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Transnational Children in Mexico: Context of Migration and Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Transnational migration increasingly impacts economically disadvantaged and culturally marginalized students. Over the last decade, an unprecedented number of Mexican nationals living in the United States have returned to Mexico. Their children may face cultural and linguistic barriers in their ancestral country. This group of students is particularly important to American educators since they may eventually return to the United States. This article reports on the results of a qualitative study of experiences of 12 U.S.-born children of Mexican nationals who are currently living in Mexico. Through a series of semistructured interviews and activities, we learned about the children’s varied experiences. Included are recommendations for greater collaboration between U.S. and Mexican educators.

Introduction

The changing patterns of migration between Mexico and the United States have unprecedented implications for schools in both nations. Since 2010, more than 500,000 U.S.-born children of Mexican immigrants moved to Mexico (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012). Young children ages 5–9 comprise almost one third of this population (Alba, 2013). Many of these children face cultural and linguistic barriers in their new country (Dreby, 2012). Their acculturation and adaptation needs to be studied by scholars on both sides of the border. This group of students is particularly important to educators since it is likely that many will eventually return to the United States (Cave, 2012).

The main reason for conducting this preliminary study was to convey children’s voices and experiences to educators who work with transnational students. This study is part of a larger binational collaboration between U.S. and Mexican universities. The purpose of the larger project is to explore various experiences of economically disadvantaged U.S.-born children in Mexico and their linguistic and cultural adaptations in their new communities and schools as children of returnees. We want to generate potential solutions to social challenges that economically marginalized transnational children face when they move to their parents’ country of origin. We began our study by learning about the experiences of children outside of school settings to better understand children’s realities and how they define their responses to their current circumstances.

Today, more than half of Mexico’s population lives in poverty and migration to the United States remains primarily motivated by economic need (Alba, 2013). Millions of manual and semiskilled workers are forced to move to the United States in search of better lives. Over the past three decades, the number of Mexican nationals migrating to the United States has increased substantially. In 1980, there were 2.2 million Mexican-born immigrants in the United States. In 2011, more than 11.7 million Mexican nationals lived in the United States, accounting for almost one third of all persons...
born in another country (Alba, 2013). However, migration is not unidirectional. Since 2005, 1.4 million Mexican nationals, who had lived in the United States for an extended period of time, returned to Mexico (Cave, 2012). Deportation plays a major role in this reverse migration. An unprecedented 800,000 people were removed from the United States between 2010 and 2011 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Their children’s lives are undoubtedly impacted by migration. Currently many transnational children experience separation from one or even both parents, have few social supports, and like the adults around them experience acculturative stress that may have serious mental health consequences such as depression (Cervantes, Fisher, Cordova, & Napper, 2011).

Transnational children’s long-term educational and employment opportunities are likely to have a considerable impact on both countries. Yet, educational researchers have not given sufficient attention to children’s experiences with migration (Dreby, 2010). With the exception of Zuñiga and Hamann (2006), transnational children’s experiences in Mexico have, to a large extent, been overlooked. In their large-scale, mixed-methods study, Zuñiga and Hamann surveyed 14,473 transnational students, Grades 1 through 9, attending 174 schools in the state of Nuevo Leon. The researchers also conducted 62 individual and group interviews. Perhaps their most dramatic finding was regarding older students’ clear intentions to return to the United States. When the researchers asked 6th through 9th grade students about the probability of attending U.S. schools again, the overwhelming majority (95%) responded affirmatively (56% noted it was likely and 38% expressed certainty regarding their plans to return to the United States). This finding reminds us that some students may have a sense of partial belonging and perhaps their schooling needs are vastly different from children whose residency is more permanent.

**Migration and schooling**

Children of Mexican nationals represent a significant population of K–12 students attending American schools. Approximately 6.3 million U.S.-born children under the age of 18 live in a household with at least one parent born in Mexico (U.S. Census, 2011). Numerous scholars including Valenzuela (1999), Garcia (2001), and Valdes (1998) have suggested that, historically, U.S. schools have not provided equitable educational opportunities for Mexican-American students. Similarly, others have focused on U.S. policies that have restricted schools in many states from providing native language instruction to predominantly Spanish-speaking children of Mexican descent, leading to loss of human potential and language and to students’ underperformance in English-only instructional settings (Waters, 2001).

Similar to Ruiz and Barajas (2012), and Sanchez-Garcia, Hamann, and Zuñiga (2012), we focus on transnationalism and call for more awareness of the realities of students who have schooling experiences in two or more countries. These researchers have noted that cultural, economic, and political factors, among others, impact communities that cross multiple national borders. Transnational communities face a multitude of challenges in both sending and receiving countries.

Teachers’ understanding of these challenges can help them in developing learning opportunities that cultivate students’ sense of social responsibility and justice while continually refining their cultural competence and capital (Ladson-Billings, 1992). We believe teachers can cultivate resiliency by assisting their transnational students in developing and accessing protective factors that enable them to successfully navigate two educational systems. Resilience is defined as a human capacity to withstand and overcome obstacles despite setbacks (Krovetz, 2008; Medoff, 2010).

Our intention here is to extend the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006) and educational resiliency to show that, in these combined approaches, teachers build on transnational students’ cultural knowledge and their multiple contexts to empower student learning while also fostering a school climate that ultimately reinforces the teachings of social justice and promotes educational resilience of students. Milner (2011) argues that teachers should work toward building cultural competency among students and should themselves acquire the cultural
knowledge of their students for the purpose of furthering understanding of social inequalities that influence schooling. Although Ladson-Billings, Gay, and Milner did not focus on children of immigrants or transnational students, their perspectives are highly relevant in our study.

Ladson-Billings (2006) described sociopolitical consciousness as ways in which teachers support students to combine what they have experienced in their communities and what they have learned at school to better understand and critique social and economic forces within the society and their role in bringing change for themselves and their communities. An equally important part of such instruction is to understand the forces, economic and political, that impact transnationalism. Often, knowledge of the geopolitical forces that create the need for immigration is lacking in teachers’ awareness. Yet, it is important to understand the multiple contexts in which students and families are intertwined as they struggle to sort out their new lives in one country while still maintaining allegiance to family and friends in another country.

Transnational families struggle with some or all of the following issues: finding employment and a safe place to live, formalizing their legal status in the new country, sending money to family in the home country, maintaining communication with loved ones in the home country, and establishing a support system. These are just a few of the important issues that transnational students may struggle with in class while the teacher is occupied with math or some other subject matter. It is no wonder, then, that some students give the appearance of being unmotivated to the teacher, when in fact they are weighed down with social or familial concerns for which answers cannot be found in the school curriculum.

How well immigrant students succeed in school cannot be fully understood without consideration of their social-emotional needs. Valenzuela (1999) and Valdes (1998) emphasized the influence of affective factors on learning. They argued that immigrant students (who are frequently also English language learners) must feel that their teachers care about them; teachers also must create “safe” learning environments for them where their classmates are willing to learn about and from them (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). A safe learning environment is one where the newcomer student who is struggling with English, for example, can feel comfortable in expressing her opinions without being judged for the adequacy of her English, but rather for the quality of her ideas.

Teachers can support students by recognizing some of the complex contexts that transnational students face while simultaneously learning about school culture. It is also important for teachers to understand that, in the complex geopolitical world in which we live, many immigrant students are in the United States because of American foreign policies that impacted the life of their parents, creating the need to immigrate. For example, the NAFTA treaty between Mexico and the United States, coupled with the economic recession that began in 2008, has created a massive displacement of Mexican agricultural workers who find that it is cheaper to purchase corn from the United States than to produce it themselves (Boucher, Smith, Taylor, & Yúnez-Naude, 2007). Thus, in a neoliberal globalized market, where do these displaced and unskilled agricultural workers go to find employment to feed their families? Many come to the United States and assist in growing the crops that feed Americans, but which are also exported to Mexico, continuing the spiral of economic displacement of people in Mexico and contributing to immigration to the United States.

In summary, learning from the varied experiences of U.S.-born children currently living in Mexico can better inform educators and educational researchers on what support systems can work for these students and what schools need to do to ensure that students can obtain quality education for successful lives on both sides of the border.

**Methods**

We were interested to learn about (a) parents’ reasons (voluntary or deported) for returning to Mexico, (b) children’s current experiences living in Mexico, and (c) children’s future plans (e.g., future careers, plans to return to the United States, etc.).
For this study, children and adolescents were chosen through purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). Research participants were recruited with the help of well-respected members of transnational communities. These individuals were particularly informed about varied circumstances of families who had returned from the United States to Mexico, had lived in the communities for a long time, and were trusted and respected by the transnational community. We presented the study to prospective participants and their families, and requested their participation. From 26 families who agreed to participate, a subgroup was selected based on criteria that the children were born and raised in the United States and were now living in Mexico. We also used referral sampling, in which we asked parents of participants to nominate other families who met the eligibility criteria of our study. Three additional families were added to the list of eligible participants. Because in-depth interactions with transnational students were necessary, we randomly selected a subgroup of students to participate.

We used phenomenological interviews to obtain in-depth, first-person descriptions of respondents’ experiences (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). Spending extensive time interviewing children was essential to get to know them and for them to get to know and trust us. A central task for interpretive, participant-observational research is to enable researchers and practitioners to become much more specific in their understanding of the inherent variation from one population to another. Developing trust and rapport with respondents was essential in gaining valid insights into children’s points of view regarding their transnational experiences.

Participants

Twelve (12) U.S.-born children (5 girls and 7 boys) of Mexican parents who had lived in Mexico for more than 1 year participated in this study. Their ages range from 5 to 15 years (average = 9.5). Some had lived in Mexico for five years and others arrived as recently as last year. On average, this group of respondents had moved to Mexico a little more than two years ago. Five children were English dominant, two were much more comfortable in speaking Spanish, and five were able to easily move from one language to another.

Data collection and sources

Data collection was conducted in the states of Guanajuato and Colima, Mexico, where immigration has had a profound social and economic impact on many communities. Both states have historically been major immigrant-sending localities in Mexico and are experiencing considerable return migration.

Data sources consisted of field notes, observations, and individual interviews. Other sources of data included conversations with teachers, home visits and conversations with parents, and journal entries of researchers that focused on what they learned from each child. We also studied younger children’s drawings of their memorable experiences (both negative and positive) in the United States and Mexico, and description of similarities and differences between life in the United States and Mexico. Informal self-assessments of listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency levels in English and Spanish were also obtained from the participating children and adolescents.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish, English, or bilingually, depending upon each respondent’s linguistic preference. All interviews were semistructured in order to obtain answers to similar questions from all participants and to allow for the individual elaboration of personal experiences. Respondents were asked to discuss the following main categories in the interview protocol: (a) experiences living in the United States (i.e., description of schools, friends, family members, favorite activities, and language usage); (b) experiences living in Mexico (i.e., reasons for family’s return, duration of stay in Mexico, description of schools, friends, family members, favorite activities, and language usage); (c) issues around adaptation (i.e., what their friends think of them, “American
Culture” vs. “Mexican Culture,” how teachers respond to them, cultural identity, possible plans to return to the United States, and career goals.)

Analysis of data

We reviewed our field notes and transcribed excerpts of the interviews and analyzed our data through an emergent process that involved repeated reading of all interview notes and organizing themes into emerging categories. We coded our data using the constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), clustering similar units under the themes of families’ reasons for returning, children’s current experiences, adaptation, identity development, and future goals. As we noted one theme, we compared it against other themes for similarities and differences using respondents’ age and duration of time in Mexico. The resulting concepts were labeled and grouped, which refined emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Furthermore, we examined our data and looked for expected as well as unexpected patterns. Through ongoing conversations with the children and youth, we also obtained important anecdotal information that enhanced our understanding of the life experiences of each respondent.

Results

Here we present a small slice of reality of 12 U.S.-born children of Mexican nationals who have lived in the United States for a period of time and for various reasons are currently living in Mexico. Children reported that their parents’ main reasons for returning were a desire to retire in Mexico, economic hardship, family obligations, deportation, and change in family conditions. Children’s future goals included obtaining higher education in the United States and Mexico, starting a business, and getting married. Some children were not sure about their future plans.

Whenever children move anywhere, we would expect some to adapt well and others to struggle. It is not surprising that, for some, the process of leaving their country of birth and relocating to Mexico was stressful. These children struggled with problems ranging from little to no knowledge of the Spanish language and Mexican culture, to severe poverty and disrupted family structure. In contrast, some children had responded positively, in spite of many obstacles, and had adapted to their new environment.

Overall, seven respondents seemed generally well adjusted to living in Mexico and five presented indications that they did not feel comfortable in Mexico. Families’ reasons for returning to Mexico varied, but nevertheless profoundly impacted each respondent in multiple ways. Seven respondents expressed their desire to return to the United States. Overwhelmingly, respondents were more interested to discuss the context of their experiences living in the United States and Mexico and were less enthusiastic to talk about issues around their acculturation or identity development. Complex and interconnected reasons influenced these families to return to Mexico. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants’ experiences and their future plans. The table is organized to present each respondent’s name, age, duration of time in Mexico, family’s reasons for returning to Mexico, parents’ immigration status in the United States, dominant language, plans for returning to the United States, and future goals. The table shows, with two exceptions, that the parents of our respondents had undocumented status. Economic insecurity played a major part in four families’ decisions to return to Mexico.

Reasons for moving to Mexico

Voluntary

When the migration process was planned and parents had discussed it with their children, adaptation became easier. One feature of adaptation is a sense of choice. Some children knew that their stay
in Mexico was temporary. For example Ana, who was 11 years old and had moved to Mexico 18 months earlier, clearly noted:

My father is retired and so my parents wanted to move back to Mexico. They asked me and my younger brother to come with them, my ten older brothers and sisters stayed in the U.S. … They are in college or married. … Next year I want to go back to the U.S., I will live with my oldest sister’s family, … my nieces are my age. [Stated in English]

Yet, Ana was struggling with the status of her grandmother in the community. This grandmother is an elderly indigenous Otomí woman who preferred to live in her traditional stone house rather than move in with Ana’s parents, who had constructed a modern house. Her decision has been troublesome to Ana, who notes: “I feel ashamed of my grandmother’s stone house, and she does not want to move in with us.” She further commented that the house looked “poor and ugly” (stated in English).

In spite of her love for her grandmother, Ana had difficulty coping with complex issues of poverty that confront many Mexicans. Ana’s younger brother Beto, an 8-year-old third grader, on the other hand, had no apparent problems with his adaptation. He had also been well prepared and informed about the relocation and was pleased to be in this community, despite its sparse economic resources. He eagerly stated:

My mother is so happy in Mexico, she doesn’t want to go back to the U.S. … For the time being I will stay with my parents here … I like it, I also have lots of friends in the community … maybe after middle school I will join my oldest sister … but I don’t know … maybe I stay in Mexico to become a bricklayer or an architect. [Stated in English]

### Economic hardship

Children of low-skilled immigrants are more likely to live in poverty. We learned from four youth that the primary force behind their families’ decision to leave the United States was harsh economic conditions. Their parents had worked in the United States for several years without proper documentation. They had suffered a sizeable earning disadvantage and the types of jobs they held were not sufficient to support their families. Furthermore, the economic recession beginning in 2008 in the United States dramatically impacted their already vulnerable economic standings. Facing low-wage jobs, unemployment (mostly underemployment), and increasing costs of living, the parents returned to Mexico hoping for better economic conditions. For these four families, having relatives as safety nets played a significant role in reinforcing their decision to return to Mexico. Eduardo, who was 14 years old...

### Table 1. Children of Returnees: Experiences and Goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years in Mexico</th>
<th>Family reasons for returning</th>
<th>Parents’ immigration status in the U.S.</th>
<th>Dominant language</th>
<th>Plans to return to the U.S.</th>
<th>Future goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Parents wanted to retire in Mexico</td>
<td>Permanent residents of United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Get married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beto</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Parents wanted to retire in Mexico</td>
<td>Permanent residents of United States</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Not Sure</td>
<td>Bricklayer or architect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Economic hardship</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Teacher of English (Mexico)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduardo</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Economic hardship</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>Yes (Visit)</td>
<td>College and start a business (Mexico)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrian</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Economic hardship</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>College (U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Economic hardship</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>College (Mexico)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Family obligations</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Doctor (U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Family obligations</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaime</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Family obligations</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Engineer (U.S.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandra</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parents deported</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parents deported</td>
<td>Undocumented</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryan</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Divorce</td>
<td>Mixed status</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Family obligations

Similarly, we learned that three families decided to return to Mexico in order to take care of elderly relatives who had fallen ill and required assistance from their children. These families had sufficient economic resources to stay in the United States and withstand the great recession the country was experiencing, but their sense of obligation to their loved ones outweighed other factors. It is noteworthy that these three families’ undocumented status also played a role in their decision to return. They were aware that once they left, it would be quite difficult to return to the United States.

Children of these families had not adapted uniformly to their new circumstances in Mexico. One preschooler was simply happy to be with his grandparents. One youth articulated dissatisfaction regarding his current realities and the other expressed content, but both clearly voiced their pride when discussing their parents’ decision to move to Mexico in order to help a grandparent. Gabriel, who was 11 years old, stated: “I’m not totally happy here but I’m happy that we are here to help my abuelos [grandparents]” (stated in English).

Deportation

Two children whose parents were deported to Mexico did not seem well prepared for the next chapter in their lives. In one case, responding to the trauma of deportation, the parents either underestimated her needs and capacity for understanding, or tried to protect their child from emotional stress of forceful removal and did not tell her that they were moving to Mexico. Alejandra, a 5-year-old preschooler, showed signs of emotional stress. She told us that she did not know the reasons for her stay in Mexico and expressed her dislike for the house in which she lived, the neighborhood, and her school in Mexico. She described her complex situation by stating: “I want to be in my room and cry, but my mom gets mad at me” (stated in English).

However not everything was melancholy for Alejandra. Upon drawing her preschool in the United States, she shared her delight in swinging and playing on the monkey bars. She also expressed her positive experiences in school, but much of her explanation of her drawing focused on her joy of playing outside.

In the second case, Alicia’s parents had been apprehended by United States immigration agents and were about to be deported to Mexico. They did not have time to emotionally prepare their child. This 12-year-old sixth grader took a long time to think, gazing into the distance. She later shared:

I am so scared, it was awful when the police came to my house to take me to my parents and then put us all together in a bus to Mexico; ... I sometimes feel so mad, and sometimes so unhappy. [Stated in English]

Alicia felt rejected by the United States, yet she discussed her plans to eventually move back to the country in which she was born. For the time being she has accepted the fact that she needs to be with her family in Mexico.
As expected, family conditions emerged as an important determining factor for children’s well-being. When families are separated as a result of divorce, the adaptation of the children to their new communities could become more difficult. Bryan, a 9-year-old fourth grader, disliked living with his grandparents and mother in Mexico. After his parents divorced, his mother decided to return to Mexico with her child. Bryan missed his father and his home in the United States. He explained: “I often dream of my house in the U.S. … and that my parents are together and love each other again” (stated in English). However, to our surprise, Bryan wanted to share his vivid positive memories of his school in the United States and expressed his love of playing in the school playground.

Comparing two realities

Naturally, in spite of the fact that several children and adolescents in this study had become well adapted at home and in the community, they noted that they missed specific aspects of their U.S. schools: their green school playgrounds, the big sports facilities, warm lunches, and computer labs. Nevertheless, they placed less importance on what they had given up in the United States and focused on their current realities in Mexico. However, some children presented their concerns about violence among classroom peers and expressed astonishment that, unlike their teachers in the United States, their Mexican teachers did not intervene to stop violent behavior. In a way, they used their transnational experiences in order to become cultural brokers so they could compare and contrast their past and present realities.

Aspirations

The dreams and choices children shared with us varied greatly. It is noteworthy that in spite of facing some difficulties, several children had high hopes for their future, but some were not very clear about how to achieve their goals. Several children were very clear in their intention to someday return to the United States.

Janet was 15 years old and came to Mexico five years ago. Despite fond memories of California, her plans were to remain in Mexico and she hoped to become a teacher of English after completing high school. She explained that her family could not afford to pay for four years of college education. In addition, her parents’ undocumented status made Janet realize that returning to the United States was currently not a viable option for her. However, she believed that her ability to speak both Spanish and English would be socioeconomically advantageous for her future.

Eduardo, a 14-year-old young man, was comfortable living in Mexico but talked about traveling to the United States to visit his friends. His outgoing personality and his bilingualism have enabled him to make friends and he felt well accepted by his peers and teachers. He had plans to attend college and eventually start his own business in Mexico. On the other hand, 15-year-old Adrian had definite plans to permanently move to the United States. His family was facing economic hardship in Mexico. Adrian was perfectly comfortable speaking English and Spanish. For the time being, he wanted to be with his parents (who are not able to return to the United States), but he saw more opportunities in his country of birth and had high hopes of attending college.

Similarly, 11-year-old Gabriel had plans to return to the United States. His long-term goal was to become a medical doctor. His parents returned to Mexico due to family obligations, but Gabriel felt more connected with “how things are done in the U.S.” and wanted to continue his education there. Not unlike Alicia, Gabriel relied upon his anticipated return to the United States as a protective factor in coping with his current reality. In a way, for some children, their birth certificates are an insurance policy that reminds them that their stay in Mexico is only temporary.

Ana wanted to get married and have a family. Her dominant language was English and she had plans to move back to the United States in the near future. Beto, her brother, preferred to speak
English and dreamed of constructing houses, but he had not decided whether to live in Mexico or in the United States. Facing economic hardship, 9-year-old Cathy’s family returned to Mexico. Cathy, a capable bilingual, was quite savvy regarding the educational opportunities available in the two countries, noting: “When I grow up I want to live in Mexico and I want to be a physician … in Mexico my parents can support my university studies, in the U.S. it is too expensive” (stated in Spanish). David, only 5 years old, was happy being in Mexico and enjoyed the company of his grandparents. On the other hand, 10-year-old Jaime, who had lived in Mexico for 5 years, had already decided to return to the United States, despite the fact that his Spanish was more dominant than his English. “When I grow up I want to be an engineer in the U.S.” (stated in Spanish). Similar to David and Gabriel, Jaime’s parents came back to Mexico in order to take care of their aging relatives and were unable to return to the United States.

Some children seemed too distressed to discuss specific future plans but were clear about their desire to return to the United States. In particular, Alejandra, Alicia, and Bryan each expressed eagerness to return to the United States as soon as possible.

Discussion, significance and future research

Economic hardship and documentation status

It is difficult to fully understand lived experiences of others. However, we have attempted to present the voices of economically marginalized transnational students who are seldom heard. Our findings clearly point to the need for a deeper understanding of socioeconomic forces that influence children’s lives beyond the classroom. Learning from the children in this study reminds us that, as students’ life experiences are rapidly changing, teachers in the United States and Mexico are facing new challenges as well as opportunities (Borjian & Padilla, 2010).

Poverty is the biggest obstacle facing many transnational students and their futures are at jeopardy if they continue to face economic hardship. Differences in socioeconomic status between immigrants and nonimmigrants have been shown to be an important factor in explaining immigrants’ disadvantages in educational outcomes (Gang & Zimmermann, 2000). Although limited development in one language and adapting to new cultural norms are significant obstacles for some transnational students, financial restrictions and documentation challenges are among the most formidable difficulties facing many transnational families. Only one family (Ana and Beto) made the conscious, and independent, choice of returning to Mexico in order to enjoy their retirement years in the country of their birth. Economic insecurity and deportation did not force them out of the United States.

Linguistic adaptation

In the case of five children, circumstances have enabled them to become fluent speakers of both English and Spanish. Knowing the language of the host society will continue to help these children to be more adjusted to their transnational experiences. Janet, Eduardo, Adrian, Cathy, and Gabriel were all very capable speakers of English and Spanish. Their bilingualism will have a positive and significant impact on their subsequent academic performance if they are given the right conditions to continue to grow their dual languages. For example, students like Eduardo should be encouraged to start a transnational club at school and explore exchange programs for students in Mexico and the United States. Others, including Bryan and Alicia, should be urged and supported to develop their English language proficiency.

Research repeatedly indicates that instructional usage of the primary language reinforces the acquisition of a second language (Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001; Padilla, 2006). Research confirms that bilinguals have distinct cognitive advantages over monolinguals, indicating that students’ heritage languages should be encouraged while a second language is being acquired (Bialystok, Craik, Green,
& Gollan, 2009). In fact, we argue that creating a distinction between first and second languages of transnational students is not necessarily a productive approach, as these children will need to be bilingual and their proficiency in both languages will be essential for their adaptation in both countries.

**Aspirations**

The degree of optimism presented by many children and adolescents in this study signifies their resilience in spite of facing economic hardship as well as rejection and marginalization from the United States, their country of birth. However, high aspirations voiced by youth can dissipate if they experience continuous educational disadvantages. To ensure socioeconomic mobility of transnational students, educational systems of the United States and Mexico must prepare these children for quality schooling, thus giving them more opportunities for better-paying jobs in the future. Students like Adrian and Cathy need to be celebrated for their resiliency and educators should provide them access to information about higher education in order to maintain their motivation to reach their educational goals. Similarly, students like Gabriel and Jaime need to learn about opportunities for obtaining higher education in both nations. Furthermore, these youth can become mentors to younger students.

Bryan and Alicia need support in enhancing their social and emotional growth. They need adult mentors in order to talk about their current circumstances. Fostering and maintaining connections with friends and families in the United States will also support social and emotional development of transnational students. Encouraging social interactions with other transnational students can provide opportunities for them to share similar experiences and realities.

The results of this study provide evidence that children’s dual perspectives and linguistic and sociocultural knowledge must be viewed as human capital that should be valued and further developed by community members, teachers, and parents alike. Children’s languages, cultures, and identities must be promoted and protected. Children like Ana and David should be supported to develop appreciation of their cultural heritage and see their grandparents as cultural assets. Encouraging cultural appreciation and bilingual development of other transnational children will undoubtedly help them to reach their highest potential and become productive members of their communities in Mexico and the United States. Children like Jaime need to be encouraged to develop their bilingualism since they have plans to return to their birth country.

Students like Janet and Eduardo should be given service learning prospects as well as information regarding financial support opportunities to attend college. Since Janet has specific goals to be a teacher, she should be given the chance to be a teaching assistant at a school so she can become better prepared for her future plans.

**Teachers supporting transnational students**

Although our research did not focus on classroom experiences of transnational students, 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 United States. By developing critical consciousness, teachers can foster students’ understanding of multiple forces that influence their circumstance. With the support of teachers, students can learn to critically examine socioeconomic forces that impact their lives. Guiding students to obtain appropriate social and economic support is also a priority.

Educational practices, teacher training, and language education policies must consider cultural and linguistic gifts of transnational students and should strive to develop their talents. Transnational children are valuable assets for both Mexico and the United States. Their well-being, socially, emotionally, and educationally, depends upon caring and responsive adults in both nations. By learning about transnational students’ life experiences, teachers can provide cultural and linguistic
validation, which in turn will support students’ academic achievement. When teachers consider students’ funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and see students not as blank slates, but as individuals who have a storehouse of knowledge acquired from parents and other adults that may be rich in cultural traditions such as stories, music, and art, students can enrich the classroom in ways that exceed the skills and knowledge of teachers. Teachers with an authentic caring framework (Valenzuela, 1999) make every opportunity to work with their students and get to know them well. When working with transnational students, educators should have some familiarity with students’ home languages and transnational cultural backgrounds, personal circumstances, and strengths, as well as academic needs. After all, transnational students are learning about the culture of the school and of the new community. Teachers can reciprocate and seek to learn about their students’ cultures, beliefs, and aspirations. Furthermore, teachers who are proficient in the primary language of their students have an additional tool to enhance subject matter understanding as well as to promote a safe learning environment for their students. These educators are keenly aware that transnational students need substantial support in building strong foundations in their native languages as they develop academic proficiency in a second language (Garcia, Arias, Harris, & Serna, 2010).

**Future research**

Although we have provided some evidence of the complexity of transnational experiences, we do not claim that the profiles of our respondents can be generalized to all transnational children. Much more needs to be done to gain a better understanding of the impact of transnational experiences on children and adolescents. In particular, we need to learn about their adaptation strategies and how they seek available support systems. Development of culturally appropriate tools is necessary to accurately measure adaptation of children under different circumstances.

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 implement pedagogical practices that recognize these children’s funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Previous studies have laid important groundwork toward developing a multidisciplinary approach to the study of transnational students in Mexico (Zuñiga & Hamann, 2009). Extensive research is needed to identify conditions that allow children to experience joy in learning while building self-confidence. We need to learn how to connect students’ prior knowledge, life experience, and interests with learning goals in order to support academic achievement of children. Similarly, we need to recognize school practices that assure transnational families that their children will attend schools that are safe places in which useful and relevant learning opportunities are regularly available to students.

We concur with Zuñiga and Hamann (2006), who view schooling systems of the United States and Mexico as not aligned with each other. In part, these systems are specifically geared toward educating their respective pupils to remain and work in the country of origin. We view this model of education as not fully functional for millions of transnational students across the globe. Binational collaborative programs are necessary to facilitate the integration of newly arrived transnational students in their new educational settings. Researchers and educators from (and within) both nations must work together in order to learn about and raise consciousness regarding the realities of transnational students. Schools can minimize the turbulence of their journeys while ensuring all students with quality education in the age of globalization. When we accept human migration as a multidirectional process, we are better able to respond to the needs of transnational children. Where they were born or which country issued their birth certificates should not dictate their ultimate destiny. Yet, it is important to better understand how some children successfully navigate misaligned schooling systems.
Our focus was on early stages of cultural adaptation of U.S.-born children living in Mexico. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the linguistic development and cultural adaptation of children. We need to learn who is succeeding in Mexican schools and how they achieve academic success. For instance, how do transnational students leverage their cultural and linguistic resources in order to advance socially and academically in their new settings? In contrast, we must also learn about the barriers that are preventing some students from obtaining academic achievement in Mexico. Just as U.S. schools are not fully ready to meet the needs of transnational students, Mexican schools are not yet equipped to integrate these students (Zuñiga & Hamann, 2006). We need to study specific teaching strategies that facilitate the learning of grade-level academic content in Spanish in the context of Mexican classrooms. Similarly, we need to learn about the experiences of students in the United States that prepare them for their move to Mexico. What family, community, and school practices in the United States prepare students for a smooth transition to Mexico?

Notes on contributors

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