with phonetics and other dimensions of language, rarely did Mexican teachers see transnational experience as an academic resource. Language was not the teachers’ only complaint. Several complained that transnational students did not know Mexican history and geography. A Nuevo León teacher insisted, “Let me give you an example: she [the student coming from Houston] does not know anything about history; that is exactly the same case for Neto [another transnational student].”

He does not know anything about Mexican history.” Some teachers even questioned transnational students’ claim to Mexican-ness, as the them/us framework of one Zacatecas teacher illustrates, “Some of them have attitudes and behaviors that do not coincide with ours.”

Third, once the issue had been brought to their attention, generally, Mexican teachers expressed interest in supporting transnational children, but they did not know how to achieve this purpose. They were perplexed about this school population. Certainly, language barriers were the most overt obstacles teachers faced, although the superficial similarity between a generally shy child and one who was shy because of limited Spanish obscured even this. A large majority of the Mexican teachers we interviewed did not speak English, but they frequently observed that transnational children did not understand curricular content and school norms. Sometimes, teachers felt unable to communicate with their students. A Zacatecas teacher argued that Mexican teachers needed to know at least a little English for such situations: “Sometimes we received children who do not speak Spanish at all. . . . [T]hat is why I was saying Mexican teachers need to learn English, not because this is a plus, but this is a necessity.”

Other teachers described a paternalistic sympathy for transnational students because of the frequent geographic disbursement of such students’ families. Teachers saw students’ transnationalism as a synonym for family rupture, parental absence, and broken authority lines. Even if most of the teachers we interviewed recognized parents’ engagement in the school success of their children, they pointed out the consequences of migratory cycles on students’ lives and often added that they did not know what to do in these cases. A Nuevo León teacher explained, “The most important thing we need is training courses for working with those children, something for being prepared to teach them. We need to be able to work with them. Look, that is my case and the case of most of my peers, all the time, we have always taught Mexican students.”

Fourth, it should be noted that Mexican teachers described several misconceptions about American schools, although it was not clear whether these emerged from dealing with transnational students and whether they changed Mexican teachers’ conduct with such students. One claim related to the idea that education in the United States is based on technology, not on teachers’ practices and skills. A teacher who once visited a school in Los Angeles told us, “Talking about technology, the [U.S.] schools are well provided, but that is not the same thing. I feel we are better here [in Mexico] with our blackboard and our pencils. They are the best means for catching knowledge.” An additional claim that Mexican teachers registered about American education was that U.S. schools were anonymous and marked by antisocial behaviors and conflicts. American schools were seen as arenas where racial divisions impeded positive relations, drugs were available, and violence was

TABLE 4
HAVE YOU REPEATED A YEAR OF SCHOOL?

Type of Student (Birth Country/Transnational School Experience)	No	Yes	Total
Mexican-born transnational	71 (67%)	35 (33%)	106 (100%)
U.S.-born transnational	45 (74%)	16 (26%)	61 (100%)
Mexican-born mononational	6,927 (91%)	400 (9%)	7,619 (100%)
U.S.-born mononational	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	3 (100%)

SOURCE.—UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–5; $n = 7,789$ (4th–9th graders in Zacatecas).

common. As a third claim, most of the teachers we met were convinced that American curricula were not as strong as Mexican curricula. Mexican teachers told us they thought the U.S. progression in math was especially slow. Thus, transnational children were not on grade level and able to follow the curriculum when they attended Mexican schools.

In summary, Mexican teachers were often unaware of the presence of transnational students, knew little about such students' backgrounds, and tended to be more aware of what such students lacked than what assets they possessed. They held comparative beliefs about the two systems that favorably positioned the more familiar Mexican practices. However, many of these teachers also indicated a need to know more about transnational students, and they registered a desire to help.

Vulnerable Transnational Students?

Looming behind our whole research project are these questions: How does transnational status matter? Are transnational students more vulnerable than their less mobile, mononational peers? Yet answering these questions is not easy. We asked students for characterizations of their school grades and found that most transnational and mononational students claimed they were doing fine academically. It is, however, possibly indicative of academic struggles that 20 percent of the transnational students characterized their Mexican teachers as "bad" or "regular," in comparison with just 4 percent who characterized their U.S. teachers this way.

The most solid indicator of vulnerability we had was an indirect one: repeated years of schooling at the same grade level. Early in our study we discovered that having students repeat a grade was one Mexican school strategy to deal with students who, because of their U.S. experience, were behind in Spanish skills. Although table 4 does not emphasize this specific point, we found that among transnational students who had repeated a year, it was much more common that the repeat year happened in Mexico. This may well be because, unlike U.S. schools with ESL, sheltered immersion, bilingual, and other strategies meant to meet the needs of newcomers, the Mexican schools lacked other strategies for responding to limited Spanish proficiency and other particularities of students with substantial U.S. school experience.

Table 4, which includes only data from Zacatecas,⁹ suggests that transnational students were much more likely to have repeated a grade than Mexican-born students with experience only in Mexican schools.

Although intended as a remedial catch-up strategy in the United States, repeating a grade is associated with higher levels of school failure (e.g., Shepard and Smith 1989; Alexander et al. 1994; Jimerson 2001). We mention this higher repeat rate as a possible indicator that transnational students may be more academically vulnerable. Yet given the point-in-time nature of our sample, it is hard to know whether the transnational repeaters in our sample were any more vulnerable than the transnational students who never repeated. If they were, then the discrepancy in repeating rates between those who were transnational and those who were not may hint at the vulnerability of transnational students. On a related point, if repeating points to vulnerability, then the 28 percent repeat rate among those who were U.S. born should be of concern to U.S. educators and policy makers, as it indicates school struggles among a population that has a right to live in the United States and one day work there in adulthood. Still, this is a modest basis upon which to assert vulnerability. Our discussion below of next steps suggests some research strategies that might address this issue more definitively.

Policy Implications and Next Steps

Our surveys in two Mexican states indicate that transnational students exist there in large numbers, adding to our knowledge that they also exist in Puerto Rico (Albino Serrano 1998; Reyes 2000), the Dominican Republic (García Pérez 1999), and surely in other typical sending countries, for example, Morocco, Turkey, Algeria, Senegal, Vietnam, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Moskal (2008) and Rutter (2008) show that the mobility of youth in Europe and other regions of the world is becoming a challenging phenomenon. Many students are moving from Portugal to England, from Poland to Ireland, from Turkey to Germany, and back again. The U.S.-Mexico dynamic described here likely is relevant to schooling in many other nations and places. One next research step that we hope this article spurs is further studies of schooling of returned migrants and other transnational youth in other typical sending countries.

To be sure, our statistically representative samples show that transnational students do not represent a high percentage of the total enrollment in the two states of Mexico we surveyed, just 1.7 percent and 2.3 percent at the time of our study. However, when projected as portions of each state's total matriculation, our estimations suggest that there were about 18,000 transnational students in Zacatecas and Nuevo León. Projections at the national level are difficult from our data set, but it is plausible that there are several hundred

⁹ Interview data from Nuevo León led us to look at this systematically in Zacatecas.

thousand students with U.S. school experience in Mexico. Moreover, we suspect that these percentages are likely now higher as a consequence of the U.S. economic decline and related documented decline in Latino immigrants looking for work in the United States (Kochhar 2008), heightened U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and an increasingly unwelcoming environment for Latinos in the United States (Lopez and Minushkin 2008). Combined, these factors all may indicate more movement of families from the United States to Mexico. New studies could verify this hypothesis.

The transnational students were concentrated in municipalities with higher participation rates in migration. This pattern suggests that building educators' awareness of transnational students and strategies for second-language instruction, building on lessons from another country's school system, and engaging in other teacher training or professional development efforts may be tasks more relevant to some locations than others. Yet with the modest exception of the *asignatura regional*, the one teacher preparation course at *escuelas normales* expected to vary by region, there is little flexibility in how public school teachers are prepared in Mexico. Mexican teacher preparation may well need to be modified if changes to it could assist teachers in considering how to help transnational students, whose brightest future opportunities may entail continued transnationalism.

Our argument for different teacher preparation and teaching praxis revolves around two partially overlapping concerns: Are transnational students more vulnerable than other students? And do they constitute a population that needs different outcomes from school than other students? Getting a better take on transnational students' vulnerability could involve a number of next steps. Although logistically challenging, the official academic records of transnational students could be examined, and if such students were found to be more likely to be struggling, then the vulnerability label could be warranted. Perhaps more easily, a new study of transnational students might look at how many such students continue their studies at the *preparatoria* level (10th–12th grades). *Preparatoria* is not obligatory in Mexico, so if transnational students were underrepresented in *preparatoria*,¹⁰ then perhaps it would be safe to conclude that transnational experience is correlated with reduced likelihood of further education. Of course, the richest way to answer this question is through longitudinal research in which students with transnational experience are tracked over time as they continue their education and then continue into the world of adulthood.

Yet each of these efforts to better determine vulnerability does so with an implicit comparative lens. Transnational students are more vulnerable if they do less well in school or are less likely to stay in school than their mononational peers. Yet there are two important limitations to such a claim.

¹⁰ Underrepresentation could be determined by looking at the predicted portion of students with transnational experience that studies like this forecast, versus actual tallies.

First, it assumes that vulnerability is relative—one population is vulnerable only if it is needier than another. Second, it assumes that what transnational students need from school matches what mononational students need, and it is not clear to us that such an assumption holds. Our study about transnational students brings attention to dynamics that get little formal attention in Mexican schools, although they pertain to thousands of children there. More generally, it suggests the incompleteness for thousands of students of the assimilationist or acculturative assumption of schooling, an issue for Mexico as well as for the United States and many other nations.

Our creation of a new label, and resistance to using existing labels, opens the way for a more holistic and circumstantially responsive schooling for these youngsters. Our study also highlights that within the universe of transnational biographies, there are a range of experiences, identities, circumstances, affiliations, and aspirations. Even as we promote a new label to draw attention where little attention has been drawn, we repeat the hazard of any label; labels imply homogeneity or coherence when there are actually a range of lived experiences being summarized within *transnational student*. Some transnational students in our sample saw themselves as Mexican, others as American, and still others as Mexican Americans. Some mononational students saw their transnational peers as like them, others noted difference but no superiority or inferiority, and still others complained about transnationals' arrogance and alleged wealth.

We self-identify as social scientists and, as such, find value in the quantitative description of an underconsidered phenomenon. This is surely one of our intentions in this article. We also self-identify as educators and, in this second capacity, we find ourselves wondering about the intrinsically political work of schools. One reviewer of an initial draft of this article noted that our research indicates the importance of further binational coordination between the United States and Mexico on schooling issues. We agree, as we found little on-the-ground evidence of such coordination, that is, evidence cited by teachers or students, although, as scholars, both of us have participated in some of the efforts to build such a binational structure. The lack of much school-level evidence of binational coordination may be instructive, however, in ways that are little affected by a recommendation for more coordination. Schooling is a local, state-level, and national creation, not a transnational one. It will require more than policy-level coordination to have U.S. teachers see encouraging Spanish proficiency and awareness of Mexican history and heroes as part of their role, and for Mexican teachers to see teaching English and other skills rewarded in the United States as part of theirs. Imagining binational or transnational pedagogy and curricula, that is, imagining the schooling that would be most circumstantially responsive to the students described here, is daunting. Converting such imagining into a blueprint for

new practice would entail much more than having a binational framework for coordination.

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