

# SCHOOLING FOR US-CITIZEN STUDENTS IN MEXICO

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Mexico-United States migration is a unique case in the history of international migration. The two countries have maintained massive migratory flows for more than a century (Durand, 2000), creating profound interdependence between nations. For decades, with each wave of Mexicans leaving the US, a corresponding flow of Mexicans return to their communities of origin in Mexico. The Great Recession of 2008 marked the end on an era in Mexico-to-US migration, and by 2010 there were as many Mexicans returning to Mexico as there were coming to the US (Passel, Cohn & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012). By 2014, more Mexicans were returning to Mexico than coming to the US (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). In 2007 there were 12.8 million Mexican immigrants in the U.S., compared to 11.7 million in 2014. Family reunification and the US economic recession (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015; Passel, Cohn & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2012) were cited as the most common reasons for increased returns to Mexico, followed by deportation (U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security, 2014) and stricter enforcement (Roseblum & Meissner, 2014).

An important consequence of return migration is a growing population of US-schooled students who moved to Mexico with their families. In this paper, we synthesize research that focuses on US-born children of Mexican migrants who now live and attend school in Mexico. This is the fastest-growing group of transnational children between two countries, also referred to as “students we share” (Gándara, 2016). In 2015, there were about 500,000 US- born children in Mexico (Jacobson, 2016; Jensen, Mejia-Arauz, & Aguilar, 2017), an 81 percent increase with regard to 2010 numbers (Aguilar & Jacobo, forthcoming).

The Trump election sparked concern in Mexico regarding a possible increase in deportations and voluntary returns, including the children of migrants. This situation has produced uncertainty about the educational opportunities that Mexico could provide to these students. Despite the fact that research on transnational students is a growing field, important questions remain unanswered. We focus especially on what teachers in Mexico should know and be able to do to meet the various needs of US-citizen students in Mexican schools.

## II. DEMOGRAPHICS

The wave of immigration from Mexico to the US from 1965 until 2008 is the largest in US history (Pew Research Center, 2015). It comprises over 16 million people, not including the children of Mexican immigrants born in the US (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). The “students we share” comprise 9 million students from Mexican immigrant households enrolled in elementary

and secondary school between Mexico and the United States. They are a large and heterogeneous group (Jensen & Sawyer, 2013) that includes students who have emigrated themselves and, more commonly, children with immigrant parents whose origins range from Baja California to Chiapas and everywhere in between.

A sharp increase in the flow of return migration to Mexico has provoked new questions and considerations about immigrant integration and opportunity in that country, even as old ones — e.g., how to improve school quality for children of Mexican immigrants in the United States (Jensen & Sawyer, 2013)— continue to be relevant. Overall, there are about 1.5 million minors in Mexico with ties to the US, about 5% of the student population. This includes 1) children with at least one migrant parent (i.e., children “remaining behind”, 2) circular immigrants (born in Mexico, lived in US, and now back in Mexico), and 3) “American-Mexican” (Zúñiga & Hamann 2013) children, born in the US and now living in Mexico. Historically, the first of these groups has been the largest, but in recent years the number of US-citizen students in Mexico has grown precipitously, and is now the biggest. Consequently, integration concerns have inverted. New questions address how Mexican institutions should incorporate migrants, not only from the U.S. but also from Central America (Pederzini, Riosmena, Masferrer & Molina, 2015). A critical concern is how to integrate the US-citizen children of return immigrants into Mexican schools.

Projecting from Mexican Census data, there are currently over 600,000 US-citizen students from preschool to high school in Mexico—nearly 3% of the total student population (Jensen, Mejia-Arauz, & Aguilar 2017). Though concentrated in municipalities in Northern and Central states in Mexico, these students are also dispersed throughout the country, typically in rural communities. The portions of US-citizen children are higher in elementary than high school. In 2015, states with the highest concentrations (i.e., percent of child population that is born in the US) were Baja California (7.04%), Chihuahua (5.35%), Sonora (3.79%), Nayarit (3.58%), Colima (3.53%), and Tamaulipas (3.53%). Concentrations vary even more widely by municipalities within states. In 2015 there were 45 municipalities in Mexico in which more than 10% of their child populations were US citizens. In a quarter of Mexico’s 2,457 municipalities, more than 3% of the child populations are US-born. These numbers continue to grow (Aguilar & Jacobo, forthcoming).

The educational experiences of the US-citizen students in Mexico are as diverse as they are. Their schooling—access *and* quality—is stratified by socioeconomic status, language proficiencies, race, region (especially within countries), immigrant generation, school programs, and documented status (e.g., Galindo, 2013; Gándara, 2017; Gándara & Escamilla, 2017; Jensen, Giorguli & Hernandez, 2016; Treviño, 2013). For instance, US-citizen students in Mexico are more likely than their peers to attend a rural (rather than an urban) school. Students in rural schools, on average, perform more than a full standard deviation below those in urban and private schools on measures of academic performance (INEE, 2016; Reimers, 2000). Rural schools have shorter days, fewer resources, and teachers with less preparation (Pérez Martínez, Ruiz Cuellar & García Cabrero, 2013; Schiefelbein & McGinn, 2008).

### III. MEXICO'S INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

In response to these demographic changes, studies on transnational students constitute a growing field and a topic of increasing relevance in Mexico's public agenda. The Mexican government has taken various steps to guarantee the rights of migrant students to education. The Ministry of Education (*Secretaría Educación Pública* [SEP]), has amended several regulations, first in 2015 and then in 2017, to facilitate the enrollment of students with US schooling experiences. Public and government interest in these issues increased after the election of President Donald Trump.

The 2015 regulatory change addressed K-12 education. Immigrant organizations identified several cases of denied and conditional school access among returned families who had US-citizen children. These families reported difficulty matriculating their children at school in Mexico because their birth certificates lacked the Apostille certificate, or because their US school documents were not translated to Spanish. Thus, a group of Mexican-based scholars and immigrant organizations presented SEP with a legal proposal to eliminate Apostilles and certified translations as requirements for school enrolment (IMUMI, 2014).

The purpose of the Apostille system, originated at the Hague Convention, was to expedite legalization of foreign documents. All signatory countries agreed to validate foreign document with an Apostille stamp. Although the purpose was to facilitate enrollment, the Apostille requirement was onerous for returning families and counterproductive. Apostilles were required to be obtained from government offices in the country where the specific document was issued. Yet many returning families are restricted in their US travel, do not maintain transnational support networks, and have limited financial resources to pay someone to obtain the Apostille for them (Jacobo & Espinoza 2017; Jacobo & Landa, 2015).

After months of negotiation with federal authorities, the first regulatory piece was amended on June 15, 2015. The *Acuerdo Secretarial 286* established that no Apostille or official translation of foreign documents was required to validate foreign transcripts. In September 2015, the *Normas de Control Escolar*, the specific standards that regulate K-12 education, were also amended so that school authorities should no longer require Apostilles on birth certificates or school documents as prerequisites for enrollment. These modifications promote immediate access to school for transnational students in elementary and middle schools (Jacobo, 2017).

The most recent amendment was based on the interest of the federal government, particularly the Senate, to open opportunities for dreamers who would like to initiate or complete their higher education in Mexico. In January 2017, President Enrique Peña Nieto sent a preferential initiative to amend the General Education Law. Its objective was to facilitate revalidation of higher education studies for Mexican students coming from the US. Thus, the federal government was promoting educational continuity in Mexican institutions of higher education. Among the various modifications, the possibility to obtain complete revalidations stands out. Degrees obtained in US universities can be revalidated in their entirety if they are within the list of "highly prestigious" institutions compiled by the federal government. In addition, it also eliminates the

Apostille requirements to revalidate higher education studies conducted in the US (Aguilar & Jacobo, forthcoming).

While these amendments are important steps to facilitate school access for transnational students, they are recent and their implementation has not been evaluated. Furthermore, SEP has not trained its staff in the states to guarantee their proper implementation. In some municipalities, the permanence of the Apostille requirement by school authorities has been reported, even though the 2015 regulations no longer require it. Apparently, in many cases the new regulations are still unknown in many communities, suggesting that training for school authorities is necessary (Jacobo, 2017). The coming years will be crucial to evaluate the impact of these changes. We must highlight that these normative changes address school access. Yet, once students enter school, inclusion becomes relevant. Next, we discuss diverse educational challenges the students we share encounter once they attend Mexican schools.

#### IV. CHALLENGES IN MEXICAN SCHOOLS

Throughout the process of transition from the US education system to Mexican schools, children experience multiple ruptures and challenges to adaptation. Conducted from various disciplines—e.g., sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, psychology, linguistics—research examines diverse challenges US-citizen children encounter during their process of adaptation into Mexican schools. Such challenges range from meeting documentation requirements to developing literacy skills in Spanish and catching up with Mexican curricula. These studies show a lack of pedagogical resources to meet the needs of students with migrant experiences or those who speak a language other than Spanish.

##### *a) Documentation issues*

Some of the main bureaucratic obstacles transnational students encounter in Mexico are difficulties to register at school, to revalidate studies completed in the United States, and in extreme cases, they have been denied formal enrollment in public schools due to lack of documentation. Those who are US-born encounter additional bureaucratic obstacles to enroll at schools or to revalidate studies concluded in the US (Jacobo, 2017; Medina & Menjivar, 2015), which complicates their adaptation and learning process.

Education is a universal right recognized in Mexico's legal framework, including its Constitution, the General Education Law, the Migration Law, and the Special Migration Program. According to the legal framework, education in Mexico must be free and compulsory regardless of race, religion or nationality. Therefore, children born outside Mexico have the right to education regardless of their immigration status (Migration Law, Art. 8, 2011). Yet, parents of transnational children frequently face problems navigating Mexico's bureaucracy to get their children enrolled. Many returnee families are unaware of the documents they will need in order to register their children at school until they are asked for them in Mexico. Deported migrants frequently lack the opportunity to prepare any required documentation and cannot return to the US to gather documents, at least in the short and medium term.

Once in Mexico, returnee families may be wrongly advised by school authorities on the process to follow to enroll their children (IMUMI 2015; Jacobo & Landa 2015). Given the complex bureaucratic system in Mexico, the students we share constitute a vulnerable group when they are compared to their peers without migratory experience.

*b) Needs of US Citizens in Mexican Classrooms*

Studies show that US-citizen students in Mexican schools face a series of challenges inside the classroom that are unique to their transnational experiences. They often experience multiple ruptures and invisibility when they first enter Mexico's schools as teachers do not perceive their particular needs or even acknowledge their transnational experiences (Hamann, Zúñiga & Sánchez 2006; Hamman & Zúñiga 2011). Students report feeling out-of-place in Mexican schools and struggle to form their identities and to feel a sense of belonging in a new place (Bybee et al., 2018; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009). At school, students experience important differences in cultural codes (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2008), language of instruction (Panait & Zúñiga, 2016; Despaigne & Jacobo, 2016), and pedagogy (Sánchez & Zúñiga, 2010).

Mastery of Spanish is an important element for integration, learning and self-esteem among transnational students. Having a Mexican surname and looking like their Spanish-speaking peers, transnational students often go unnoticed by the school community even when they often have a greater command of English than Spanish. Many have difficulty speaking Spanish, especially academic Spanish, and express uncertainty about where they will live and work in the future (Hamann, Zúñiga & Sánchez García, 2010). Students' learning is negatively affected when they do not have linguistic skills needed to understand a class taught in Spanish (Panait & Zúñiga, 2016). Moreover, a common mistake is to assume that, if the student speaks the language, logically s/he reads and writes it (Despaigne & Jacobo, 2016). In a study in Zacatecas and Nuevo León, Hamann, Zúñiga and Sánchez García (2010) found that US-citizen students were more than three times as likely to be retained a grade than their Mexican peers, which is alarming given relationships between grade retention and school dropout (Reimers, 2000) and academic underachievement (Jensen, Giorguli & Hernández, 2016) in Mexico.

Unlike the US, Mexico does not have Spanish-as-a-second-language programs for students who do not have a mastery of the language of instruction. Also, most teachers do not speak any English (Mexicanos Primero, 2015), and the schools do not have a practice for assessing what students know in English. They fail to recognize the skills and knowledge returnee students bring with them to the classroom, similar to teachers of Mexican-origin children in the US (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2013, p. 184). Teachers are largely unfamiliar with U.S. schools and curricula, which contributes to a disproportionate amount of school failure (Zúñiga, Hamann & Sánchez García, 2008, p. 61-78). Most schools and teachers working with returnee students in Mexico report a lack of preparation and resources to meet students' particular needs (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2013). This includes language and cultural needs, curricular needs, and others associated with family mobility.

In the absence of support programs for students to develop their language skills in Spanish, or training for teachers to acquire pedagogical tools appropriate to this population, linguistic

differences constitute a challenge that prevents returning students from maximizing their educational experience (Sánchez García & Hamann, 2016). The *Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación* (INEE) stresses the importance of adaptability of educational services in Mexican schools. Ensuring adaptability implies that educational institutions are responsible for offering material conditions as well as pedagogical strategies necessary for the development of their students. When it comes to transnational students, there are large areas of unfulfilled opportunity to ensure adaptability. Trained teachers and special transition programs are crucial for this purpose.

## V. PREPARING TEACHERS FOR US-CITIZEN STUDENTS

Teaching quality is the single most important factor in school that affects student success in Mexico (INEE, 2015). This includes not only what teachers know and are able to do, but also the supports and resources they enjoy, as well as the quality of relationships and interactions with and among their students (Schiefelbein & McGinn, 2008). Indeed, teaching quality is a matter of structural variables like materials, credentials, student-teacher ratios, and wages, as well as process variables like lesson planning, relational quality, and engagement with parents. Jensen, Pérez Martínez and Aguilar Escobar (2016) frame teaching quality in Mexican classrooms in terms of (a) instructional time, (b) generic quality and (c) local quality. Instructional time concerns the amount of time available for children to engage in classroom activity (Bloom, 1974; Creemers & Kyriakides, 2008; Levin, 1984). Generic quality consists of process and structural variables that are important for all students to learn—e.g., facilities, social relationships for teaching, and instructional interactions. Local quality concerns how well teaching resonates with what students know and do outside of school. These three aspects are critical to preparing Mexican teachers to meet the needs of US-citizen students. Some argue, however, that the emphasis on expanding access to school has led to increased disparities in school quality (Schmelkes, 1997; Muñoz Izquierdo & Ahuja Sánchez, 2000).

Education policies in Mexico in recent decades have focused aggressively on expanding access to school for all Mexican children and youth. Primary schooling in Mexico has become essentially universal (INEE, 2013), and attendance for all children ages 3 to 17 years old is now compulsory, though the capacity to enroll all students in *preparatoria* (high school) still has not been met everywhere. As a result, policy efforts during the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations focused on improving student learning opportunities under the umbrella of major national education reforms. Most recently, a constitutional reform declared that the process of hiring and promoting teachers, administrators, and other school staff is to be public and democratic. This reform mandated controversial teacher performance evaluations as well as improvements to school infrastructure (e.g., equipment, learning materials) (INEE, 2015).

### *a) Programs for transnational students*

Teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students is under-addressed within Mexican education. However, the Binational Migrant Education Program (PROBEM), created in 1976 with initial participation Michoacán and Baja California in Mexico, and California in the US,

focuses on the needs of immigrant students. The PROBEM seeks to foster educational continuity in grades K-12 for students who transition between the US and the Mexican schools. This program assists students in enrolling in Mexican schools as long as enrollment takes place before the last working day of the month of June. Though PROBEM still exists today, implementation of its programs varies considerably by state, as the program does not enjoy federal fiscal support.

In 1990, Mexico and the US signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Education, through which PROBEM was defined as a program with four pillars: a) teacher exchange, b) a strategy of attention to immigrant students, c) attention to Mexican communities in the US and d) the Education without Borders project. The purpose of this last initiative was to assist students with US educational experiences by providing them with an “intercultural pedagogy.” Under this project, materials for teachers emphasized the value of diversity and combating discrimination. However, this project was underfunded and did not survive subsequent administrations.

So far, there are scant evaluations of PROBEM programs (Martínez-Wenzl, 2013), though they have been implemented for decades. A preliminary evaluation of the program showed few positive results (Gándara, 2008). This study concluded that the teacher exchange program had a limited impact due to its short duration and because Mexican teachers were assigned to federal migrant education programs that did not interact with educators in regular schools. During the exchange, Mexican teachers taught in the migrant education program, which limited their understanding of the US system, curricula and pedagogies. There were no guidelines on how the exchange could inform pedagogical practices in Mexican schools with transnational students. The report concluded that PROBEM has had little impact so far to serve transnational students, since its emphasis was not on Mexican students returning to the country, but on students of Mexican origin in the United States (Gándara, 2008).

#### *b) Further Research on Teacher Preparation*

Preparing teachers to meet the needs of US-citizen students requires stronger tools (i.e., assessments and frameworks) for teaching, as well as close partnerships with teacher education institutions in Mexico, especially *Escuelas Normales* (Normal Schools). Quality improvements require much greater attention to classroom- over school-level processes (Jensen, Pérez Martínez & Aguilar Escobar, 2016). It is especially important to focus on high-leverage teaching practices that can be addressed through policy and professional development initiatives.

Frameworks and measures of teaching—e.g., teacher reports, observation protocols, and classroom products—are critical. They should demonstrate conceptual and technical rigor. If indeed “we cannot improve what we cannot measure” (Bryk, Harding & Greenberg, 2012, p. 97), then developing a framework and assessments of teaching quality are among the most important tasks for educational research in Mexico. Whereas some interpretive research addresses teaching quality in Mexican classrooms, there has been little measurement work conducted (Martínez Rizo, 2012). Strong assessments should be used to support professional development programs, as well as to examine how elements of teaching correspond to dimensions of children’s learning and development across diverse classroom contexts (Haertel, 2013).

Developing frameworks for and assessments to measure teaching quality is especially critical to prepare Mexican teachers for US-citizen students who have particular needs and strengths. Jensen, Mejia-Arauz and Aguilar (2017) provided some evidence showing that US-citizen students in the state of Aguascalientes were less likely than their Mexican peers to attend classrooms that connected with what they knew and did outside of school. Presumably this was because educators in Mexico have limited understanding of the life experiences of US-citizen students. Broader and more complete analyses of teaching for US-citizen students should be conducted, and interventions to develop and test improvements where necessary should be realized (Jensen, Mejia-Arauz & Aguilar, 2017).

## VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR US AND MEXICO

We provide three recommendations for state and federal governments in the US to collaborate with Mexican institutions to improve elementary and secondary schooling—access and quality—in Mexico. The US-Mexico Binational Commission, established through the US Department of State by Presidents Reagan and López Portillo in 1981, provides a framework for enacting these recommendations.

- 1) Revive bi-national partnerships in education to improve schooling opportunities for US-citizen students in Mexico.** In joint collaborations between the U.S. Department of Education and the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* and the *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*, several educational programs have been launched to support the Mexican immigrants and children of Mexican immigrants in the US (Martínez-Wenzl, 2013). These programs are administered through Mexican consulates in the US. They include a teacher exchange, transfer document, textbook donation, online secondary education, adult education, scholarships, and community computing centers. Whereas these programs have been historically under-resourced, understudied, and have been given limited support during the Peña Nieto administration; the organizational framework they provide to collaborate in education between countries is helpful to address the educational needs of US-citizen students in Mexico. The US Department of Education should work with Mexican institutions to re-design programs and to evaluate their effectiveness, and collaborate with state education offices in this regard. The recently signed MOU between the California Department of Education, the University of California, and the Mexican *Secretaria de Educación* provides a useful framework.
- 2) Foster partnerships between US and Mexican local educational agencies to facilitate school access, appropriate placement, and curricular transitions for US-citizen students in Mexico.** Reviving and revising the “transfer document” will help with this. Local education agencies in the US, supported by state governments and school district policies and procedures, should provide parents and their children with information they need to experience as smooth of a transition as possible to Mexican schools. US schools should let families know about current education law in Mexico (e.g., paperwork needed to enroll), and provide students with documentation to summarize their curricular advancement.



- 3) Enhance research investments in collaboration with Mexican institutions to understand and improve schooling for US-citizen students in Mexico.** There is much we do not know about the educational well-being of US-citizen students in Mexico. Federal departments that finance educational research activities in the US—e.g., National Science Foundation, Institute of Education Sciences (Dept. of Education), National Institutes of Health—should collaborate with Mexican institutions to support educational research—e.g., *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología*, *Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación*—on joint “requests for proposals” about elementary and secondary schooling for US-citizen students throughout Mexico. The focus should be on research for improvement. Researchers and policymakers should use data from the Mexican Census to identify schools that are highly impacted by return migration, and researchers should address contextual and regional variation in the dynamics they analyze. Some research topics include: (a) academic achievement differences between US-citizen students and their Mexican peers, and associated factors; (b) alignments between US and Mexican curricular content and standards; (c) US educational aspirations of US-citizen students in Mexico; and (d) design and testing of teacher preparation initiatives in Mexico to meet the particular needs of US-citizen students (e.g., connecting classroom learning in Mexico with the life experiences of transnational students).

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