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Linguistic Rights and the Realities of Transnational Students

Introduction

Schooling of children who live between multiple nation-states is a global phenomenon and transnational children who have experienced living in both the United States and Mexico will have a significant impact on the educational systems of the two nations. In this paper we will focus on linguistic rights of U.S. born children living in Mexico. We begin by describing how the United States has historically responded to the linguistic rights of language minorities. We will then explore the realities of four children. Their human and social capital will be examined and their cultural norms and adaptations as well as bilingual development will be discussed. By opening a small window through which the complexities of these children's lives can be seen we argue that economic policies are impacting children of returnees in powerful ways. We will discuss the educational and policy implications of our findings and will emphasize the need for providing teacher professional development opportunities that focus on respecting the linguistic rights of transnational students and steps needed to support children and their dual language development. The children presented in this paper are participants of a larger study that began in 2013 and is currently underway in Mexico and is jointly conducted by U.S. and Mexican researchers.

History of Linguistic Rights in the United States

Understanding past actions can better inform us about current practices. United States has had a troublesome history with supporting multilingualism and American schools have seldom supported the rights of children's to become proficient in their home languages. Today, little attention is paid to the linguistic rights of language minorities in the United States. Nevertheless, scholars continue to advocate for linguistic rights of language minorities, in particular their children. These rights include respect for native languages; opportunities to formally learn those languages; and for languages to have equal societal status (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Since the early 1900s, the Americanization of new immigrants has been a main objective of public schools in the United States (Tyack, 1974). A major component of this Americanization has been through the emphasis of English language usage. The early Americanization and civic education texts warned against forming ethnic ghettos, and directly and indirectly encouraged immigrants to learn English as soon as possible and abandon their native languages in order to assimilate.

A crucial socializing role of the schools was teaching and maintaining the allegiance of young immigrants to the majority group. Policies that enforced monolingualism have been at times challenged in courts. In 1974 the Supreme Court of the United States strongly noted that the civil rights of non-English speaking students were violated by public schools (Crawford, 1992). However, particular remedies that were implemented to respond to the Supreme Court mandates soon were under fire. Eventually, in 1998, California, a state with the largest number of children who spoke languages other than English, forcefully demanded the elimination of programs that used children's first languages for instructional purposes making bilingual education virtually illegal.

Multi-directionality of Migration

Yet, today multilingualism is still strong in many parts of the United States. The primary force that secures multilingualism is migration, the vast majority coming from Mexico. Today, 11.6 million Mexican nationals live in the U.S., accounting for nearly one-third of all who were born in another country (Terrazas, 2010). After English, Spanish is by far the most widely used language in the United States. However, migration between the U.S. and México is not unidirectional. Since 2005, 1.4 million Mexican nationals, who had lived in the United States for an extended period of time, have returned to Mexico (Cave, 2012). Deportation plays a major role in this reverse migration. During the last four years, an estimated 1.4 million Mexican nationals who had lived in the United States for an extended period of time have returned to Mexico (Passel et al., 2012).

In addition to deportation, other factors including economic exclusion, intolerance and discrimination, as well as family obligations have forced numerous families to return to Mexico. Significant numbers of children have been impacted by reverse migration. It is estimated that more than 300,000 U.S. born children of Mexican immigrants have moved to Mexico in recent years (Cave, 2012). These transnational students of Mexican descent are particularly important to American educators since it is predicted that many will eventually return to the United States. Children's social, linguistic, and academic responses to moving to Mexico might be heavily influenced by these and allied factors. Age of the children at the time of reverse-migration, their understanding of the reasons for the move to Mexico, the family's ties to Mexican culture while living in the U.S., the students' academic Spanish proficiency, socioeconomic status of the family, along a host of other factors impact how transnational children adapt to their current situation and will directly influence the extent to which they become bilingual and bicultural.

Methods

Very little is known about how transnational children use their range of sociocultural and linguistic resources to navigate their new environment. Better understanding of students' complex realities, and being more informed about their transnational experiences can help teachers in implementing pedagogical practices that respect their

linguistic rights and recognize these children's funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, Amanti, 2005).

This paper draws on data from a larger study of U.S. born children of returnees in central Mexico. Migration has had a profound social and economic impact on many communities in this state. We presented our study to several public elementary and Kindergarten schools. We explained that our current research would focus on how children use their linguistic resources and what they do to adapt to their new context. Although we are currently working in three sites, the emphasis of this paper is one Kindergarten school that serves 350 students whose age ranges from 4-6 years old. We contacted prospective families in this school and requested their participation. From those who agreed to participate a sub-group was selected based on the criteria that the children were born in the U.S. and had lived there for at least five years before they moved to Mexico. We focused on children's educational experiences in U.S. schools, reasons for moving to Mexico, and ways in which they are using their linguistic capital to adapt to life in Mexico.

Data sources

For this study, children were chosen through purposeful sampling in which information-rich cases were selected for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). We used phenomenological interviews, observations, and tutoring sessions in order to obtain in-depth, first person description of respondents' experiences (Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997). Over a period of three months we worked with four children of Mexican parents. A series of 32 semi-structured interviews and were conducted. We met with each child twice a week at school with sessions usually lasting about one hour. Interviews were conducted in the language that each child preferred. Other sources of data included children's drawing of their experiences in the United States and Mexico and journal entries of researchers that focused on what they learned from each child including their hobbies, description of similarities and differences between life in the U.S. and Mexico, and future goals. Spending extensive time interviewing these kindergarteners was essential to get to know the children and for them to get to know and trust us.

Informal assessments of children's listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency levels in English and Spanish were conducted at different stages of this research.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through an emergent process that involved reading of each interview notes and organizing themes into emerging categories. We attempted to identify both subtle and overt ways that children are using their linguistic resources to respond or adjust to their new environment. Student drawings and journal entries were also analyzed. We coded our data using the constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), clustering similar units under the theme of linguistic adaptation.

Results

We will describe the contexts for transnationalism of four kindergarten boys and the circumstances that lead their families to bring them to Mexico. We will illustrate their human and social capital and will examine their cultural norms and adaptations as well as bilingual development.

In the first case we explore how Miguel's father's decision to return to Mexico has impacted this boy's attitude toward school and how he is responding to stress. Miguel attends school in Mexico very infrequently and prefers to stay at home to watch movies in English. However, he speaks fondly of his bilingual school in the U.S. where teachers often read stories to children. At school Miguel does not have any friends. His best friend, and hero, is Paloma, his eleven years old half-sister, who is aware of the importance of supporting her brother's social and emotional development as well as maintaining his English language proficiency.

In the second case we present Angel, an energetic boy who has difficulties making friends and being accepted by his teachers. His family's circumstances for returning to Mexico are unclear but Angel explains that his mother teaches English in Mexico and his stepfather works at a bakery. Angel does not have any educational experiences in the U.S. and was taken care of at home by his grandmother. Angel's functional English is quite limited. Angel does not get much attention at home, in particular from his stepfather. He is brought to school by one of his parents but unlike most other parents, Angel's parents never come to the school entrance. Angel is quite aware of the street environment as he spends much time in the streets. Prior to attending the current school, Angel has been at two prior preschools in Mexico but was removed for various misconducts. Angel is now working with the school psychologist who describes him as aggressive and immature with the possibility of having Attention Deficit Disorder. Angel clearly indicates that he wants to return to the U.S. when he grows up. We will identify his adaptation strategies to his current situation.

In the third case we introduce Yandel who came to Mexico with his mother after his parents separated. At the tender age of five Yandel is fully aware of the composition of his immigrant family and among his future plans are to apply for proper documentation to enable his mother to emigrate to the U.S. He describes his preschool in the U.S. as a fun place where children played with a lot of toys and were provided with warm lunches. He notes that teachers in the U.S. did not yell at children. Yandel is clearly more comfortable in English but is gradually becoming proficient in Spanish. Language is a marker for his transnational experiences and his fluency in English, to some extent, has led to his social isolation in school.

In the last case we discuss Favio who has excellent rapport with his teachers and peers in his Mexican school. He is a happy child who speaks highly of his bilingual preschool in the U.S. His parents' human and social capital; particularly, immigration status and economic stability, have elevated his positive identity formation and enabled him to view his experiences in Mexico as opportunity rather than a shock. Favio's parents are involved in school and come to different school events. They expect him to do well at school and to be a role model for his three younger siblings. He is independent for his age and has a strong sense of identity as a Mexican. Favio is highly

proficient in Spanish but is slowly losing his English.

Significance

In concentrating on children's linguistic rights, we have attempted to draw attention to the need for nation states to transform their policies toward transnational communities. The changing patterns of immigration between Mexico and the United States have unprecedented implications for schools in both nations. Schools are important institutions for children of immigrants. Linguistic, intellectual, cultural, and historical contributions of transnational students must be celebrated. We call for more research that depicts the transaction between bilingual development and complexities of transnational experiences. Linguistic rights cannot be separated from civil rights, in particular economic rights. Transnational families need to secure sustainable livelihoods. Integrated economic development programs in Mexico and the U.S. are needed to reduce the vulnerability of economically marginalized transnational families. Furthermore, economic policies are directly linked to educational policies. Our findings point to the need for teacher professional development and family outreach efforts to discuss the unique experiences of transnational students who have schooling experiences in both Mexico and the U.S. Their dual perspectives and linguistic and sociocultural knowledge must be viewed as an important human capital that should be valued and further developed by teachers and parents alike. If teachers treat all children like Favio and connect students' prior knowledge, life experience and interests with learning goals, academic achievement becomes more accessible. Similarly, students like Miguel, Angel, and Yandel become much more motivated to come to school and participate if they see that their linguistic rights are respected and their transnational experiences and bilingual development are valued and celebrated at school.

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