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Transnational Students' Perspectives on Schooling in the United States and Mexico: The Salience of School Experience and Country of Birth

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Transnational Students' Perspectives on Schooling in the United States and Mexico: The Salience of School Experience and Country of Birth

Edmund T. Hamann, Víctor Zúñiga, and Juan Sánchez García

Introduction

As schooling becomes an increasingly common institutional presence across the world and as decided majorities of children now attend at least some version of primary school, it is hardly surprising that childhood gets increasingly constructed as a time of dependence, need, and preparation. As this volume's introduction notes, vulnerability is a common fourth thread of this predominant conceptualization of children. Yet, as the introduction also hints, these conceptualizations suffer in at least two ways: whether optimistic or pessimistic, they tend to homogenize a broad and heterogeneous portion of the lifespan and they direct us away from attention to children's agency. Instead, adult attention focuses on what children need, what should be done *to* them or *for* them, but much less common is the consideration of children's views of the world they are traversing and their actions and intentions in that traversing.

Here we echo our fellow contributors by questioning the homogenizing lens through which children, notably internationally mobile children, tend to be conceptualized. And we offer additions to the larger project of including migrant children's perspectives on the social and institutional realities that they negotiate. We do so by considering the specific topic of encounters with schooling and the specific cases of 632 largely invisible children whom we found through visiting 1673 classrooms in *primarias* (grade 1-6 schools) and *secundarias* (grade 7-9 schools) in the Mexican states of Nuevo León and Zacatecas. Five hundred and twelve of these students had attended school in both the United States and Mexico, while

another 120 were US-born, although they had never attended school in the United States.

These students are "largely invisible" because both US and Mexican education and other government policies have conceptualized international migration between the two countries as largely from Mexico and to the United States. Per this logic, they were not supposed to be where we found them. Yet, this invisibility was likely a factor in some of these students' exercise of agency. For example, because of their Mexican school's limited acknowledgment of US-developed English language skills and/or limited willingness to build on students' interest in this subject,¹ several transnational students improvised ways to maintain their English skills (e.g., regularly practicing with an aunt who had also spent time in the United States).

Before focusing on these children's perspectives, it is important to quickly trace the intentions of schooling in both the United States and Mexico to illustrate the mismatch between these intentions and the perspectives of the children we studied. That mismatch creates the contexts in which these students negotiated their sense of identity, national affiliation(s), educational aspiration, as well as their sense of agency and efficacy as a student. It is these negotiations that put these migrant children at various crossroads. At those crossroads they exercise agency, subject to the expectations, awareness, and physical parameters that shape what these crossroads consist of (Brettell and Hollifield, 2000). To put this more plainly, children decide if they identify as Mexican, American, or both; they decide if they hope to continue their studies at the *preparatoria* (high school), *universidad* (university), and so on; they decide if they view themselves as capable students or not, but they do all of these subject to influence of a powerful list of other people and institutions.

In earlier work on this dataset (Hamann et al., 2006, 2008; Sánchez García, 2007; Zúñiga and Hamann, 2006, 2008, 2009; Zúñiga et al., 2009), we determined that estimates that 2 percent of children enrolled in Mexican elementary and middle schools have prior experience in US schools and that at least 1 percent are US citizens (by place of birth) are both plausible. It is important to remember that thousands of children are negotiating these crossroads.

Schooling and Transnational Links between the United States and Mexico

Since the Mexican Revolution in the second decade of the twentieth century, Mexico has used schooling to reinvent itself to build a patriotic

loyalty to country, and thereby to frame inculcating national identity as part of the task of preparing youth for adulthood (Booth, 1941; Dawson, 2004; Dewey, 1964 [1926]). These efforts have been so successful that they extend beyond national borders. Scholars refer to a “Greater Mexico” (see Limón, 1998) and politicians to “*comunidades en el extranjero*” (communities outside of the geographic boundaries of the nation-state) where loyalties to Mexico and self-identity as “Mexican” linger. Yet, just as Mexico has been rapidly transformed through schooling, the United States has built a substantial “receiving” infrastructure in its schools—with newcomer centers, English as a second language (ESL) programs, and other special efforts enrolling millions of students—that have the larger intent of fitting newcomers into American society. These Mexican and US school infrastructures coexist, on opposite sides of the border, as economic and demographic dynamics continue to push and pull people (as well as materials and communications) across that arbitrary but consequential divide.

The Pew Hispanic Center (2008) recently estimated that there were more than 28 million Hispanics of Mexican origin living in the United States in 2006; 40 percent of these had been born in Mexico. That same report noted that 28.7 percent of the United States’ Hispanic population was of age 14 or younger (compared to 17.4 percent of the non-Hispanic white population). An updated and slightly differently focused Pew Hispanic Center (2009) press release estimated that 12.7 million Mexico-born persons lived in the United States in 2008, constituting 32 percent of the United States’ total foreign-born population. Seven million of that 12.7 million were unauthorized (undocumented). Passel (2006) estimated that, in 2005, 56 percent of the unauthorized population in the United States was from Mexico. He went on to note that there were 1.8 million undocumented Mexican minors in the United States and an additional 3.1 million authorized Mexican children living with unauthorized parents. The Migration Policy Institute (Dixon et al., 2006) reported that the 2000 estimate for US-born living in Mexico was 358,614, nearly double the 1990 population and four times the 1970 tally. They noted that newer data of this type is not available (and that the US Census Bureau does not collect it, nor does the US State Department, although it used to). However, if the trajectory between 1970 and 2000 has held, even a conservative projection of contemporary (2009) numbers suggests the number of US citizens living in Mexico exceeds 400,000.

These statistics quantitatively denote how large the population is with links to both countries. More specifically, they help illustrate the size of the pools from which come the children in Mexican schools who have US school experience. In the case of the unauthorized populations statistics,

the numbers illustrate the size of at least one segment of the Mexican origin population in the United States that might be disposed (or required) to return to Mexico (although the returning population pool also includes many with legal status in the United States). Our point is not that the students we met in Mexico had been undocumented while in the United States, nor that their parents had been (likely some were and some were not). Rather we want to remind readers that there are various contexts that compel transnationally mobile children to be mobile and that shape the circumstances in which they exercise their agency.

What these numbers undergird but do not themselves show is that there are students in Mexican schools for whom Mexican schools' logic of building loyalty to Mexico competes with other biographic experience intended to build loyalty to a different nation-state (to the United States). Additionally, there are children in Mexican schools who can anticipate that they may spend some or much of their adulthood in the United States. Our focus is on how they comprehend and negotiate this tension. In earlier work examining most of the subset of students who reported transnational school experience, we found that only 59 percent of these students identified as Mexican (although all were attending Mexican schools), while 6 percent identified as American, and 35 percent as Mexican-American (Zúñiga and Hamann, 2008). Here we look at variation in different student population's educational aspirations, academic self-identities, and views of US schools versus Mexican ones. Each of these relate to students' senses of self, opportunity, and belonging.

Tables 1–5 illuminate how groups of transnational students in Mexican schools understand themselves, their prospects as students, and their affinity with or difference from peers who have biographically different school backgrounds. Table 6 broaches questions about whether these students show evidence of academic vulnerability. In raising the prospect of vulnerability, we do not want to reinforce the paradigm of nonagentive children that so much of this volume is intended to challenge. However, it remains the case that if schools mark transnational students as less likely to succeed academically and/or if they are less responsive to students with transnational backgrounds, then the agency demonstrated by these children will encompass their negotiation of such dynamics.

Comparing four populations found in Mexican schools—(1) students with US school experience who were born in Mexico, (2) students with US school experience who were born in the United States, (3) students without US school experience who were born in Mexico, and (4) students without US school experience but who were born in the United States—

Table 1. School aspirations (level you would like to study to)

	Through Grade 6	Through Grade 9	High School	Vocational Training	University	Total
Mexico-born transnational school experience	7 (3%)	17 (9%)	26 (13%)	39 (20%)	108 (55%)	197
US-born transnational school experience	2 (3%)	9 (11%)	7 (9%)	10 (12%)	52 (65%)	80
Mexico-born Mexico-only school experience	121 (1%)	779 (8%)	1518 (15%)	1994 (20%)	5734 (56%)	10,146
US-born Mexico-only school experience	1 (1%)	7 (8%)	11 (12%)	10 (11%)	59 (68%)	88

Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–2005. *N* = 10,511

Table 2. Self-described quality of school marks

	Poor	Average	Good	Excellent	Total
Mexico-born transnational school experience	14 (8%)	97 (48%)	79 (39%)	11 (5%)	201
US-born transnational school experience	1 (1%)	45 (56%)	25 (31%)	10 (12%)	81
Mexico-born Mexico-only school experience	438 (4%)	5340 (51%)	3699 (37%)	862 (8%)	10,339
US-born Mexico-only school experience	6 (7%)	48 (54%)	29 (33%)	6 (6%)	89

Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–2005. *N* = 10,710

Table 3. How would you compare US schools to Mexican ones?

Student background	Worse than Mexican schools	Equal to Mexican schools	Better than Mexican schools	Total
Mexico-born transnational school experience	9 (13%)	17 (24%)	46 (64%)	72
US-born transnational school experience	1 (14%)	1 (14%)	5 (72%)	7
Mexico-born Mexico-only school experience	1049 (10%)	2534 (25%)	6657 (65%)	10,240
US-born Mexico-only school experience	5 (6%)	8 (9%)	72 (85%)	85

Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–2005. *N* = 10,404

Table 4. How are Mexican students treated in US schools?

Student background	Poorly	Equally	Well	Total
Mexico-born transnational school experience	21 (29%)	28 (39%)	23 (32%)	72
US-born transnational school experience	0	2 (29%)	5 (71%)	7
Mexico-born Mexico-only school experience	2742 (26%)	4722 (46%)	2782 (27%)	10,246
US-born Mexico-only school experience	13 (15%)	41 (48%)	32 (37%)	86

Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–2005. *N* = 10,411

allows us to consider how international school experience and the right to live and work in the United States as adults (by virtue of US citizenship conferred by US birthplace) affect US/Mexican transnational students' sense of academic potential, opportunity, and responsibility. Dif-

Table 5. How do your classmates with US school experience speak Spanish?

Student background	Poorly	Fine	Well	No answer/ I don't know such a student	Total
Mexico-born transnational school experience	5 (6%)	27 (31%)	35 (40%)	20 (23%)	87
US-born transnational school experience	2 (10%)	6 (30%)	2 (10%)	10 (50%)	20
Mexico-born Mexico-only school experience	469 (5%)	2533 (28%)	3318 (36%)	2757 (31%)	9077
US-born Mexico-only school experience	6 (7%)	21 (25%)	39 (47%)	16 (21%)	82

Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–2005. *N* = 9266

Table 6. Have you ever repeated a grade?

Student background	No	Yes	Total
Mexico-born transnational school experience	71 (67%)	35 (33%)	106
US-born transnational school experience	45 (74%)	16 (26%)	61
Mexico-born Mexico-only school experience	6927 (91%)	692 (9%)	7619
US-born Mexico-only school experience	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	3

Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey 2004–2005. *N* = 7789

ferentiating US-born students in Mexican schools from Mexican-born students in Mexican schools allows an imperfect window into the perceived salience of national citizenship. Because the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution declares any child born within US borders to be a US

citizen, all the US-born children in this study have legal status to be in the United States. Framed another way, these students can realistically imagine themselves as *of* the United States, although that does not mean all in this category actually do so. In contrast, for most of the Mexican-born students (whether they have US school experience or not), imagining themselves as *of* the United States would suggest a mismatch between sense of self and what was legally likely in their future as adults.²

Methodology

Data on the four populations come from surveys we conducted with funding from CONACYT (the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología), Mexico's national science foundation. We surveyed more than 24,000 students in 1673 randomly selected classrooms in 377 randomly selected Mexican schools in the states of Nuevo León and Zacatecas. The Nuevo León onsite surveying was conducted in the late autumn of 2004, and the Zacatecas data collection occurred in the autumn of 2005. While Nuevo León and Zacatecas may not be perfect proxies for Mexico as a whole (no two states are), they were selected because of how they contrast with each other and how they encompass dynamics relevant elsewhere in Mexico. Zacatecas is a typical example of a Mexican state with a long-standing high participation rate in international migration, and Nuevo León is a typical example of Mexican state with a long-standing but modest participation rate in international migration. Nuevo León has a lower participation rate in international migration than the Mexican average, while Zacatecas' average is higher. Nuevo León has a more urban population than the Mexican average, while Zacatecas' is more rural. Nuevo León is one of Mexico's wealthiest states, while Zacatecas is one of the poorer ones.

Excluding the 7000 students in our population who were in the first three grades of *primaria* and whose literacy skills were not sufficiently developed to complete a written survey,³ 17,637 students responded to multiple-choice and short-answer questions about their migration and school histories, their current experiences in Mexican schools, and their senses of how that schooling related to their future interests and possibilities. These survey takers would have spanned in age from 8 to 16. Of these 17,637 students, 437 identified that they had previous experience in US schools and of these 113 had been born in the United States. Another 120 students in this subsample (of 17,000) indicated that they had been born in the United States but had never attended school there. At the bottom of each table, we share which subset of our surveyed population the answers came from.⁴

We also make limited use below of interview data. We carried out interviews with 121 transnational students and with 25 of their teachers. Partially because of language limitations among interviewers, most of the interviews were carried out in Spanish (and are translated here), but several students code-switched mid-explanation and there were a few who only agreed to be interviewed if the interview could be carried out in English. The interviewees were a population of convenience; we interviewed transnational students when there was time and willing interviewees, but those recruited this way may not be representative of our whole population of interest. Nor do we have interviews of Mexican students without transnational experience, although they form the largest portion of our sample.

Student Perspectives

As we thought about what effects transnational school experience and US citizenship might have on educational aspirations of students enrolled in Mexican schools, we developed various hypotheses. According to one, because legal and social expectations in the United States place greater emphasis on more years of schooling than does Mexico (in Mexico mandatory schooling ends at the end of *secundaria*—the end of 9th grade—whereas not finishing high school—12th grade—is stigmatized in the United States), it seemed plausible that those with US school experience would have internalized the expectation that continued schooling is important and their aspirations would be higher.

In contrast, a second hypothesis suggests that if transnational mobility was a risk factor that inhibited educational success and/or that limited students' attachment to school, then perhaps transnational students would have converted existing struggles with school into a larger reduction in school aspirations. In other words, according to this scenario, transnational students would have more modest educational aspirations than Mexican students who had not migrated internationally.

A third hypothesis uses the theoretical model of primary and secondary sectors of the economy. According to that model (Piore, 1979; Spener, 1988), in the primary sector of the economy, school attainment is rewarded with higher remuneration and greater job stability. In the secondary sector, which includes mostly blue-collar and unskilled jobs, school attainment does not correlate with wage or job security, although an identifiable vocation is likely to be the category in which one seeks work. According to our third hypothesis, it seemed plausible that the

US-born (who all would have legal access to participate in the US economy) might have higher educational aspirations than those who were not US-born (and who, in many instances, would lack legal access to the US economy). In turn, the Mexico-born portion of the sample might be more inclined to seek vocational training per a rationale that the category of training rather than the net quantity and attainment of schooling was what was economically salient.

As Table 1 illustrates, those who were US-born were most likely to aspire to a university education (66 percent vs. 56 percent). This finding is consistent with our third hypothesis. In contrast, the lack of a difference in educational aspirations among the Mexican-born with and without US educational experience argues against there being a straightforward effect of transnationalism on educational aspirations, at least at the level of selecting between technical training and university experience. However, that a slightly higher portion of students with transnational school experience aspired to finish only *secundaria* or less (12 percent of the Mexican-born with transnational school experience and 14 percent of the US-born vs. only 9 percent in each of the two populations with only Mexican school experience) suggests that, among the more vulnerable end of the continuum, transnational school experience may be an exacerbating factor, lowering school expectations. So the second hypothesis may also have some explanatory merit, but not for all transnational students.

Comparing students with transnational experience to those without it suggests a favorable transnational effect on university aspirations (160 of 277 or 57.7 percent vs. 5793 of 10,234 or 56.6 percent). This is, however, misleading, as country of birth (reviewed in the previous paragraph) seems a likelier explanation of the difference than does transnational school experience. Still, the first hypothesis might have explanatory power in one dimension: those with transnational experience seemed less likely to see finishing *preparatoria* (i.e., high school) as an end goal for their schooling. In the United States, a high school diploma does not educationally distinguish people from most of their peers, whereas in Mexico it does. Perhaps the two populations with transnational school experience may agree on being less likely to view high school as a terminal degree, even as they bifurcate on their aspirations. If so, then one portion of this population might determine that just finishing *preparatoria* does not count for much, so those who cannot see going farther than that are slightly more likely to accept not even going that far. Yet a second portion of the transnationally experienced could share a concern about the limitation of just finishing *preparatoria* but then determine to aspire to vo-

cational or university preparation. An interview recorded in rural Nuevo León with a student, José, born in the United States, illustrates some of the reasoning that informed how at least this student was shaping his educational aspirations. For José, “here” refers to here in Mexico, not specifically the rural community where we encountered him:

Interviewer: Considering your future, what do you think you’re going to be when you’ve grown? What does the future hold for you?

José: Well, study high school I imagine... I want to study business management.

Interviewer: And you’re going to study in the United States?

José: No, here in Monterrey.

Interviewer: You want to go to Monterrey? And, for example, your peers, how do they seem? Will everyone have the same opportunities or will some struggle?

José: Well, we need to be realistic. “Yes” I feel that the majority will struggle.

Interviewer: Possibly not going further than *secundaria*? And then what will they work on here?

José: Well, in the stores or on the farms. Not many will go on to *prepa*.

Self-Perceptions about School Success

We also compared our four subpopulations’ self-characterizations of their school success. Claims about how one is faring in school are an imperfect proxy for actual grades and achievements. Moreover, if the effects of country of birth or transnational experience relate to self-assessment rather than objective performance, then Table 2 is misleading as a proxy for performance. Still, given that our focus is on how migration and legal status affect the way a child sees the world, if there are relationships between these factors and perceived school success then comparing groups on this dimension may provide insight into how students with transnational experiences understand their identities as students.

Here again we developed multiple hypotheses. Perhaps moving between school systems in two countries would be disruptive with a negative effect on grades and perceptions about grades. Alternatively, the US educational system’s greater emphasis on self-esteem could make it likelier for students to be more optimistic about their achievement even if it was comparable to or even worse than that of their nontransnational peers. This second hypothesis is informed by other survey re-

sponses in which transnational students were more likely to describe US schools as fun and US teachers as caring than they were to apply either of these characterizations to their Mexican experiences (Zúñiga and Hamann, 2009). Per a third hypothesis, students whose sense of being Mexican might be less secure because of their US citizenship and/or self-identification as American or Mexican-American might fare less well in Mexican schools because of a relative mismatch between their sense of self and the identity that Mexican schools seem most apt to confirm. By a fourth conjecture, for some students, experience in two systems might offer a particular cognitive and academic advantage. That is, just as transnationalism might leave some students *between* two cultures, feeling marginal in both the United States and Mexico, for others it might be a vehicle for becoming *of* two cultures. When faced with academic tasks, such students might be advantaged (and thereby more successful) in that they have two repertoires from which to draw as they attempt to solve academic tasks. Maybe transnational experience would create more bifurcation, or fatter ends to the bell curve, than one would expect in a normal distribution.

There were three intriguing variations in responses to this question, but none align in a straightforward fashion with our hypotheses. First, bundling "good" and "excellent" responses together and "poor" and "average" together, US-born students who had only Mexican school experience seemed the least likely to report educational success. Thirty-nine percent identified as successful, as compared to 44 percent of the Mexican-born with transnational experience, 43 percent of the US-born with transnational experience, and 45 percent of the Mexican-born without transnational experience. Perhaps these US-born but never schooled in the US students were least likely to feel a link between their Mexican schooling and their anticipated adult life experiences, with their perceptions of their grades thus more pessimistic than their peers'.

In contrast, US-born students with transnational school experience seemed most likely to consider their grades "excellent" and much less likely to report "bad." It is hard to explain this relative optimism, however, except perhaps by returning to Table 1 and noting that the US-born more commonly indicated an aspiration to go to college. Perhaps the link between school success and future opportunity was most obvious to this portion of our sample. Irrespective of specific explanations, it does seem clear that country of birth was not a good predictor for how students would respond to this question. Something about schooling *and* country of birth together seemed to matter. Still, if one compares middle responses (average or good) to extreme ones (poor and excellent), one sees

that no population was more or less prone to an extreme response (12-13 percent of all four groups' responses fit in an extreme category), even as they varied in terms of the optimism or pessimism of their academic achievement self-portrayals.

Comparing American Schools to Mexican ones

One consideration behind our whole study was concern with how schooling builds a sense of national pride and belonging and how transnational students negotiate the discordant messages of two countries' school systems telling them to be loyal and proud (Rippberger and Staudt, 2003). While our data do not support a comparison of national pride building (because there is no US-born, American, mononational student population to compare the Mexican mononational population to), Table 3 shows patterns in how those with comparative experience responded versus how those without such experience responded. Those patterns seemed to be further affected by the students' country of birth and related right to citizenship.

The 79 students who had comparative school experiences had weaker impressions of US schools than those who did not have such experiences. That said, it was only 10 out of 79 who thought US schools were weaker. Direct experience with US schools appears to have had a negative impact for some on the sense of their quality. Those with direct experience were not more likely to find US schools better than Mexican ones—the group most convinced of that was the US-born without US school experience. There did seem to be a birthplace pattern to favoring American schools over Mexican ones, with the US-born with transnational school experience more likely to favor US schools than Mexican-born students with transnational school experience, and, as noted, with the US-born without transnational school experience more likely to favor American schools than were Mexican students with just mononational school experience.

The US-born without direct experience in US schools was most likely of the four groups to favor US schools. Perhaps for them idealized images of the United States were easiest to conjure because they lacked direct experience to contradict them. They were also not ultimately circumstantially blocked from US opportunities, nor were they as prone to worry about possible disloyalty to their country of birth, as their Mexican-born peers might occasionally have been. The US-born but only Mexico-schooled population also seemed least willing to believe that US schools could be worse than Mexican ones. Perhaps this reflected some

sense of displacement in Mexican schools, a conceptualization that Mexican schools were not quite for students like them. (Data in Table 4 in the next segment also support this interpretation.)

The students who were most skeptical of US schools were those with direct experience there, but who lacked a US birthright to guarantee access to future US economic opportunities supported by US school experiences (i.e., Mexican-born transnational students). But it is striking to also note that those who were US-born and had US school experience were less likely than their US-born but no US school experience peers to believe US schools were better. US schools' reputation then might be slightly ahead of their actual quality, or the experience of being identified as Mexican or Latino in US schools (despite US birthplace) might have negatively colored how some US-born with transnational school experience students thought of their US schools.

That said, a majority of all four populations thought US schools were better than Mexican ones. This point has intriguing implications for Mexican schools as it suggests that the majority of their students think schooling somewhere else is better. Yet it is also striking to note that a much higher portion of Mexican-born students (both with and without US school experience) resisted categorizing one system or the other as stronger. As will be further noted in the next segment, Levinson (2001) has noted that Mexican students in his studies have internalized a defiant belief in equality (defiant because this belief seems to be particular to the *secundaria* age-level of the students he studied, and belied by the actual social class differences among students). Perhaps we are capturing and measuring some of that same trait here. Mexican-born students were most devoted to asserting that school quality in both countries was equal. Such a stance avoids characterizations of disloyalty or self-deprecation on the one hand, as well as charges of nationalistic chauvinism on the other.

Given the variation illustrated in Table 3, no one student's responses will speak for all the perspectives within a typology, let alone across the four groups. Nonetheless, the following interview segment from a student in his last year of *secundaria* in a small city in Nuevo León does highlight some of the dynamics that informed why students offered the responses that they did to these questions.

Interviewer: How are teachers over there [in the US]? And how are the teachers here?

José Guadalupe: They are very, that is to say, they are not [pause] ... There are truly all kinds of course. I feel that there are many that don't, that is to say, their opinion is the right one. They don't allow us to say. They don't take us into account.

Interviewer: Where are they like this?

José Guadalupe: Here [in Mexico].

Interviewer: Here and there?

José Guadalupe: There, no. Even when there is a dumb or stupid idea, they have to listen, to heed, there in the United States.

Interviewer: And, what about the norms of the schools, the rules that one has to follow and all that, how are they? Where is it stricter? Where is it more flexible? Here or there?

José Guadalupe: Here [in Mexico] they are stricter.

Interviewer: That is how it appears? Why?

José Guadalupe: Because [pause], I feel that [pause], like the school uniform, here if you don't bring your uniform, they make you, I don't know, they make a report about you, or something like that. There in the United States, if you don't bring a uniform, there they give you one. They lend it to you there at school if you didn't wear one, whatever the reason.

Interviewer: And what about discipline? Where do they ask for more compliance? Here or there?

José Guadalupe: Here.

Interviewer: They make you comply more here? Why?

José Guadalupe: Well, like with the teachers, you can't answer back to them, even if you do so politely. If something bothers you, here you can't say what that is. There you can. Here they see it as a lack of respect.

Student Perspectives on Mexican Students in the United States

We also asked a more pointed question about US schools, asking students to comment upon how they thought Mexican students were treated in US schools. As Table 4 illustrates, almost 27 percent of all respondents (2776 of 10,411) suggested that they felt Mexican students were not treated as well. (Phrased a different way, nearly three-quarters felt there was no problem.) More than a quarter of those who were Mexico-born made this allegation (with little difference between those with and those without US school experience). The US-born were not as willing to make this judgment, however. Only 14 percent (13 of 93) and none who had transnational experience were willing to claim that Mexican students were treated poorly in US schools. Almost 40 percent of the US-born were willing to claim that US schools treated Mexican students well, a percentage that was substantially higher than either of the

Mexico-born populations were willing to assert. Indeed, as with Table 3, the US-born seem to have a clearly more favorable take on how US schools operate.

We can only conjecture about why the Mexican-born would be more skeptical of how Mexican students are treated in US schools than would their US-born counterparts (many of whom identify as "Mexican"). Perhaps it reflects skepticism on the part of those without an official purchase in the United States about what kind of response they and compatriots would receive from a US institution (i.e., schools). Juxtaposed with data from Table 3 that showed that a majority of the Mexico-born thought US schools were better than Mexican ones, this sets up the rather poignant point: Many of the Mexico-born think there's something better somewhere else where they are not sure they are welcome.

Evaluating the Spanish of Transnational Students

Through 25 interviews with transnational teachers as well as formal interaction with school administrators in each site, we were able to ascertain that many Mexican educators had little awareness of the presence of transnational students and thus few overt stereotypes regarding what such students were like, although we did find a few educators who assured us that transnational students were weaker academically than native Mexican students and that their Spanish was not as good (Hamann et al., 2008). Our investigation into peers' impressions of classmates with transnational experience was more systematic. In particular, we checked whether peers felt there were any limitations in their classmates' Spanish skills.

The most striking point in this inquiry was that nearly a third of survey takers did not answer the question or claimed to not know any students with transnational experience, although their reluctance may have reflected an aversion to characterizing their peers. Similarly, among those who did respond, it is important to recognize that most peers did not categorically claim that transnational students' Spanish skills were weaker (10 percent or less in all four subpopulations), with the Mexico-born mononationals the least willing to offer a negative characterization. These were the impressions even though, based on our interviews, it was true that at least a few transnational students did have weaker Spanish skills and weaker Spanish was often offered as a rationale for having a transnational student repeat in Mexico the grade level that they had last completed in the United States.

Given a chance to stereotype their transnational classmates, few were willing to do so. Levinson (2001), among others, has documented the solidarity that Mexican students often feel toward each other; perhaps this was a display of that impulse. That more of the US-born without transnational school experience were willing to insist that peers with US school experience spoke Spanish well (more than any other category) is interesting, but we do not have a good hypothesis to explain this. Perhaps some autobiographical impulse to insist that those with US experience be included is in play.

The range of answers summarized in Table 11.5 highlights that students in each of the four populations varied in terms of how they thought of their transnational peers' Spanish abilities. Given that, the comments of Yamilet, a *secundaria* student we found in a rural high migration participation part of Nuevo León, are not typical of any group's viewpoint, per se. They do, however, offer some sense of how language can figure in a transnational student's negotiation of social networks and mobility.

Interviewer: Do you have friends there [in the US]?

Yamilet: Yes. Yes I do.

Interviewer: And here?

Yamilet: Here too. They are the same, although they speak differently.

There they speak in Spanish and English and here only Spanish.

Interviewer: Your companions over there, your friends over there, do they also speak Spanish?

Yamilet: Some... There maybe only two don't know Spanish.

Interviewer: Of all your peers at school or of your friends over there?

Yamilet: My friends.

Interviewer: Are they friends from school?

Yamilet: There in Washington? Yes.

Interviewer: And everybody in the group you're part of, how many are in that group?

Yamilet: Maybe thirty.

Interviewer: And of all of them, only two don't speak Spanish?

Yamilet: Of the ones I'm connected with?

Interviewer: Of your friends there, they can be from school or your neighborhood there, of those only two don't speak Spanish?

Yamilet: Yes

Interviewer: And when you are there, do you speak in Spanish or in English?

Yamilet: We speak more in English...

Interviewer: And over here?

Yamilet: Here, well more in Spanish and, at times, in English. Sometimes we don't want to speak in Spanish, I mean English, because it is better not to have classmates think we're saying something bad about them, even though we aren't.

Grade-level retentions

The tables discussed so far have juxtaposed opinions and impressions. This final table differs from the previous ones in that it asks a yes/no question about a specific experience, querying whether students have ever repeated a grade. Early in our study we discovered that having students repeat a grade in Mexico was one Mexican school strategy to deal with students who, because of their US experience, were behind in Spanish skills. Although Table 6 does not emphasize this specific point, we found among transnational students who had repeated a year that it was much more common that the repeated year had happened in Mexico (Zuniga and Hamann, 2009). This may well be because, unlike US schools with ESL and other strategies meant to meet the needs of newcomers, Mexican schools lacked other strategies for responding to limited Spanish proficiency and other particularities of students with substantial US school experience. Table 6, which includes only data from Zacatecas (interview data from Nuevo Leon led us to look at this systematically in Zacatecas), shows that transnational students were much more likely to have repeated a grade than Mexican-born students with a mononational experience in Mexican schools.

Although intended as a remedial or "catch-up" strategy, in the United States repeating a grade is associated with higher levels of school failure (Alexander et al., 1994; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard and Smith, 1989). Given the point-in-time nature of our sample, it is hard to know whether the transnational "repeaters" in our sample were any likelier to perform less well long term at school than the transnational students who never repeated. (Perhaps a next step is to correlate repeaters with self-reported grades to see if that yields any patterns.) If repeaters were more likely to struggle with school, then the discrepancy in "repeating" rates between those who were transnational and those who were not may hint at transnational students confronting academic challenges that mononational students do not. On a related point, if repeating points to vulnerability or hazard, then the 28 percent repeat rate among those who were US-born should be of concern to US educators and policymakers, as it suggests school struggles among a population that has a right to work and live in the United States in adulthood.

This final focus on grade-level repetition varies from our previous five tables in that it focuses on what is done to students rather than by them. However, we bring it up here as a reminder that transnational students' exercise of agency often occurs in reaction to broad parameters that they do not control.

Conclusion

As revealed by the data analyzed in this chapter, there are differences between three transnational populations—US-born and Mexican-born students with transnational school experience and US-born students with only Mexican school experience and the Mexico-born, mononational majority. The data concurrently affirm the variation of experiences and worldviews of those with migration experience and the salience of the subcategories we divided them into. Yet these experiential categories are hardly determinative. Migrant children (children with migration experience) in Mexico are at crossroads, but subgroup by subgroup and within the various subgroups just what those crossroads look like and (continuing the metaphor) where the various pathways lead are variable. There are hints that those with transnational school experience might be more likely to struggle academically (based on grade retentions), yet they are also more likely to claim that their grades are strong (at least the US-born among them). There is evidence that the US-born are more likely to aspire to a university education, though how salient this aspiration is for these students' subsequent negotiation of school, how well Mexican teachers do or do not respond to it, and what its implications are for these students' adulthoods in the United States and/or Mexico are all open questions.

What seems most important to highlight is that the transnational students we surveyed and interviewed were human beings, albeit at the younger end of the spectrum. As such, they made sense of what they encountered, they absorbed and pursued ideas of what they should be and what they should do, and, more generally, they negotiated complex realities. They had opinions about how long and to what level they should continue their schooling. They varied in their sense of how successful they were as students. They varied in their opinions about which country's school system was stronger, with many asserting that the US system was stronger, although none were enrolled in that system at the time we surveyed them. The survey respondents also varied in terms of their opinions of transnational classmates' skills with Spanish, while an interview highlighted a sociolinguistic sophistication regarding how choice of

one language versus the other might include or exclude those who were present. Finally, transnational students varied in terms of their academic trajectories, not just geographically as our emphasis on more than one nation has kept reiterating, but also chronologically, with some repeating grade levels while others are not asked to.

There are multiple policy implications of this larger research project, ranging from teacher preparation implications (like adapting the *asignatura regional* that is part of Mexico teacher preparation so as to highlight the very existence of students with transnational academic biographies) to rationales for binational educational collaboration, but the policy emphasis of this chapter and this volume is not intended to be so pointed and specific. Rather this chapter and the larger volume are most relevant to policy in their overarching insistence that internationally mobile children think, communicate, interpret, and act. They are agentive. That means that as crucial as the question is to consider what schooling for US/Mexico transnational should look like, it is an intrinsically incomplete question. Policymakers, educators, and other adults all can pose these questions, but it is still students, like Andrea, quoted below, who will pay greater or lesser attention in class, who will decide what parts of what happens there is relevant to what they want and need, and where they expect to be. Andrea was not the most articulate student we interviewed, nor the most ambitious; nor was her story the most heartening or harrowing. And that's ultimately the point. Andrea and girls like her are (or were) in Mexican classrooms and they participated in determining how or how much that particular fact mattered.

Interviewer: And what do you think your future will be like?

Andrea: (Pause), that I will return [to the US]. Here in Mexico I will come to visit a lot, that's for sure. I will finish my studies and then I will visit often to see my friends and all that. Beyond that, I don't know. I'll have a career and see where that takes me.

Interviewer: Have you thought about what career you might want?

Andrea: Ummh.

Interviewer: To what level would you like to study?

Andrea: Until the end.

Interviewer: Until the end.

Andrea: Yes.

Interviewer: Is there a career that you like?

Andrea: Many, many.

Interviewer: There are a lot that you like?

Andrea: Hair stylist, clothes designer, early childhood educator, singer. [Laughs]

Interviewer: Oh that is good. And you see yourself more in the US than here?

Andrea: Yes

Interviewer: Why “yes”?

Andrea: Because I will return to live over there. I don't know what part, probably [a different place than before], but we will see what comes. At most, we will stay here another year, two, three, or maybe four, but we will return to the US. We will return.

Andrea was not sure what her future would bring or what she wanted it to lead to, but she was clear that she expected the geographies to be plural. These points, of course, shape the cosmology that Andrea brings with her everyday at school. It is worth wondering to what extent Mexican schools (or US schools) are ready to meet her at this point.

Notes

1. We twice recorded English-as-a-foreign-language teachers in *secundaria* welcoming transnational students' assistance with pronunciations and other English learning tasks. These were the only overt instances we recorded of Mexican teachers adapting instruction because of an asset that transnational students brought to their classrooms.
2. Because birth to a US citizen parent and/or naturalization conferred through a parent's application for residency and citizenship are other ways to acquire legal status to be in the United States, some of the students born in Mexico who have US school experience and even some of the students born in Mexico who have no international experience may also be US citizens. Nonetheless, comparing birth-places works as a proxy indicator, allowing us to compare groups where all are US citizens to peers who mostly are not.
3. This group responded to a much briefer group oral survey that asked if any had ever studied before in the United States.
4. In the tables that follow there are some small deviations from the total numbers of identified students. These deviations have three sources: a few students left a few questions unanswered; more substantially, in the Nuevo León dataset we initially restricted the full-length questionnaires to only two grades (6th and 9th) instead of all six (4th through 9th); and third, there were questions we only asked to the Zacatecas sample.

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