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6-8-2019

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Hamann, Edmund T. and Mitchell-McCollough, Jessica, "The Paradoxical Implications of Deported American Students" (2019). *Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education*. 433.

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The Paradoxical Implications of Deported American Students

Edmund T. Hamann and Jessica Mitchell-McCollough

If we don't understand the everyday lived experiences of people, we can't really think of immigration policy or reform.

Tileva, 2018, p. 30

Context

Principals and teachers throughout the United States (and world) have students with transnational ties. Sometimes students were born in another country. More commonly, one or both parents were. Sometimes that means students and/or parents lack documentation, which creates anxiety and ambiguity in students' lives that schools need to negotiate. Suro and Suárez-Orozco (2015) recently estimated that one in 15 schoolchildren were from mixed-status households (meaning one or more members of that household could be deported), but five-sixths of these students were themselves U.S. citizens.

Given these conditions, U.S. schools must consider the possibility that some of their students may move somewhere else, even to a different country, often with little notice. In turn, they need to plan for how those prospectively mobile students can be best served. They also need to think about how to keep those possible departures from disrupting the schooling of the students who remain. Departures can be sudden and traumatic, but they can be less traumatic if action plans have been developed.

Published as: Hamann, E. T., & Mitchell-McCollough, J. (2019). The Paradoxical Implications of Deported American Students. In E. Crawford, L. Dorner, & E. Bonney (Eds.) *Educational Leadership of Immigrants: Case Studies in Times of Change* (pp. 88-95). New York: Routledge. Copyright © 2019 Routledge/Taylor&Francis. Used by permission.

The case that follows comes from Lincoln, Nebraska, which Mary Pipher (2003) called “the middle of everywhere” in her book, noting Lincoln’s role as a refugee resettlement area, as well as the hub of much new migration. Some of the details have been changed to protect anonymity.

Case narrative

In a recent spring, two school principals and several teachers in Nebraska were faced with agonizing decisions about what to do, both educationally and humanely. They had just learned that two of their students, Maria de la Luz, a middle school student, and her younger brother, Norberto, an elementary school student, were about to move to Mexico. They were leaving the United States for a land neither child knew because their father was being deported and their mother wanted to keep their family together. As such, they were joining the roughly 600,000 children in Mexican schools with prior experience in the United States (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2015).

The educators had a week to intentionally ready their students for departure, as the father was seen as sufficiently unthreatening that he was allowed a week before he would be sent away. Still, a week is not much time to reorient entire lives. One task at hand for the principals and teachers in this case was how to best facilitate the educational transition the family would be facing. An email from a guidance counselor at one of the children’s schools captures the improvisational nature of figuring out what to do. Serendipitously, the counselor remembered that a professor she knew had studied the circumstances of students in Mexico with prior experience in the U.S. Her email (below) wondered if he might be able to help.

Say, I have a 6th grade student, U.S. born, whose parents are being deported to Mexico next week and she is going with them. I know that you worked with an institution in Monterrey, Mexico on a project involving cross-country immigration. I’m wondering if you have any tips for this student who is essentially immigrating to a foreign country. She wants to take some books so she won’t forget her English. I assume she’ll be behind the Mexican students academically and may face teasing because of

her accent. In the past U.S. born students have reported not being accepted by peers— too “gringa.” Do you have any thoughts or advice? The little girl is leaving on Friday. I have another 6th grade girl whose dad was apprehended by ICE; it was a big mess and the incident rippled throughout our school district’s Hispanic community. Hope all is well with you...

Less than a day after that email’s crafting, the professor and counselor had a chance to talk and then, later in the week, for 30 minutes, both met with Maria de la Luz herself. It was during that 30-minute conversation that they learned about Norberto, as Maria de la Luz clarified that both she and her younger brother were headed to Mexico. She said it would be their first plane ride and the first time that they would meet their grandparents in person. She also conceded she was nervous about what they would find in Mexico.

Given the short time frame— one week— that the school community had to support these children as they prepared for the transition to their next school and community environment, two things stood out as priorities. The first was to ask what generally would make the prospect of moving less daunting? The second was to consider what would make moving specifically to Mexico less daunting? That is where the discussion of the adventure of plane travel and the prospect of meeting close kin for the first time fit in. The idea was to focus on known upsides, even if they were in the face of so much that was more difficult and ambiguous.

Logistically, there was also work to be done. Maria de la Luz’s counselor (who was bilingual and had been hired in part for her capability to communicate with parents at a school with a high Latinx enrollment) assembled Maria de la Luz’s transcripts, met with her mother, and shared a letter cowritten with the professor that included the names of two professors in Puebla (the state where the family was relocating). One of the professors worked in Puebla permanently and one was there on a Fulbright. That step proved serendipitous, as the permanently-in-Mexico professor helped Maria de la Luz’s mother when she encountered resistance to enrolling Maria de la Luz in her new community’s school two months before the school year ended.

Given the suddenness of the relocation, it was not yet clear when the Nebraska counselor met with Maria de la Luz’s mother where specifically the family would end up. They knew which larger community,

but not which particular school catchment zones, so creating means for continued email communication was important. Maria de la Luz's mother brought Nebraska school records with her to Mexico for both Norberto and Maria de la Luz, but once in Mexico she could still reach out to the counselor in Nebraska to obtain additional information and forms, if needed. It was fortunate that Maria de la Luz's school had a counselor who could communicate with Maria de la Luz's mother and who could remain reachable (through email), even after the family's forced relocation.

Teaching notes

The task of how to respond with a week's notice is not the only way to think about Maria de la Luz's and Norberto's challenges. Given the prospect of some students' international dislocation for reasons like those encountered by Maria de la Luz and Norberto, or for other reasons (see Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011), schools need mechanisms to communicate with parents in parents' home language(s) and to be reachable in an uncomplicated way even after students have left that system for another one. While knowing a professor with ties in Mexico was useful in this instance, that does not seem like a coincidence that should be expected. But planning for the prospect of working with about-to-be-dislocated students and their parent(s) can and should be undertaken.

U.S. schools need to plan for more than what to do during a crisis. This country has long thought of itself as "a nation of immigrants" and for almost as long thought of its schools as vehicles for helping students and ultimately their families find a footing to integrate into the larger society (Dewey, 1902 ; Proefriedt, 2008). While taking on this role of immigrant integration has always been more fraught and complicated than the rhetoric supporting it would suggest, the truism of schooling as a key mediating site where newcomers and established residents come into contact remains very true (Goode, Schneider, & Blanc, 1992), although that mediation is more complicated than is typically recognized.

Schools' tasks are not just to help students and families live here, in this country, with its dominant language and culture. Instead, students increasingly need to be helped to be ready to negotiate multiple possible geographies and languages, because the contemporary globalized

economy (which moves both goods and people) and contemporary contestation of immigrant rights and statuses together make the likelihood of binational or multinational lives higher. Thinking of Maria de la Luz and Norberto as “immigrants” or “ ‘English Learners’ ” is not pejorative (although it would ignore their birthplaces), but it does steer away from helping students develop and maintain some of the identities and skills they may need if their schooling and lives are to be enduringly multinational. Even though they were U.S.-born and U.S. citizens, both Maria de la Luz and Norberto were more than just Nebraskans and more than just Americans. Pretending otherwise did not protect them from the shock that came from their family’s forced relocation; nor did it position them well for success in Mexican schools. They needed skills in Spanish and an understanding of Mexican culture. Promoting the students’ heritage language (in this case Spanish) would likely have illuminated its relevance and thus supported their maintenance of that language and confidence with it (Hornberger, 2005 ; Valdés, 2005). Valuing Spanish and other culture/ heritage features would also have reinforced students’ identity development through the continued ability to connect with community (Leeman, Rabín, & Román-Mendoza, 2011). This may well have aided both children in their transition into an educational setting of a different, yet recognizable, language and culture.

Some may protest that it is not the job of U.S. schools to teach Spanish. Perhaps not, but not having the choice to study or use their home language(s) at school makes students like Maria de la Luz and her brother vulnerable in predictable and avoidable ways. If they had been encouraged to develop their heritage language as well as learning English, they would have been less vulnerable to their sudden move. Moreover, there is evidence that supporting students’ academic development in their heritage language along with English improves educational outcomes (Yanguas, 2010). (So even if Maria de la Luz and Norberto had never moved, their cultivated multilingualism would have been a useful asset.)

Both children could have also gained from overt metalinguistics instruction (e.g., attention to details like word order conventions and grammar varying by language, and recognition that language is used differently in various content areas). There is good evidence from the U.S. that older English Learners with school experience elsewhere use their literacy skills in a native language to learn English (Meltzer & Hamann,

2004, 2005). There is no reason why this logic could not be reversed, with knowledge about language derived from studying English in U.S. schools being used as a resource for studying in Spanish in Mexico. Metalinguistic awareness includes knowing that content areas have particular vocabularies, text structures, and discourses, that informal oral registers and academic ones differ, that there are appropriate places for each, and that language indexes what a society pays attention to. Knowing each of these things can give a student starting points for how to learn Spanish (or any other language), but that only works if the metalinguistic instruction is intentional. While this is useful for a student who may be mobile, it is also useful for geographically stable students who have to negotiate the coming and going of some peers and who live in an increasingly transnational world.

Schools are not usually organized to expect mobility, even though mobility (across town, across country, and/ or across national borders) is a factor in practically every school. While Maria de la Luz and Norberto's district mobility rate only barely exceeded the Nebraska average (of approximately 11% changing schools in a given year), the mobility rate at Maria de la Luz's school was more than one in six and at Norberto's almost one in four. Given those ratios, it behooves such schools to step outside the traditional paradigm of preparing students to come of age locally. Phrased more bluntly, if it is predictable that many students will move, then it is a school's responsibility to help that movement occur as successfully as possible.

Focusing on the week between learning about their pending dislocation and their departure, Maria de la Luz's school did several things right. It was flexible in terms of when it met with Maria de la Luz's mother, whose life was clearly more upended by what was transpiring than were teachers and staff, allowing her to juggle getting information from both of her children's schools while attending to myriad other details. It indicated that the school cared what happened to Maria de la Luz and her family after their departure. It recognized the ambiguity entailed by starting a new life in Mexico after more than a decade away and emphasized a willingness to continue being "reachable" from afar. This proved valuable when the mother met resistance to enrolling Maria de la Luz and Norberto in Mexican schools and could appeal back to the counselor for support. It gave Maria de la Luz some space to consider and strategize about her pending changes. While the chance to meet grandparents

she knew only by telephone and WhatsApp did not undo the shock of what she was negotiating, it did put something favorable on the ledger with all of the more challenging and difficult parts of uprooting. The act of naming her concerns—like how she would sustain her English—may have also contributed to her developing intentionality and plans to problem-solve once she got to Mexico.

In summary, schools like those attended by Maria de la Luz and Norberto in Nebraska need to think about and plan for how to help children negotiate both *here* and *somewhere else*, attending to the likely patterns regarding where students can be dislocated to and under what circumstances. Understanding and working to educate children beyond borders will allow for a system that thinks and acts critically to address the needs of a changing global population through attending to individual student stories, understanding and preparing for patterns of migration common to their communities, and forming partnerships that allow for the broader support of students' futures. Moreover, if we know that children who feel safe and welcomed are better positioned to focus on academics than those who are scared and stressed (Erickson, 1987), then we can see how helping Maria de la Luz and Norberto appraise a situation, make new friends, and develop a reputation with teachers as respectful could support their transition. These are skills worth helping students develop anyway, but they become more salient and pressing for students who are or could be mobile.

Teaching activities

1. Retrace the steps taken by Maria's school. Create a visual flow chart for actions taken to support both the student and the family as they navigated the transition. What was done before they moved, what was done after?
2. Discuss how schools can anticipate and position students for success in their mobile and global geographies. In what ways can schools in the U.S. help a student continue to be successful if/when that student moves to Mexico? Are there other countries that students might move to?
 - a. Who are the key actors in helping students negotiate both the here and somewhere else of their possible biographies?

- b. What are the essential tasks of the key actors in both the short term and the long term in supporting students that are (or are potentially) mobile?
 - c. What are pathways to continued and uncomplicated communication with families after they have transitioned somewhere else?
3. How can schools in the U.S. support the maintenance of students' heritage languages (e.g., Spanish) and other resources (e.g., pride in family and culture) that can be useful in the event of a move and/ or for communication with international family members?
 4. This chapter recommends explicit attention to metalinguistics. How can metalinguistic awareness be incorporated in student learning inside the classroom throughout the school day? How is metalinguistic awareness beneficial to the learning of any student (mobile or not)? How might it specifically help a student negotiating schooling in a new country that uses a different primary language? (See Chapter 5 on translanguaging for some ideas.)

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Resources

Organizations — Repositories of research and policies

- Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services: <http://www.brycs.org/>
- Center for Applied Linguistics: <http://www.cal.org/>
- Color in Colorado (a bilingual website for educators and families of ELs, supported by Washington, DC’s PBS affiliate):
- New Immigrant Communities in the Heartland: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/new-immigrant-communities-heartland-interview-dr-ted-hamann>
 - How to Support Immigrant Students and Families: Strategies for Schools and Early Childhood Programs: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide#topics>
- Cultural Orientation Resource Center: <http://www.culturalorientation.net/library/publications>
- Great Lakes Equity Center: <https://greatlakesequity.org/>

- Teacher Perspectives on Equitable Education for Immigrant Students: <https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/teacher-perspectives-equitable-education-immigrant-students>
 - U.S. Teachers' Responsibilities Given That Some of Their Students Will Later Go to School in Mexico: <https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/students-we-share-us-teachers-responsibilities-given-some-their-students-will-later-go>
- Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education: <http://ige.gseis.ucla.edu/>

Migration Policy Institute. Analysis of Unauthorized Immigrants in the U.S. by Country and Region of Birth: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/analysis-unauthorized-immigrants-united-states-country-and-region-birth>

National School Boards Association. Legal Guide to Serving Undocumented Students in Public Schools: <https://www.nsba.org/lifting-lamp-beside-schoolhouse-door-legal-guide-serving-undocumented-students-public-schools>

U.S. Department of Education. Schools' Civil Rights Obligations to English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ellresources.html>

U.S. Department of Justice, fact sheets:

- <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2014/05/08/plylerfact.pdf>
- <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/crt/legacy/2014/05/08/plylerletter.pdf>

Illustrations — Resources for learning and lessons

Student-Driven Research, by Makeba Jones and Susan Yonezawa: http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/dec08/vol66/num04/Student-Driven_Research.aspx

Youth-Led Participatory Action Research, website that curates student research and offers lesson plans: <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu>

Being a Young Translator, video by kids: <https://youtu.be/OvljhyuM4Us>

Child Language Brokering: <https://languagebrokeringidentities.com/>

Child Language Brokering in School: <http://child-language-brokering.weebly.com/>

Translation as a Generative Construct for Lesson Ideas: <https://exchange.gseis.ucla.edu/xchange/repertoires-of-linguistic-practice/suppliment-to-lesson-plan>

Civic Online Reasoning (Stanford History Education Group) <https://sheg.stanford.edu/civic-online-reasoning>

Translanguaging guides and videos: www.cuny-nysieb.org



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