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Edmund T. Hamann

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, ehamann2@unl.edu

Víctor Zúñiga

Universidad de Monterrey, vazgonzalez@itesm.mx

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Schooling, National Affinity(ies), and Transnational Students in Mexico

Edmund T. Hamann¹ and Victor Zúñiga²

¹ University of Nebraska-Lincoln

² Universidad de Monterrey

Abstract

An examination of responses by 346 students from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas, Mexico, who had previously attended schools in the United States, found that 37% asserted a hyphenated identity as Mexican-American, while an additional 5% identified as “American.” Put another way, 42% did not identify singularly as Mexican. Those who insisted on a hyphenated identity were not a random segment of the larger sample, but rather had distinct profiles in terms of gender, time in the United States, and more. This chapter describes these students, broaches implications of their hyphenated identities for their schooling, and considers how this example may pertain to other parts of the world, like southern Africa.

Introduction

What happens to students from Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique if they return to schools in their home country after attending schools in South Africa? What happens to those students in South African schools whose parents are South African, but who perhaps themselves were born in Britain, or Australia, or Canada, or who at least attended schools in these countries before coming to South African ones? If one common role of school in almost any country is

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to teach affiliation with and affinity towards the nation state (Benei 2008; Booth 1941; Gamio 1916; Luykx 1999; Zúñiga & Hamann 2009), how do the various students described above self-identify? Is school a place where “who they think they are” is validated? Or, instead, is it a site where their national identity(ies) is instead invisible or even challenged. This chapter answers none of these questions directly because it is not directly about Africa. However, in sharing the range of school experiences and asserted identities, described by students in Mexican schools who previously have attended schools in the United States, this chapter describes experiences that we think are highly salient elsewhere, like the questions about Africa posed above.

In 2004 and 2005, we visited a stratified random sample of 387 *primarias* (Grade 1-6 schools) and *secundarias* (Grade 7-9 schools) in the historic and high-international-migration-participation state of Zacatecas and the historic but low-migration-participation state of Nuevo Leon, both in Mexico. Saying historic, we mean these states have had international migration patterns back and forth with the United States since the nineteenth century. Our purpose in both Mexican states was to identify enrolled students who had previous experience in U.S. schools - i.e., students whose experience ran counter to the dominant narrative of Mexico as a migration sending country and the U.S. as a receiving country - and to consider how they were faring in Mexican schools, how they had fared in U.S. ones, and other parts of their educational biographies. This paper fits the “other parts of their educational biographies” category, as the concern here is with how students self-identified and only very indirectly with how they fared, although like many contributors to this book, we do concur that how students self-identify and how they understand which identities are privileged at school affects how they fare at school. (See Zúñiga, Hamann, & Sánchez Garcia [2008]; Zúñiga & Hamann [2008, 2009]; and Hamann, Zúñiga, & Sánchez Garcia [2006] for examples in English and Spanish that directly consider these topics.)

Not counting students in the first three grades of primary school (who, too young to reliably read and write, were given just quick oral surveys), we gave surveys to 17,681 fourth to ninth graders at schools in these two states. Of the whole sample, both those orally surveyed and those who completed written questionnaires, we found 512 students with school experiences in both countries in these two states.

Three hundred forty-six of these were old enough to complete written surveys and answered a question about their national affiliation(s). The rest of the data shared in this paper are derived from those 346 surveys, although in some instances our “n” is less than 346 because in the first year of our fieldwork (in Nuevo Leon) we worried that our survey might be too long and for that reason we restricted some questions to just sixth and ninth graders. When we determined that survey length was not an obstacle, we asked all of the transnational students identified in Zacatecas in 2005 to answer all of the survey questions. In Table 5, for example, our “n” is 303, because that is the number of transnationals who we asked to identify whether they still had relatives living and working in the U.S.

Table 1 shows the sub-sample of 346 students with school experience in both the U.S. and Mexico who identified a national or hyphenated national identity. Grounded by this wealth of data, here we consider themes also broached by other chapters in this volume: for example, how the label (as native, foreigner, or both) that a student uses to self-identify correlates (or not) with other parts of their identity and with various attitudes. Except in Table 1, our chapter pays special attention to students in our sample who identified as both “Mexican” and “American” (i.e., “Mexican-American”) or just as “American” by aggregating them. We identify these 147 students as “hyphenated or alternative nationality identities.” While something is lost by not further distinguishing between students in Mexico who identified as “Mexican-American” and “American” (and there were some intriguing patterns, like that: just 1 of the 18 students who identified as “American” was 14 or older, while 40 of the 129 who identified as “Mexican-American” were 14 or older), there are hazards to making too many projections from a population of just 18. Moreover, we think

Table 1 Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas sample, by affiliation

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Mexican	199	58%
American	18	5%
Mexican-American	129	37%
Hyphenated or alternative nationality identities	147	42%
Total	346	100%

N = 346 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

it is more important that both the “Mexican-American”-identifying and “American”-identifying rejected calling themselves just “Mexican” than that they differed from each other, because singular national identity is clearly what is anticipated in the design of Mexican schooling.

Why hyphenated and alternative nationality identities matter for schooling

Although this is mainly an empirical work that compiles responses from children and adolescents with school experiences in two countries, it is important to briefly preface the presentation of data with a consideration of why hyphenated identities matter for schooling not from an outcome standpoint, but rather from an educational foundations stance that considers what school should be for.

The rise of public education globally correlates with the creation of nation states. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, as the yoke of colonialism was thrown off at the end of the 1950s, schools figured centrally in the strategies to build a new society (e.g., Nyerere 1968). In Mexico, public education only became broadly available in the 1920s, after the chaos of Mexico’s revolution revealed the predominance of regional rather than national loyalties and after the 1917 Constitution promised it as a right of all citizens (Booth 1941). In the 1920s, a leading educational thinker, John Dewey, wrote at length about efforts in Soviet Russia, China, Turkey, and Mexico to use schooling as a vehicle to create modern nation-oriented societies (Brinkman 1964).

In each of these national efforts, there was an underlying and usually unstated assumption of geographic stability, that students and their parents would not move, or at least would not move beyond national borders, and that the task of building affiliation with a national identity was a singular task. Only very recently have a few countries started to see the schooling they offer as a vehicle for their young citizens to grow and become employable somewhere else, as Suro (2010) recently suggested about the Philippines. But even in these instances (Mexico’s *Mexicanos en el Extranjero* program might be another example), there continues to be a guiding logic that school should teach an ongoing loyalty to the nation where the schooling takes place (even if

because of economic or other considerations graduates may someday not be able to stay in that same country). So, extending Suro's point, Filipino schooling should help Filipino students build attachments to the Philippines so they are disposed to orient their own efforts to its development and support even if they migrate.

If the state's interest in schooling is, in part, to build loyalty to the state and more abstractly to membership in the imagined national society (Anderson 1991), it is not clear that students with experience in schools in more than one country and/or with citizenship in a different country from that where they are being schooled agree to the national loyalty prescription they are ostensibly to follow. Indeed, the assertion of hyphenated identities and the less common assertion of "American" identity in our sample from Mexican schools serve as reminders that students are agentive in relation to the socialization efforts of their school. Although surely more nuanced than just complicating the nationalizing agenda by asserting a hybrid identity (i.e., "Mexican American") or a counter identity (i.e., "American"), it is important to note that some students in Mexican schools do not think they are fully or aptly described just with the label "Mexican." In tum, if from a constructivist standpoint learning builds most effectively from the experience and orientations of the learner (allowing students to construct new knowledge using existing knowledge as a starting point), optimal learning is inhibited if there is a mismatch between the operative orientation of the school and that of the student (Erickson 1987).

The context of transnational students in Mexico and research methods

Most research on migration between Mexico and the United States focuses on "adult" issues - e.g., employment, law enforcement, remittances - but there are sizable and growing literatures on children's experiences (e.g., Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 200 I) with migration, but almost always from the perspective of those who leave Mexico to come to the U.S. Also, the emphasis is on loss in the sending country and integration in the receiving country, not on the prospect of return. Related to the case here, this is understandable in that a much larger

flow originates in Mexico and goes to the U.S. rather than vice versa. Correspondingly, the U.S. has developed a large infrastructure to respond to Mexican and other newcomers, an infrastructure mainly devoted to transitional bilingual education or teaching English as a second language.

Because less attention has been paid to the flow from American schools to Mexican ones (referring both to students who start in the U.S. and then go to Mexico, and to students in more complicated trajectories of Mexico to U.S. and then again to Mexico), our efforts since 2004 to fill this gap have been substantial and have drawn the attention of Mexico's *Secretaria de Educación Pública*, among other important audiences, but they remain exceptional. As a consequence, much of our work has necessarily been both descriptive and preliminary.

It has been relatively commonplace, as we have visited schools across two Mexican states, to encounter teachers who were unaware of the presence in their classrooms of students with experience in U.S. schools and with self-asserted identities different than or more complicated than just simply "Mexican." It has also been relatively commonplace to find teachers and students who insisted that such students should be treated just like everybody else. While superficially egalitarian, such a stance rejects the ideas that students with different educational histories should be treated differently (in that attending to their backgrounds will look different from attending to other students' backgrounds) and ignores that these students are more likely than others to one day again be in U.S. schools. Yet transnational students are not exactly like other Mexican students, nor, as the next section illustrates, are they homogenous among themselves. Comparing students who variously affiliate as "Mexican," "American," and "Mexican-American" reveals different patterns within the transnational student population.

Students with Hyphenated Identities: Circumstantial Variables

The acts of defining who one is and what groups one affiliates with are both subjective and agentive. That is, it is within the power of the respondent, in this case students in Mexican schools with transnational school experiences, to assert who they are (even if these bids

Table 2 Distribution of sample by age and affiliation

<i>Age</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/American</i>	<i>Total</i>
9-10	41	32	73
11-12	55	49	104
13-14	83	53	132
15-17	20	13	33
Total	199	147	346

N = 346 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

may not always be accepted by others [Becker 1990]). Our question was to investigate which features (e.g., age, gender, country of birth) had any predictive power regarding which identity a transnational student was most likely to identify with.

As Table 2 shows, there was a reasonable consistency across age spans related to which portion of the transnational students in our sample chose to identify as “Mexican” and which person selected something else (i.e., “Mexican-American” or “American”). The overall average was 58% of the cohort identifying as “Mexican” with a low of 53% (9 and 10 year-olds) and a high of 61 % (15 and older). Although there may be a slightly greater likelihood for older transnational students to identify as “Mexican” than younger students, which might initiate consideration of whether age-level/development-level relates to identification choice, the far more salient point is the consistency rather than inconsistency across samples. Age is not a powerful predictor of which transnational students in Mexico were more or less likely to identify as “Mexican.” Put another way, it seems reasonable to suggest that irrespective of students’ age and grade-levels, Mexican teachers with transnational students could expect that nearly half do not singularly associate with Mexico.

Gender on the other hand does seem to have some predictive power related to who was likelier not to assert a “Mexican-only” identity. See Table 3. Girls were more likely than boys to identify as “Mexican” (63% to 52%). Obscured in Table 3, but still salient because it so deviates from the rest of the pattern, only three of the 16 students in the sample who identified just as “American” were girls.

Looking for broader generalizations between gender and the likelihood of various identity claims, there do seem to be patterns that hint at boys’ relative rebelliousness and girls’ relative orthodoxy (if

Table 3 Affiliation by gender

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/American</i>	<i>Total</i>
Female	111	66	177
Male	87	79	166
Total	198	145	343

we understand identifying as “American” or “Mexican-American” as somewhat rebellious). In a study of letter-writing behavior within a transnational Mexican-American community (i.e., a community with geographic ties in both the U. S. and Mexico), Guerra (1998) found girls and women were much more likely to be letter writers and suggested that this was because of gendered roles related to home, familial unity, and preservation of tradition. Our data might point to a similar underlying disposition: given that parents of the students in our sample were overwhelmingly Mexico-born (and presumably Mexico-affiliating), girls may be more reluctant to depart from their parents’ identity.

A more straightforward predictor of national affiliation (or the assertion of hyphenated identity) is the country of a student’s birth. Per the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (added in 1868 after America’s Civil War to assure citizenship of freed slaves), all who are born in the U.S. are, because of birthplace, U.S. citizens. So, although legal citizenship and asserted identity are not the same thing, the patterns illustrated in Table 4 are not surprising. Those born in the U.S. are much more likely than those born in Mexico to assert a “Mexican-American” or “American” identity than those who were born in Mexico.

What is surprising perhaps (as well as noteworthy) is that birthplace is not a full predictor. That is, 22% (50 out of 229) of those born in Mexico nonetheless claimed to be “Mexican-American” or “American,” and 17% (19 out of 115) of those born in the U.S. did not affiliate

Table 4 Affiliation by country of birth

<i>Country of birth</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/American</i>	<i>Total</i>
Mexico	179	50	229
USA	19	96	115

Table 5 Affiliation by relatives working in the U.S.

<i>Relatives working in the U.S.</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/ American</i>	<i>Total at the moment of the survey</i>
Yes	153	112	265
No	26	15	41
Total	179	127	306

N = 306 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

with the labels “American” or “Mexican-American”; they claimed only to be Mexican. Perhaps as a way of insisting on the salience of their U.S. experience (whether Mexican schools acknowledged it or not), a full fifth (50 out of 229) of the Mexico-born and more than four fifths (96 of 115) of American-born opted for an identity that was not just “Mexican.” In short, country of birth, unlike age and even more than gender, was a strong but not definitive predictor of how a transnational student would affiliate.

Continued familial ties to the U.S. showed a possible relationship to whether a transnational student claimed a hyphenated identity (See Table 5), but discerning an effect was difficult because those who identified singularly as “Mexican” and those who asserted an “American” or “Mexican-American” identity both were also likely to have relatives working in the U.S. This was true for 85% of those who identified as “Mexican” and for 88% of those in our second category. Perhaps more strikingly, looking at Table 5 horizontally rather than vertically, 37% of transnational students without continuing familial ties to the U.S. (15 of 41), still nonetheless asserted an identity at least partially associated with *el otro lado*. (In Mexico, the U.S. is often referred to as *el otro lado*, literally “the other side [of the border].”) That is not as many as the 42% (112 of 265) with relatives in the U.S., but it is not that much less. Continuing familial ties to the U.S. are modest predictors of greater likelihood to not affiliate as just “Mexican.”

Given the power of first impressions (perhaps under an imprinting logic), it seems plausible that those who first start schooling in the United States (and who first start making school-site pledges of national allegiance [Rippberger & Staudt 2003]) are more likely than other transnational students in Mexico to affiliate (at least partially) with the U.S. Table 6 supports this interpretation. Forty-seven percent

Table 6 Affiliation by the school system where the student started education

<i>Start schooling</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/American</i>	<i>Total</i>
In the U.S.	126	113	239
In Mexico	69	31	100
Total	195	144	339

N = 339 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

of those who started their schooling in the U.S. (113 of 239) affiliated as “Mexican-American” or “American” while only 31 % (31 of 100) of transnational students who started their schooling in Mexico chose an identity other than “Mexican.” This indicator then is strongly predictive of affiliation.

However, it may be mainly a symptom of another closely associated dynamic: the total amount of time living and going to school in the U.S. From data drawn just from 181 surveys of transnational students in Zacatecas (and otherwise not depicted here), those who identified as “Mexican-American” or “American” had spent just more than half of their lives in the U.S., compared to those identifying as “Mexican” having spent just a quarter of their lives, on average, in the U.S. Similarly, those affiliating as “Mexican-American” or “American” had averaged about three years in U.S. schools compared to two years for their “Mexican” affiliating counterparts. Nonetheless, a fact obscured by our aggregation in Table 6 of “American” and “Mexican-American” further argues that first impressions matter: only 1 of 18 students who started schooling in Mexico identified as “American”; the other 17 “American”-identifiers all started their schooling in the U.S.

Table 7 shows an intriguing and harder to explain correlation between alternative identity and type of school (rural versus urban) that a transnational student attends. At a rate of 46% (95 of 204) to 37% (52 of 142) students attending rural schools were more likely to identify as “Mexican-American” or “American” than were their transnational urban counterparts. So, rural locale in Mexico was associated with a greater likelihood of resisting identifying as “Mexican” only.

Traditionally rural areas in Mexico (as in much of the world) have been poorer and have had weaker, less well-resourced schools. Perhaps students going to school in such circumstances feel more of a

Table 7 Affiliation by type of Mexican school

<i>Type of school in Mexico</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/American</i>	<i>Total</i>
Rural	109	95	204
Urban	90	52	142
Total	199	147	346

N = 346 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

compulsion to assert an ongoing affiliation with the U. S. and its better-resourced schools. Alternatively, maybe better-resourced Mexican schools do a more effective job of teaching Mexican mono-nationalism than their penurious rural counterparts. Or third, maybe transnational students in rural Mexican settings felt less settled and continuing attachment to the U.S. therefore felt more tangible.

In other work with this dataset (Zúñiga & Hamann 2009), we noted an apparent pattern of many families leaving rural Mexico, finding work in the U.S., and then returning to urban Mexico. In other words, for these families, migration to the U.S. was part of a larger urbanization dynamic that brought those of Mexican rural backgrounds to Mexican cities (by way of a stint in the U.S.). Within this trajectory, arriving in a Mexican city may feel more settled than either continuing in a rural area or living in the U.S. Maybe the more settled feel less of a need to continue their “American” affiliation.

In sum then, related to circumstantial characteristics, birthplace, current setting in Mexico (rural or urban), country of initial schooling, and gender are all strongly or reasonably robust predictors of how a transnational student in Mexico is most likely to affiliate, while continued presence of relatives in the U.S. and age at the time of being surveyed have much more limited predictive relationships.

Students with Hyphenated Identities: Differences as Learners

As intriguing as circumstantial correlations are between school and life experience on the one hand and affiliation on the other, perhaps more interesting are the subjective beliefs, including aspirations, which differentiate those who affiliate one way from another.

Table 8 Influence of affiliation on educational aspirations

<i>Educational aspirations</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>American</i>	<i>Mexican-American</i>
Less than high school	13 (10%)	3 (25%)	7 (8%)
High school	15 (11%)	1 (8%)	9 (10%)
Technical preparation	28 (21%)	2 (17%)	11 (13%)
College	79 (58%)	6 (50%)	60 (69%)
Total	135 (100%)	12 (100%)	87 (100%)

N = 234; Source: *N.L. sample (6th and 9th grades), Zacatecas sample (4th-9th grades).*

Preparing Table 8 we found that those who identify as “Mexican-American” are more likely to aspire to go to college than either population that identifies mono-nationally. Given this, it did not make sense to aggregate “American” and “Mexican-American” here, but it also did not make much sense to aggregate both mono-national identities, (a) because we have not earlier and we did not want to accidentally confuse our readers, but (b) because the relative similarities in “Mexican”-identifying and “American”-identifying may exist for very different reasons.

Given an “n” of just 12, it is hazardous to draw too many conclusions about the educational aspirations of those who identified as just “American,” but the existing pattern is intriguing in that it backs up earlier suggestions that claiming to be “American” while attending Mexican schools might be an oppositional identity (indexing disenchantment with Mexican schools, among other things): hence 3 of the 12 expecting to complete less than high school. More interesting is to consider why “Mexican” identifying students might be less likely to aspire to college than those who identify as “Mexican-American.” As Dreby (2010) has suggested, the Mexican economy offers less reward for educational attainment than does the American economy. So, while a majority who identified as “Mexican” aspire to college, that portion might be higher yet if the Mexican economy better rewarded it.

Most striking, however, is that affiliating as “Mexican-American” seems to associate with higher likelihood of aspiration to college, and less likelihood to seek technical training, just high school, or even less than that. The U.S. has higher educational attainment rates than Mexico; so, maybe the absorption of “American” as part of a hybrid or hyphenated identity, but not as a singular perhaps more oppositional

Table 9 Influence of affiliation on opinion about U.S. schools

<i>Opinion about U.S. schools</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American /American</i>	<i>Total</i>
I didn't like it; I liked it only a little; it was OK	72	28	100
I liked it a lot; I really liked it	127	118	245
Total	199	146	345

N = 345 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

identity, also means internalizing or developing higher aspirations. Among the very many implications of this pattern, it suggests that Mexican teachers can see students' "Mexican-American" affiliation not as a challenge, but rather as a healthy indicator of wanting/expecting more from school.

Not surprisingly, Table 9 (which consolidates five Likert-scale options into three more negative and two more positive) shows that the transnational students in our sample also had varying opinions regarding U.S. schools, although decisive majorities in both categories liked them. Those transnational students who identified as just "Mexican" selected one of the two most favorable characterizations 64% of the time (127 of 199), while those who asserted a hybrid or exclusively "American" identity picked these top two categories 81 % of the time (118 of 146). Having a favorable impression of schooling in the U.S. was predictive of a greater likelihood to at least partially affiliate one's identity with that country.

Given the influence of difficult migration conditions (at least for those without documentation), one might suspect that the percentage of those with favorable impressions of American schools would be higher than the percentage that wished to return someday to U.S. schools (Table 10), but it was actually the other way around. In all affiliation categories, the proportion of those wishing to return someday to U.S. schools was higher even than those with a favorable recollection of U.S. schools. Seventy three percent of those who affiliated as just "Mexican" indicated a desire to return to U.S. schools, while 86% of those identifying partially or exclusively as "American" hoped to return to U.S. schools. So clearly the desire to return to U.S. schools someday was predictive of those more likely to assert more than just a "Mexican" identity.

Table 10 Influence of affiliation on wish to return to the U.S. schools

<i>Wish to return to the U.S. school</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/American</i>	<i>Total</i>
Yes	144	125	269
No	53	20	73
Total	197	145	342

N = 342 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

Language and identity are often associated with each other, and the next two tables (Tables 11 and 12) both show that self-described proficiencies with English (including English as a first language) correlated with the likelihood of self-identifying as “Mexican-American” or “American.” Not surprisingly, those who self-appraise as being stronger in English are also those who are more likely to at least partially affiliate with the U.S. where English is the obvious dominant language (although the fact that some transnational students reported learning little or only modest amounts of English is a reminder that, as ubiquitous as English is in the U.S., some children may not have ready and sufficient access to environments there that allows them to fully develop it). Fifty-four percent (80 of 147) of transnational students who identified as “Mexican-American” or “American” claimed to speak English well, whereas only 15% (27 of 176) of those identifying as “Mexican” claimed a similar level of English proficiency. Looking horizontally at Table 11, 90% of the 20 transnational students who indicated that they knew little or no English (despite their American school experiences) identified as “Mexican.” In contrast, 75% (80 of 107) of those who indicated that they knew English well also opted to identify as “American” or “Mexican-American.”

Table 11 English proficiency by affiliation

<i>How well do you speak English?</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American/American</i>	<i>Total</i>
Not at all	18	2	20
A little, some	131	65	196
Very well	27	80	107
Total	176	147	323

N = 323 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

Table 12 First language by affiliation

<i>Self declaration of what is the first language</i>	<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Mexican-American /American</i>	<i>Total</i>
Spanish	186	91	277
English	13	54	67
Total	199	145	344

N = 346 transnational students; samples from Nuevo Leon and Zacatecas 2004 and 2005.

As a caveat, in our own efforts to seek additional funding to expand this work, we have self-criticized as a limitation of this indicator that the characterization of proficiency is entirely subjective. However, for the topic of this paper, how students rate their own proficiency is more important than how strong their language skills really are.

Table 12 echoes the patterns of Table 11: those who identified English as their first language were much more likely to identify as “Mexican-American” or “American.” Just 7% (13 of 199) of those identifying as “Mexican” identified English as their first language, whereas that was the first language of 37% (54 of 145) of those who identified as “Mexican-American” or “American.” First language was a predictor of likely affiliation.

Table 12 also shows a surprisingly high number of transnational students in Mexico identifying English as their first language (67 of 344 or 20%), but just as importantly it shows that, though related, identity and language are not synonymous. Nineteen percent of those who claimed English as a first language nonetheless identified as “Mexican.” As another note about Tables 11 and 12, it is constructive to point out that the number of transnational students, who identified that they knew English well, was sixty percent greater than the tally of those who spoke English as a first language (107 vs. 67). Finally, as a methodology caveat related to Table 12, we should note that the survey assumed that students would identify one language or the other as first, and “both at the same time” was not an available category.

In terms of correlations between learning and aspirations and identity, there were clearly a number of factors that were predictive of a transnational student being more likely to assert one identity than another. Students who identified as “Mexican-American” or “American” were more likely than their “Mexican”-identifying counterparts to

have known English well or spoken it first, to have had fonder recollections of U.S. schools, and to be more eager to return to U.S. schools. On each of these, students who identified as just “American” were likelier to have that characteristic than students who said they were “Mexican-American.” Conscious of the small “n” of students identifying just as “American,” we did not usually further attend to this intriguing detail. However, in one instance, educational aspirations, we had a hint that a hyphenated identity was not a middle ground, but rather was associated with higher personal educational expectations than either of the available mononational identities.

Conclusion

What then to make of all of these correlations between asserted identity and age, gender, language proficiency, educational aspiration, and so on? First, it seems important, if obvious, to point out that transnational students who were not comfortable identifying themselves with or just with their current country of residence (i.e., just with Mexico) differed from their transnational peers on a number of dimensions, both circumstantial and aspirational. But they did not differ on everything. Neither age nor likelihood of still having relatives in the U.S. strongly predicted how a student would affiliate; yet gender, country of birth, first language, U.S. educational experience, and so much else did. Second, the longstanding assumption by schools that they can anticipate that the students enrolled in them affiliate singularly with the national identity of the country is flawed. Many purport to, but a sizeable portion does not. Moreover, on at least some indicators, like educational aspiration, not identifying just with the current country might be a source of academic strength or resilience, and represents a prospective asset that constructivism-oriented teachers could productively build upon.

Considering the pertinence of this survey data to other places, particularly to South Africa, perhaps this case can be viewed two ways: its relevance to South Africa as a more prosperous receiving country than those countries from which it attracts most of its (im)migrants and its relevance to South Africa as a sending country (to those countries that economically South Africa lags behind). Per this first construct:

it follows that there are currently children in South African schools who may someday return to the schools in their home countries (i.e., in Lesotho, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, etc.). These students may bring with them a lingering loyalty to South Africa and/or they may assert a hyphenated identity that includes national affiliations but refuse to see those as necessarily singular. If/when this is the case, it will matter for how that child as a student views his/her own future educational trajectory.

In turn, it follows that there are currently South African families who had migrated away from South Africa, but whose children have come back (with their parents or to be cared for by guardians) and have (re-)enrolled in school and (re-)affiliated as South Africans. Or they may affiliate with hyphenated identities, with South Africa just part of a larger mix. Or they may even reject a South African identity, perhaps pining for somewhere else.

With children in all of these scenarios, optimal schooling will vary as much as the starting point that children bring to the classroom will vary, as well as their understanding of what their schooling should be for. One pretty typical U.S.-born 12 year-old student we surveyed who asserted a hyphenated identity as “Mexican-American” explained to us that he had come to Mexico “to be with his mother and her house.” As a highlight of his U.S. learning, he valued the chance to have learned English, but remembered worrying in fifth and sixth grade that he was losing Spanish. This student still communicated by telephone with family in New York. He claimed he wanted to study at the university level and that his grades in the U.S. were excellent and were fine in Mexico. Yet he demurred regarding whether he anticipated ever going back to the U.S. (where he was a citizen). The challenge in Mexico (and in the U.S. and in South Africa) is to consider what students like this want and need from school. We expect that question lacks a mono-national answer.

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