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# Educator Responses to Migrant Children in Mexican Schools


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## Educator Responses to Migrant Children in Mexican Schools

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A decade-long, five-state, mixed-method study of students encountered in Mexican schools with previous experience in the United States suggests there may be 400,000 such students in *educación básica* alone (elementary and middle school). The focus here, however, are data from 68 educators asked how they have responded to such students and their families. We offer an emergent taxonomy of teacher sensemaking about these students and teachers' responsibilities to respond. We then assert that because they are at the interface between a national institution (school) and transnational phenomena (migration), educators can provide key insight into how migration is shaped and negotiated.

Un estudio de una década, en cinco estados, y que utiliza métodos mixtos con estudiantes que se encuentran en escuelas mexicanas con experiencias previas en los Estados Unidos sugiere que se pueden encontrar 400,000 estudiantes de este tipo tan sólo cursando la educación básica (primaria y secundaria). Sin embargo, el enfoque aquí son los datos de 68 educadores

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a quienes se les preguntó cómo responden a esta clase de estudiantes y a sus familias. Ofrecemos una taxonomía emergente sobre cómo es que los maestros dan sentido a las responsabilidades de tener que responder a este tipo de circunstancias, enfrentadas por estos estudiantes y sus maestros. Procedemos a afirmar que, a causa de que se encuentran en el punto de contacto entre una institución nacional (la escuela) y un fenómeno transnacional (la migración), los educadores pueden proveer información clave sobre cómo es que la migración se define y se negocia.

**Key words:** Mexican teachers, migrant student taxonomy, teacher sense-making, schooling, *educación básica*.

**Palabras clave:** maestros mexicanos, taxonomía migrante estudiantil, sentido proporcionado de maestros, escolarización, educación básica.

## Two Teachers: Two Vignettes

### *Margarita*

Margarita<sup>1</sup> graduated from a rural *escuela normal* (teacher training school) before finding work as a teacher in a *primaria* (elementary school). For seven years she worked under short-term contracts, before earning a permanent position in the state of Morelos, in Mexico, where two years later we met her. Her first conscious encounter with a student with prior experience in U.S. schools was with Felipe, a student who had been born in Mexico, but had moved to California at the age of two. Felipe's case was atypical in one way, because his return—precipitated by his parents' deportation—had gained U.S. press coverage when his U.S. classmates had pleaded for him to be allowed back to California. Blocked from that path, however, Felipe enrolled at Margarita's school near Cuernavaca. In that sense he was like thousands of other children in Mexico, and Margarita was like thousands of Mexican teachers.

When we interviewed Margarita, she told us Felipe initially had struggled to communicate with his new classmates, but he had since adapted. Nonetheless, she noted, he seemed to stay in frequent contact with his former classmates in California through Facebook. Felipe's mother, who had selected which school in Mexico Felipe would go to, had told Margarita that her son still longed to return to school in the United States. Still, Margarita emphasized, despite whatever

1. The names of all participants have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their identities. The data for this article draw on research processes undertaken in accordance with international human subject research ethics.

disruptions in his life to that point, “Felipe is going to be successful and he is going to go far.” We did not ask Margarita to clarify whether she meant that literally or metaphorically. Perhaps she meant both (Margarita: interview [2013 and 2015]).

### *Miguel*

Miguel was a young *primaria* teacher when we met him in 2005 in Valparaíso, Zacatecas. Of all the educators we interviewed, he was the only one who described conducting activities with parents. He gave *pláticas* (brief talks) to parents encouraging them not to migrate to the United States. He also encouraged students to stick with their studies in Mexico and to train to become professionals. He told us that he had been doing this for the previous five years:

We as teachers, we are always...I, personally, am always around them, telling them to study. I tell them, “Many of you and your parents have the mistaken idea that once you grow up you will leave for the United States.” I say if they are going to the United States they need to prepare themselves, a person ready to go to the United States is a professional. That person will work in their field. “But if you don’t prepare yourself, you’re not going to find much. Neither here nor there will you advance. The work you find will always be the most difficult, the worst paying. Your culture, your self-esteem, they are going to be very low. Therefore, make yourself into something here; work here, it is better. Prepare yourself because going to the United States isn’t a solution. It’s a serious problem that you leave for the United States because you’re needed to develop your country. And to help develop it you need to be prepared.” (Miguel, teacher in a *primaria* [elementary school], Valparaíso, Zacatecas, 2005).

## **Educator Perspectives on International Migrant Students – An Introduction**

The two glimpses just shared come from differently situated Mexican teachers—differentiated by locale, gender, time in the classroom, the year we interviewed them, and more. They do not capture the full gamut of educational thinking that has been precipitated mainly by the arrival/return in Mexican schools of children with prior U.S. school experience, but they do remind us that, in real time, Mexican educators are generating responses to students whose biographies differ significantly from their non-mobile, mononational classmates. These educators’ accounts allow us to peek at educators’ deliberative processes that are increasingly important to Mexico, as its international migrant student population grows, and to the United States, as

the prospects of these students' return for adulthood and/or more schooling persist.

As both teachers in the two glimpses clearly believe, what happens in schools matters for what society becomes. In turn, because *what teachers think* matters for *what happens* in schools, it makes sense to examine here how Mexican educators have been thinking about their internationally mobile charges. As members of our research team have noted before, neither schools nor teacher preparation in Mexico are designed for nor expect transnational enrollments, but working with transnational students is now part of their task, as it seems that there are more than 420,000 such students in Mexican *primarias* and *secundarias* (Zúñiga and Hamann 2015). That said, there are a few incipient professional development efforts to ready Mexican teachers for these students, which we discuss in the conclusion.

The research that this article comes from did not start as a teacher research project. Instead, we began a larger research project in 2004 to look for and then consider the educational circumstances of international migrant students in Mexican schools. Overwhelmingly, that meant looking at students with prior experience in U.S. schools. Over the duration of our longitudinal study (which is ongoing), international migrant students have arrived or returned to Mexico and to Mexican schools in slowly increasing numbers, not always in tandem with the entirety of their nuclear families. Some have returned because of the sharp economic downturn of 2008–09 and related shrinkage of employment opportunities in the United States for their parents. Alternatively, other students explained to us that they returned to Mexico because their parents had built the economic nest egg—the savings—to build their “dream house” and/or start their “dream business” in Mexico. Some (but not most) returned as “deportees” or because a caregiver was deported. Most returned voluntarily, including some DREAMers (referencing young adults whose right to permanently stay in the United States is tied to still-not-approved American federal legislation called “Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors” that was first proposed in 2001). Estimates from Mexico’s 2010 Census show that approximately one million Mexicans left the United States and moved to Mexico between 2005 and 2010 (Giorguli and Gutiérrez Vázquez 2011), and that about a quarter of them were children and youths.

While there is a long history in the United States of receiving transnationally mobile youth who are often accurately but reductively being labeled ELs or ELLs (for English Learner or English Language Learner, which mean the same thing) (García, Kleifgen, and Falchi

2008) because of their placement in special intensive English programs, it is only more recently that conceptualizing Mexico just as a migrant sending country and the United States just as a migrant receiving country has started to be questioned/complicated. Whatever was previously understood and whatever the previous patterns, it is clear as this article goes to press, that the movement between Mexico and the United States is bidirectional and that it involves more parts of the United States—for example, both the “traditional” Latino diaspora and the “new” Latino diaspora (Hamann, Wortham, and Murillo 2015; Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann 2002; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005)—and more parts of Mexico than previous eras of binational movement. Moreover, these migrations include those with Mexican birth certificates going to the United States and coming back and those with U.S. birth certificates moving to Mexico with their “returning” parents and older siblings as part of “mixed status” families.

In the face of patterns of transnational movement, schools remain both institutions of the state (Smith and Guarnizo 1998) and vehicles for teaching the semiotic systems that socialize individuals into group membership (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In Claudio Lomnitz’ words, “[I]n order to disseminate nationalism, it has to be shaped into signs and told” (2001, 16) and schools are optimal vehicles for at least some of that work. Because of this, schools become optimal spaces to study the negotiation of migration and reception (Goode, Schneider, and Blanc 1992), like the welcome (or lack thereof) of newcomers (Gitlin, et al. 2003).

More particularly, because educators are the salaried agents charged with guiding this semiotic socialization, studying their response to both national curricular changes and transnational demographic change illuminates the tensions between the intended and imagined—the societies schools propose to help build (Anderson 1991; Brickman 1964; Gamio 1916)—and the actual or extant societies that result (Booth 1941; Vázquez 1975). Beyond the case of Mexico reviewed here, there is an emerging extant literature on the way international migrant students are treated elsewhere. For example, Albino Serrano (1998) and Reyes (2000) both document skeptical responses to Puerto Ricans from the U.S. mainland who move/return to the island, although the focus there is on reception broadly rather than just teacher thinking about these migrants.

Schools may have been created to teach literacy and numeracy, promote democracy, and cultivate loyalty to the nation state (Booth 1941; Dewey 1916; Gamio 1916)—with each of these tasks shaping teachers’ senses of what they should do—but increasingly their task is being refined (and perhaps reduced) to workforce preparation, with

increasingly dire warnings about prospective rising generations lacking readiness for the twenty-first century global economy (Bryk, et al. 2010; National Center on Education and the Economy 2006). With education policy flows increasingly crossing borders (Meyer and Ramirez 2000, Straubhaar and Friedrich 2015), a flow enhanced by Mexico's membership in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which compels it to want to be competitive in terms of graduation rates, test scores, and other metrics with its 29 supposed peers, global ideas about schooling and the economy are increasingly finding their echo in Mexico (e.g., the Programa Sectorial de Educación 2013–2018 [Secretaría de Educación Pública 2013]). The two teachers' insights shared at the beginning reflect their concurrence that schools are to get students ready for the future economy, even as they vary in sensibility regarding where international migrant students' future economic participation should or likely will occur.

This article's intent then is to illuminate Mexican educators' perceptions, as captured over a decade, as they became more conscious of the growing number of students with international experiences in their enrollments and gave thought to these students' integration, needs, aspirations (educational and otherwise), future geographies, skills, and vulnerabilities and to their own readiness to assist students with each of these. Integrated into this portrayal are factors of teacher biography and teacher socialization — what are teachers to do? — that reflect not only the partial and particular experience of the interviewed teachers with transnationally mobile students and families, but also, more fundamentally, their senses as professionals and as humans about what should be done.

Gándara and Callahan (2014, 286) recently observed, “[E]very developed country is the recipient of immigrants and with them their languages; yet nowhere have we seen a response to this phenomenon that is truly forward thinking.” Mexico may not long have imagined itself as an immigrant receiving country or a developed one, OECD membership notwithstanding, but increasingly it is both. Gándara and Callahan's quote matters then in two ways; it reminds us that the task of responding to international newcomers is vexing to lots of school systems (even if/when some conceptualize it as “Going Home” [Zúñiga and Hamann 2015]), but it also promotes a theoretical premise—that “forward thinking” is possible—which then creates the task of delineating what that forward thinking would entail.

This paper offers a taxonomy of response derived from 68 Mexican teachers' articulated opinions about teaching the internationally mobile. In one sense then it is a detailing of what is or recently has

been so, but it also starts to take on Gándara and Callahan's challenge to consider what "forward thinking" by teachers and, more holistically, by Mexico's *educación básica* system could look like. In the taxonomy, we identified five themes from our analysis: (1) Student invisibility, (2) Circular and predictable migration, (3) Change nothing, (4) Building on what students know, and (5) Sympathy for the vulnerable. We propose that forward thinking would build on the fourth and fifth.

### Methodology

The empirical portion of this paper ultimately is grounded by two intertwined direct questions: How do Mexican educators think about/understand transnationally mobile students in their enrollment? And what is their sense of the appropriate response to such students? (Both are centrally salient considerations for a Special Issue devoted to return migration). Only the first of these questions was regularly asked in our interviews, as the interviews were initially conducted as means to better understand the contexts that students previously in the United States were now encountering in Mexican classrooms and communities. That means our database of teacher interviews has been repurposed or, more carefully phrased, is being utilized here to help answer questions that did not necessarily guide the initial data collection.

**Table 1.** Data from 68 recorded and transcribed teacher interviews collected over an eleven-year period.

Mexican state	Number of interviewed educators	Proportion of total	Years the interviews were conducted
Nuevo León	33	48.53	2004, 2005, and 2006
Zacatecas	13	19.12	2005
Puebla	7	2.94	2010
Jalisco	2	10.29	2010
Morelos	13	19.12	2013, 2015
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>		

The data reviewed here come from 68 recorded and transcribed interviews collected over an 11-year period (see Table 1). Because of this time span, they capture evolving sensibilities on the part of the teachers as well as changing contexts of migration/return on the part of the students. While the overall research project selected a stratified random sample of schools, the 68 educators whose work is included



here represent an opportunistic sample—at some schools we were able to interview teachers; at others we could not—although we have no reason to think it differs particularly from a general cross-section of Mexico's nearly one million educators of *educación básica* (except that it excludes preschool teachers).

Still, because it is a sample of convenience, we are cautious about over-interpreting it quantitatively. For example, if 34 of 68 teachers told us that they believed a certain thing about transnationally mobile families it would be misleading for us to say that that is what 50 percent of Mexican teachers think. That said, 68 is a large sample size and it likely captures much of the range of Mexican teachers' thinking about transnational students. If half of our sample thought something, if it was a belief of both some rural and urban teachers, and some teachers in 2004 and 2013, then these are patterns worth noting. For that matter, if only one teacher noted something (like the one teacher exhorting students not to leave Mexico that we noted as the second example in the initial vignette), while 67 others did not, there is some safety in claiming that viewpoint as relatively unusual or idiosyncratic.

Table 1 illuminates the geographic and chronological spread of our sample. Roughly two thirds of our interviews come from Nuevo León and Zacatecas in 2004 and 2005; and thus predate the global economic recession of 2007–09, the reverse in migration rates (with migration *from* Mexico becoming outnumbered by migration/return *to* Mexico), and the growth in deportations (and the outcry about those deportations) that perhaps began with the concurrent raids at six meatpacking plants in 2006 (toward the end of the George W. Bush presidency) and that have remained high in both of President Obama's terms (which started in 2009).

From both a geographic standpoint and a regional history of international migration standpoint, it seems fair to claim that we have captured a representative cross-section of Mexican schools and thus teachers. Regarding the latter, we include settings where migration is part of a century-old pattern (e.g., Jalisco and Zacatecas) and other locales where it is quite new (e.g., Puebla). In Zacatecas and Nuevo León we found several teachers from communities where migration was more longstanding and patterned (e.g., families predictably leaving to engage in agricultural work in the United States and predictably returning). Almost 90% (61 of 68) of our interviews came from public school teachers. The sample was almost exactly split between teachers of *primaria* (32 of 68) and *secundaria* (34 of 68), with two of the 68 in other configurations. 41 of the 68 were women and 27 were men.

**Table 2.** This table illustrates the local migration intensity rates for the *municipios* where the interviewed teachers are employed. Source: Consejo Nacional de Población (2002 and 2012).

Local migration intensity	Number of teachers	Percentage of sample
Very High	6	8.82
High	17	25.00
Medium	12	17.65
Low	22	32.35
Very low	11	16.18
<b>Total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Table 2 shows which portion of the sample came from *municipios* (which are similar to counties) with very low, low, medium, high, and very high participation rates in international migration. Members of our research team have previously shown a correlation between migration intensity and the number of internationally experienced students, so we had a broad distribution on this dimension. This matters because we want to claim that our taxonomy of teacher response types is broadly inclusive, excepting two variables: we did not include any teachers from bilingual schools targeting Indigenous students in Mexico and we did not sample from any U.S./Mexico border cities, like Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo.

Some teachers work in schools in rural areas, while others work in cities that also have high mobility rates related to internal migration in Mexico (e.g., the migration that has helped Guadalajara and Monterrey become Mexico's second and third largest cities, respectively). So it is important to note that the studied educators drew their opinions on migration and transnationally mobile students from phenomena that varied in detail from place to place.

Most of the interviews were recorded at schools and during times when school was in session, though in a few cases we were there when school ended and educators stayed on to talk with us. The interviews were exploratory by design, guided in part by our recognition that "we did not know what we did not know" and by our sense that we wanted to better understand the history and context of schooling in a particular locale. So we intentionally allowed discussions to be open, and to let teachers tell us what they thought was most important for us to know.

Thus, the lengths of the interviews varied substantially, with the shortest lasting just eight minutes and two lasting longer than an hour. The average duration was 21 minutes. The longer interviews

nearly all came from later (i.e., more recent) interviews. Of the 33 interviews recorded in Nuevo León between 2004 and 2006, the shortest was eight minutes and the longest was just 29 minutes. In contrast, the two transcribed interviews from Jalisco from 2010 were 48 and 64 minutes respectively.

### **Imagining International Migrant Students: Towards a Taxonomy**

It may at first seem odd to start the title of the “findings” section with the word “imagining,” but we do so quite consciously and purposefully. The ways teachers treat international migrant students—whether they make any adaptations to their pedagogy and/or whether they see such students as important or less important—is the complex product of how they understand (or imagine) the task of being a teacher and how they conceptualize (or imagine) those students (Reeves 2004). If, for example, teachers are not aware that some of their enrollees have lived in the United States, then their unawareness (their lack of imagining) precludes them from any purposeful response. We cannot react to what we do not notice.

Alternatively, if an international migrant student’s atypical biography is known, but a teacher thinks either (a) curriculum and pedagogy are not something that teachers can adapt (imagining the role of teacher) or (b) that students coming from the United States do not merit any adaptation (imagining the place of/for such students) then that teacher would fit into what we call the *change nothing* category. However, it is also possible that a teacher can imagine more agency for him or herself (i.e., that teachers can be adaptive) and that a migrant student merits a particular response (because the student is seen as unusually vulnerable, unusually capable, differently situated, and/or something else).

In our experience, the ways Mexican teachers have thought about migrant students was not only a direct product of their interaction with such students. Teachers’ experiences with migrant students’ parents or grandparents, their own experiences with binational mobility (even if that just meant having vacationed in the United States or having a cousin who had emigrated), their conversations with their educator peers and supervisors all sometimes influenced the way they conceptualized how they were to respond to enrollees with prior experience in the United States. That meant our inquiry was not understood as an abstract inquiry about the 400,000 transnationally mobile students that our larger research project has uncovered, but rather was usually generated in the context of “students like

Felipe” (or “like Juan” or “like Mónica”) or “according to my brother who lives in California . . .”

The first part of our taxonomy was *student invisibility*. Particularly when this study began, many international migrant students in Mexican schools were “invisible” (UNICEF 2006) or, more aptly, their biographies and trajectories were undistinguished by their teachers from those of their classmates. This was so because most had Mexican surnames (reflecting their parents’ heritage) and some familiarity with Spanish (from household environments even if they had never studied it as an academic subject). They “looked” Mexican, even if they were often quieter and less successful than their classmates. Reflecting this invisibility, many of the first Mexican teachers we interviewed knew very little about the transnationally mobile as a discrete group.

A second type of teacher thinking about the transnationally mobile came from a few in our sample who taught in communities with extensive participation in *circular migration* (particularly for seasonal agricultural work in the United States). These teachers could anticipate the regular coming and going of some of their students even if they lamented this because of how it interfered with learning. Post 9/11 militarization of the U.S./Mexico border, however, substantially curtailed this kind of pattern and it was not a topic that came up in any of our post 2006 interviews.

The final three primary types of response to transnationally mobile students in their enrollments included: *Change nothing* (sometimes rationalized with the assertion that it would be unfair to treat transnationally mobile students any different from their classmates); *Building on what students know* (which could be restricted to creating roles for students with U.S. experience to help with English language instruction or, more expansively, to imagining possible binational adulthoods for current students); and *Sympathy for the vulnerable*, which recognized both the social strains that precipitate migration (e.g., limited employment, restricted social mobility) and that come from migration (e.g., being caught between languages, family struggles, and financial difficulties). These five postures were not mutually exclusive—for example, a teacher could report one international migrant student as vulnerable and struggling and be oblivious to the background of another.

When we first began this project in Nuevo León and Zacatecas (2004–2005), the migration of Mexicans to the United States was still much higher than the return migration rate and the national education ministry had not yet devoted the resources that it would several years later to draw Mexican educators’ attention to the widespread

presence of such students. So it followed that some of the earliest responses included teachers being surprised to learn that their enrollments might include students with prior experience in U.S. schools (we will talk more in the conclusion about federal attention from the Secretaría de Educación Pública that began in 2007 and that has implications for additional pre-service and in-service training for Mexican educations).

Back then, the changed policing of the U.S./Mexico border that was precipitated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks (which, we should remind everyone had nothing to do with Mexico) and that inhibited previous patterns of circular migration were also still pretty recent, and so the migration patterns that they eventually substantially altered were also only just starting to change. Thus, a few teachers, particularly those near the border or in traditional migrant sending towns that had long sent agricultural workers to the United States, described to us strategies for students whose coming and going was reasonably predictable. More recently, these two kinds of teacher responses seem less common, but we start with them.

### *Invisible Students*

In one of the first pieces that our research team generated, we explained:

We do not know the teachers at Rosa's school well either, although we interviewed one for almost an hour. He explained that the real challenge at Rosa's school were the social problems of the community it served. Many of Rosa's classmates are from nationally mobile families, from Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz, and their economic security is fragile. In this kind of troubled environment, Rosa's unique profile as a transnational sojourner student is invisible, except to the English teacher who regards her as a sometime resource for pronunciation help (Hamann, Zúñiga, and Sánchez García 2006, 256–7).

Early in our research project, in Zacatecas and Nuevo León, it was not uncommon to run into teachers who said they were unaware of any students at their schools who had previously lived and studied in the United States. That meant two things: the responses we were collecting were improvisational (teachers were in a sense “thinking out loud” about whether or how this was salient) and the international migrant students they had had in their enrollment had not received any differentiated treatment because of their international migration. In some sense these teachers' guiding ideologies for how they had treated this kind of students were similar to our third category—*change nothing* (which is further considered below)—but in

this case adapting nothing was an unwitting default rather than an active stance.

While it has remained possible that a given student's international experience remained unknown to his/her Mexican teacher (hence leaving that student's biography still invisible), in our more recent interviews the premise that there could be such students was much more commonly articulated. This was likely tied to both the federal *Educación Básica Sin Fronteras* and *Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante* campaigns and to the related growing attention that such students might be in schools.

### *Circular Migration: Seagulls*

Early in our research (again from Nuevo León and Zacatecas), a few teachers described to us a profile of a kind of international migrant learner that has since become increasingly atypical or even disappeared. These learners were regularly gone for part of the year (as their parents worked in agricultural labor in the United States) and regularly present for another part. The few teachers who talked about this dynamic clearly distinguished these students from the expected mononational population and lamented how this pattern of migration was challenging for schooling. Because of mid-year departures and arrivals, the students' mobile biographies were obvious; so the students were not invisible, but concurrently it sounded like little was changed to respond to them. There was some overlap with the dynamic we further describe later of seeing such students as vulnerable and being sympathetic to them as such.

To illustrate: Víctor Manuel was a teacher who was born and raised in a rural area of northern Nuevo León and who still lived there when we met him. He was a *normalista* (teacher educator) at the local *escuela normal* for high school teachers. His specialization in mathematics also led him to teach a few classes in that subject at the local *secundaria*. In 2005 he told us there were a considerable number of local students who regularly moved to the United States during the summers for work (presumably agricultural work) and who returned in September or October to begin their studies (i.e., after the academic year had begun). The more geographically stable locals referred to their neighbors' frequent transnational passages as "the seagull effect," presumably comparing the human migration to the similar seasonal migration pattern of birds.

Víctor Manuel did not describe himself or other teachers making any changes because of the existence of this pattern, but he did note that he thought this pattern was slowly fading. Although at that time

(2005) he did not have an explanation as to why this was so, it now seems clear that heightened border security has inhibited this kind of migration. Still it is worth naming this framing by teachers not just for its historic relevance (although that matters because it allows us to code these kinds of responses), but also because it is possible to imagine its re-emergence if international migration between the United States and Mexico was ever regularized. In that scenario, teachers doing more than lamenting such students' challenging circumstances would be important.

### *Change Nothing*

As we also have discussed in other pieces, several teachers told us that knowing of some of their students' migratory experience was irrelevant. While these teachers sometimes complained that international migrant students did not know geography (meaning Mexican geography) nor mathematics terminology and strategies (meaning not knowing the way math was taught in Mexican schools), they were comfortable locating such problems as the students' problems and not something that pointed to the need for changing anything that they, as teachers, did or understood.

This stance can be concurrently understood as nationalistic and anti-constructivist. It is nationalistic in that it rejects the premise that a transnational past or a transnational future matters for what should happen in classrooms (leaving intact that Mexican schooling is for Mexican futures). Sometimes this nationalism mixed with skepticism of the United States even though most of the interviewed teachers said they knew little about the United States.

In a few interviews teachers revealed prejudices and stereotypes about America and international migrant students. A Nuevo León teacher referring to these students claimed, "The few I know are pushy; they believe they are special because they have lived in the United States. They rejected their own country in a way. For me, that's the thing, they rejected their country." There were other teachers who used slang and derogatory terms, like "*pasaporteados*," "*pochos*," and "Chicanos," to refer to students who had lived in the United States. (It is intriguing to note that "Chicano" can be used dismissively in Mexico—it is not a negative identity in the United States—perhaps in ways similar to Puerto Rican students and educators dismissing their U.S. mainland "Nuyorican" ethnic peers [Albino Serrano 1998 and Reyes 2000].)

Concurrently, the *change nothing* stance is anti-constructivist in that it ignores the central premise of constructivist learning theory.

Constructivism proposes that new learning builds on prior understandings and, thus, that among teachers' tasks are to discover what is familiar and salient to students and build on that directly (Erickson 1987). A teacher who changes nothing, who rejects the salience of knowing or tending to students' varied background knowledge and various likely futures is anti-constructivist. These characterizations do not mean teachers holding this view do not care. Rather they propose that such teachers see their existing understandings and existing practices as sufficient for conducting the work of teaching. In Gándara and Callahan's (2014) terms, they are not "forward thinking."

There was another version of this stance, namely one that rejects the need for any large-scale or long-term variation for international migrant students but that does acknowledge that arriving students sometimes need to adjust before becoming as successful as any other type of student in Mexican schools. One teacher (of a student we call "Daisy") told us that when students arrive in Mexico from the United States they initially need more support and explained that, "Daisy's problem was that she was competing with other students for that support." International migrant students confront two challenges, she explained, first their interaction with peers and then their acceptance into smaller groups or cliques. She then clarified that it is the students with longer experiences in the United States who are much likelier to confront "the problem of changing." She said initially those students comport themselves as superior, but then "calm down" and adapt to their new circumstances. Like other teachers with this stance, Daisy's teacher leaves intact that it is the student's task to adjust, not anything that teachers have any responsibility for.

An additional element of this teacher's account fascinates us: On what basis had this teacher come up with this informal taxonomy of international migrant students? How many such students did she know? Her recognition, however incomplete, that returning students might change their comportment over time and might initially nervously posture as "too cool," or as superior, strikes us as keenly observed, even if the alleged pattern was identified from a small sample. Other teachers too told us about international migrant students carrying themselves differently when the first came to Mexico versus after they had subsequently acclimatized.

Another teacher from Zacatecas offered a similar account as Daisy's teacher:

I am now teaching fourth grade 'B' in the afternoon school [referencing the frequent pattern of the same educational facility hosting two schools, one



that meets in the morning to midday and another that meets in the afternoon]. The experience we have had is with children who have spent a longer time in the United States and then been brought back to [Mexico]. Many of them were born in the United States while their parents were born in Mexico. We have seen their schoolwork; those that know more Spanish are less encumbered than those who know only a little. There are places in the United States where it is prohibited to speak Spanish at school (José Luis, teacher of *primaria* in Fresnillo, Zacatecas, 2005).

Ultimately, teacher beliefs in this category can encompass that international migrant students bring a different profile to the classroom. They do not claim that such students are invisible. Nonetheless, for teachers taking this stance, the sense of their own tasks and the larger logic for Mexican schooling in the twenty-first century remains unperturbed (but needs interruption if Mexican schooling is to be “forward thinking” [Gándara and Callahan 2014]).

### *Building on What Students Know*

In contrast, some teachers described to us formal and informal ways where they took a constructivist stance towards international migrant students. In several instances teachers described turning to such students for help with English language pronunciations and translations. Some even converted international migrant students into de facto classroom aides, at least for language issues. We call beliefs like this *building on what students know*. They recognized that skills students and their families brought with them—what González, Moll and Amanti (2005) have called *funds of knowledge*—could be built on (although whether this led to substantial changes or just minor adaptations varied).

Some of the interviewed teachers in each of the states explained that, above all, international migration and the negotiation of transnational spaces was a family affair. That is, students did not negotiate it in isolation, but rather they often had extended family, on either side of the border, who impacted how a student’s migration and resettlement transpired. While these comments are interesting for what they tell us about students, they are more pertinent here for what they tell us about what at least some teachers knew about their students’ backgrounds. The following are teacher *testimonios* (extended quotations) that consider the intertwined theme of international migration, schooling, and family.

Interviewer: And this phenomenon of having transnational students, tell us, is this common for you and your colleagues? Is it common here in [the city of] Jerez?

Teacher: It is common. As you already know, the majority [of such students] have extended family here. They say here that there is “another Jerez” in the United States, because half of Jerez seems to be there, while half is here. So the majority [of migrant students] have family both there and here. So some leave for the United States and others come back. It is very common that we have students from there that come here. (María de Jesús, teacher in a private *primaria* in Jerez, Zacatecas, 2005).

Of course adaptation does not need to be the school’s work exclusively, some teachers described how parents play an important role in their children’s learning:

These parents arrive with a different mentality, with different ideas of how to support their children most. The parents of these children help us well. That is, they help, which many of the parents who have always lived here do not. (Reyes, teacher of *primaria*, Zacatecas, 2005).

We remember early in our research being told that U.S. schools emphasize that parents should read with their children at home and that that was a pattern that allegedly was becoming more common in Mexico, partially because returning parents had added that as a parenting strategy. Our data on this possibility, however, is quite modest; so we merely raise it as an intriguing topic for further inquiry. The teachers we interviewed anticipated that the numbers of international migrant students in their enrollments was only likely to grow and that such students would be considering school and work opportunities in both countries.

Interviewed at a time when the migration consequences of the global recession of 2008–2009 would have been manifest, a teacher from Puebla explained that:

We are waiting for more migrant children because we know some who are returning are US residents, they are residents who are coming here and, well, they are coming here and it is their intention to live here. Therefore we are also anticipating a little more affluence among the migrant children. We think that will just be incremental. The majority is still trying to legalize their status in the United States (Ambrosio, teacher of *primaria* in Teuhitzingo, Puebla, 2010).

This same teacher also talked explicitly about place of birth as a possible advantage for binational students. She noted that those with American nationality by birthplace could count on a higher probability and more easily negotiated chance of living in the United States. This seemed even more probable if the parents of the students in question already lived in the United States. Tatyana Kleyin’s (2016) new documentary *Una Vida, Dos Países* raises a similar point.

*Sympathy for the Vulnerable*

One of the principal reasons for students' migration, according to the interviewed educators, was the state of the economy. The lack of local jobs, more than anything, precipitated migration to the United States. Former Mexican trade consul to Atlanta, Bernardo Mendez Lugo, once claimed that 20,000 Mexican teachers were working in the United States (usually not as teachers) in the 1990s (Hamann 1999). Whether his statistic was accurate or not, financial pressure and rural decline were things that many Mexican teachers not only witnessed (as discussed below), but felt themselves, as the prevalence of teachers with two teaching jobs suggests (because the salary from one was not adequate). The following quotes variously lament the poverty and hazardous circumstances of many transnationally mobile families. They remind us of teachers' special vantage points to see these challenges and of their frequent sympathy. Noddings (1992) and Valenzuela (1999) have both written at length about the importance of teacher caring. There is clearly evidence here of caring, although how agentive teachers felt in relation to student and community need is less certain.

Interviewer: *Maestro*, tell us a little about your understanding of migration and how it works in this [Mixteca Poblana] region—this issue of people who go to live in the United States. Is that common or not common?

Principal: In our school we have this problem. Here it is quite common that people emigrate, to look for work to help their family economically. It is also the case that there is a lot of movement of children, that too is a characteristic of our environment for this phenomenon.

Teacher: We had a different dynamic before; before it was only the head of the family who would go, or the oldest son, but now both parents are going. Sometimes they take the family, or the children stay, cared for by an aunt, a grandmother, or some cousin. However, in a few instances they stay in the care of their mother, but sometimes both [parents] go.

Principal: We have different types of families you could say. There are families that are united [here together], but there are also families that are very dispersed. There are cases where the two go, the two who form a married couple, the husband and wife, and then I don't know what happens there [in the United States] but they separate. I have seen cases of this. I have also seen cases of people who go and if they put effort into their work, if they put effort into completing their business there, and they return, they have made [socioeconomic] progress in some cases. And there are those who don't come back, who take their children to live with them there, in the United States (María del Socorro, teacher, and Pedro, principal, from a *secundaria* in Izúcar de Matamoros, Puebla, 2010).

As this exchange suggests, the sympathy for internationally mobile children was intertwined with teachers' senses of the family challenges (particularly economic challenges) that were often connected with students' mobility.

In turn, a teacher in the city of Zacatecas, whom we interviewed in 2005, told us he was quite familiar with the United States. Unlike most Mexican educators we met, he had autobiographical experience as a migrant. He mentioned that he had been in Texas, Missouri, Virginia, and Alabama. He had obtained his U.S. residency card in 2002 and before that had traveled using his tourist passport, or as a "*mojado*" (his term). His children and six brothers all lived in the United States when we interviewed him. When we asked his opinion about the impact of international migration on Mexican schools, he explained:

Well, realistically, the schools are slowly being abandoned here. Families are leaving and they [usually] are taking their children with them. Sometimes the mother and father go and the children are left here. It used to be that the father would go, but the mother would stay here, but not now. Sometimes both go; sometimes everyone goes. Here we have cases of children without parents (Miguel, teacher of *primaria* in Zacatecas, Zacatecas, 2005).

He also told us that grandparents are the ones in charge of the children and that the bulk of Zacatecans who head North do so to a few particular locales in the United States: California, Phoenix [Arizona], Illinois, and Utah.

This issue of children living with their grandparents was echoed by a number of the other interviewed teachers in the various parts of Mexico. In Nuevo León, in 2004, a teacher told us the following about one of her students:

Here she was cared for by her grandmother, and now she lives alone in her parents' house but they are not here. Because I am friends with the grandmother, she told me that she was mortified. It is not the same. They [the children with experience in the United States] don't bring the same sensibilities from "over there" that we have here, not the same customs, not the same values. Even though their parents are Mexican and are teaching their [Mexican] values, the media still have an influence (Hermelinda, teacher at a *secundaria* in Anáhuac, Nuevo León, 2005).

We include this quote here because it highlights the teacher's sympathy for the grandmother. Arguably, however, it also fits with the earlier discussion about some teachers doubting the morality of the United States and its influence on those who leave to live there.

A teacher from Apozol, Zacatecas typified many teachers' familiarity with students' divided families. When we interviewed him in 2005,

he explained that many families were split between the two countries and that children of these geographically dispersed families had many problems—“They have to live in two completely different cultures.” Sometimes the conditions of poverty drive them to drop out of school:

Already a young girl has told me “I’m not going to come [to school] anymore.” Why? [She responded] “Because my father has not sent money [remittances] and I don’t have money for lunch.” And when I told her, I can give you lunch. They will give you a [lunch] ticket, whatever you want, and I will pay. And that’s how it was from September to November, until about the 15th. And then what happened? The grandmother came to a meeting and told me, “I believe this child is going to have to stop coming.” Why *señora*? “Because her father has not sent any money and I don’t have any.” And maybe it’s true. What can the grandmother do in this situation? She cannot do anything” (Ignacio, teacher at a *secundaria* in Apozol, Zacatecas, 2005).

In 2015, one teacher from Morelos explained:

We have dysfunctional families, separated parents. The children are with just one of them, or with grandparents who cannot cope with them. One I had, in first grade [of *secundaria*—i.e., seventh grade] didn’t want to do anything, as if he disliked everything . . . because his parents had had to migrate. But he didn’t like it here . . . When I would dictate something, he would write everything in English. When I asked him ‘why?’, he threw his pen. Later he wouldn’t write in Spanish or English. I had to stand at his side so that he would write, albeit outside of the lines on the page. The hour passed that way with me standing there and he got mad and puckered his mouth. Regarding discipline, he was violent. He pushed one student, grabbed the hair of another . . .

One day I told him, “Look, I have noted when you were good and when you were bad and you don’t pay attention. What do you want?” He told me he wasn’t happy. That he wanted to return to his country [i.e., the United States]. I said, “You can’t do that. You’re a minor. When you’re older you can make those decisions. Meanwhile, why don’t you study?” (María de la Luz, teacher at a *secundaria* in Jiutepec, Morelos).

When asked about which places he thought international migrant children would prefer to live, in 2005 a teacher in Zacatecas indicated that:

Well, I feel that they like it more there [in the United States]. I don’t truly know if that’s because of the economy. Here I know children with real limitations [i.e., poverty]. I had a student last year who had to work here to help support his household. That student said that he didn’t work, nor did his parents, when they were in the United States, and that the government had given them economic help. Here he needs to work in order to be able to eat.

That's what happened last year. So, economically, it is more important to be there [in the United States] (Jesús, teacher at a *secundaria* in Fresnillo, Zacatecas).

Teachers in Nuevo León, Puebla, and Morelos drew our attention to a concurrent second migration pattern that merits naming—internal migration. In Nuevo León that referenced an urban population drawn from all over Mexico to the Monterrey metropolitan area. In southern Mexico, significant segments of the local populations were mobile, particularly those who migrated for agricultural work, who are called *jornaleros*. In the case of the Mixteca portion of Puebla (largely in the south of that state), the interviewed teachers described students who came through who were originally from Veracruz and Oaxaca. In Morelos, a teacher told us of the recent arrival of a number of families from Guerrero who spoke Mixteco (one of Mexico's indigenous languages) as their first language. The children who accompanied their *jornalero* parents would join them in the fields and orchards every day after they left school. In all three of these states, the intra-nationally mobile were also often thought of sympathetically, with their vulnerability too lamented. So some teachers' sympathy then for the internationally mobile was likely intertwined with their sympathy for the mobile or displaced more generally. Imagining that the mobile needed to be enfranchised, needed to be more successfully attached to the state, has been part of Mexican teacher's remit since public education's first large-scale expansion after the Mexican Revolution (Sáenz 1929).

We have reported elsewhere that some of the international migrant students we interviewed reported problems trying to enroll in Mexico with school directors questioning the eligibility of students. In contrast, we did have a school director of a *primaria* in Puebla explain to us how he had found a way to enroll a young girl who had been born in the United States, but lacked both a U.S. birth certificate and a Mexican one. The director explained that this youngster had been brought back to Mexico as her parents divorced. Her mother helped enroll her before returning to the United States and, last we knew, the girl lived with her grandmother. The father was described as living in a neighboring Mexican state, but not significantly involved anymore in the girl's life. The most important reason for sharing this exceptional anecdote, however, is to propose that, in the range of responses to international migrant students, there are dramatic instances of educators recognizing and then attending to the broad needs and vulnerabilities of some of the students. Displays of sympathy can concurrently include logistic and affective steps.

*Implications: Teacher preparation and professional development*

Over the course of our inquiry, there were themes that seemed to change—e.g., the surprise or denial by some Mexican educators that there were students in their enrollment with prior school experience in the United States faded. Similarly, we stopped hearing about “seagull” students who predictably spent part of their year in Mexican schools and part in the United States. But there were other themes that we continued to hear from teachers across the sites and the span of our inquiry. One example was a persistent portion believing that, if there were internationally mobile students, then that did not change their roles or tactics as teachers at all. That belief, whether a belief about the students (not meriting accommodation) or about the task of teaching (not allowing or entailing student-responsive differentiation) or both, looms in our view as an obstacle to the “forward thinking” advocated for by Gándara and Callahan (2014). We also consistently, but not universally, heard sympathy expressed for these students and their families. That was a starting point for prospective advocacy.

Although about their own preparation rather than about the international migrants (so not directly part of the five-part taxonomy), we also consistently heard teachers explain that they had had little or no professional preparation (pre-service or in-service) to develop strategies and ideas about how to most successfully include international migrant students. This was true even after the Mexican government commissioned and published a book and related teachers guide—*Alumnos Transnacionales: Escuelas Mexicanas Frente a la Globalización* (Zúñiga, Hamann, and Sánchez García 2008) and the *Guía Didáctica* (Sánchez García, et al. 2009)—and after it commissioned a series of train-the-trainer workshops for educational leaders from all over the country, all under the auspices of their *Educación Básica Sin Fronteras* campaign. So, on its own, the existence of this campaign was not quickly, broadly transformative.

In respect to pre-service teacher preparation (i.e., the preparation before licensure) of the teachers we interviewed, there was a consensus that Mexican *escuelas normales* did not prepare teachers for placements in schools with significant international migrant student enrollment. When we asked teacher educators whether *escuelas normales* prepared teachers to help international migrant students their succinct concurrence was “No.” The majority of interviewed teachers also had never had any professional development related to that kind of students. A teacher in Zacatecas confirmed, “We talk about [student] learning struggles in general, but never attention to transnationals.”

Attention to international migrant students was a concern for most of the interviewed teachers (although in some early cases that was an improvised concern articulated shortly after learning that there were such students in their school's enrollment). Additionally, mostly there was a sensibility that such students were to be treated with tact and respect. One of the recommendations from a *secundaria* teacher in Jalisco was to carefully attend to each student to figure out their challenges and come up with solutions. For her, it was important to develop an academic plan, but also a personal or affective one.

Similarly, a teacher in Morelos asserted, "It is important to determine how the transition to Mexico, from one school to another, is affecting a student. But also to determine if there is a psychological problem, because, in my experience, remembering the challenges of one girl, her problems were more than language, she felt that she wasn't getting enough attention from her mother. There were also very low [economic] resources."

For the young teacher of *primaria*, José, who we interviewed in Jiutepec, Morelos in 2015, it was very important for teachers to pay close attention to students, to give them the attention they needed. He also asked for more information for teachers to help them better understand the context and complexity of international migration. He cited the French philosopher Edgar Morin about the necessity "To understand the other." If migrant students are better understood, he pointed out, it is possible to present solutions, to come up with alternatives. He then specified that if particular intervention strategies are required, after assessing a student in the classroom, then pedagogical adjustments *can* be made.

In articulating how they view international migrant students, these three teachers seem to be tracing aspects of the "forward thinking" (Gándara and Callahan 2014) that an effective school response to global mobility entails. The first teacher points to attending to personal and affective dimensions as well as academic ones. A disconcerted or disoriented or scared learner is not likely to be a successful one (Erickson 1987), so if/when those are factors a student brings to school, the viable teacher student relationship needs to attend to them. In an observation also relevant to immigrant students in the United States, the second teacher notes that more than language difference and language unfamiliarity needs to be attended to for the student who has crossed international borders and, in these cases, transitioned from a predominantly English speaking environment to a predominantly Spanish one. Language is clearly part of the transition, but only part. While the first two teachers imply this, one key element of the third teacher's insight is his sense that teachers are



agentive; they *can* make empirically informed adaptations. This teacher also proposes transcending any blindness to seeing the internationally mobile as undifferentiated from the mononational.

This article has focused on considering the perception of teachers about the phenomenon of student migration between the United States and Mexico. In one sense, it seeks to make visible a phenomenon that has often been invisible, considered in fragmented fashion, or obscured by a focus on other actors. In this way, like so many of the other articles in this issue, this is about transnationally mobile families, the strategies of “transnationalism from below” (Smith and Guarnizo 1998), and the real hazards that intertwine with movement across the United States/Mexico border, but it differs in an important way: We are focusing on the often mononational teachers, on the ‘ready or not’ educators who serve in one of the key social institutions that mediates migration (Goode, Schneider and Blanc 1992).

We agree with our fellow authors that international migration is important and interesting and of course those who participate in it merit attention. Moreover, we concur that special attention should acknowledge that how children experience international migration likely varies from how adults experience it. Here we are adding that part of what matters about this story is how the host society responds, in this case how teachers from Mexico, who trained in Mexico and who work in Mexico, make sense of students and families whose biographies are not mononational. As the number of enrollees in Mexican schools with prior U.S. experience grows, this consideration only becomes more salient (to both countries).

Even as social and educational integration are often problematic, schools are key sites for the adaptation and resilience that many internationally mobile students develop. And teachers help shape whether these processes are easier or more difficult, brief or extended, viable or fraught. Moreover, teachers’ consequential interface is not just with the transnational students (and their mononational peers). Teachers are also community leaders and their sensemaking and readiness for the mobile both reflects local norms and plays a role in shaping them.

The teachers we met were variously surprised by or acutely aware of the presence of internationally mobile students. They saw such students variously as particularly challenging or particularly promising or “not different.” In turn they alternately felt confident in their response or uncertain. They concurred that international migrant families changed the nature and dynamics of their job or they rejected this premise. All of this occurred against a consistently changing

backdrop. Mexican teachers are *frente a la globalización* (Zúñiga, Hamann, and Sánchez García 2008). Not only is their enrollment starting to diversify, the expectations and needs of what school is to help accomplish are changing too.

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