Going Home? Schooling in Mexico of Transnational Children

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The literature in international migration from Mexico to the U.S. has usually examined labor, juridical, political, and public health dimensions of the phenomena. However, the educational aspect of international migration is becoming a major concern for both countries. This article offers preliminary results from a survey of transnational students coming back from the U.S. to Mexican schools. The database includes information from a representative sample of public and private schools of Nuevo León (1st to 9th grade). It includes estimates of the number of transnational students, their school trajectories, and perspectives on their educational experience in both countries.

Key words: Transnational students, public schools, scholar policies, public educational systems.

¿Yendo a casa? La escolaridad de los niños transnacionales en México

El artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación sobre las percepciones de los estudiantes trasnacionales en Nuevo León acerca de los sistemas educativos públicos mexicano y estadounidense. Dicho estudio revela cómo las experiencias académicas transnacionales moldean distintas actitudes e impresiones en los estudiantes con respecto a ambos países en comparación con aquéllos que no las han tenido. El propósito de los autores es demostrar la falta de políticas escolares, en ambos países, que tomen en cuenta el proceso de educación trasnacional que está ocurriendo como resultado del fenómeno migratorio.

***Palabras clave**: Estudiantes transnacionales, escuelas públicas, políticas escolares, sistemas educativos públicos.*

Fecha de recepción: 26/06/06 Fecha de aceptación: 29/10/06

I. SYSTEMS DESIGNED FOR ONE TASK BUT CARRYING OUT ANOTHER

As a result of social fragmentation after Mexican Independence (1821) and the feeling of shame among Mexican leaders after the defeat of Mexico in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), schools in Mexico have been conceived as ameliorative instruments of nationalism since the 19th century (Vázquez, 1975). Hence, creating national unity was one of the main purposes articulated for public education even before the Mexican Revolution (of 1910-1920). As the statement of the Secretary of the Ministry of Education during the *Porfiriato*, Justo Sierra, illustrates: "The school will save our national personality" (Sierra, 1922; Vázquez, 1975:100). Even when at the time the public school system was tiny and almost entirely urban, Sierra claimed that schools could teach "the love for Mexico and its institutions" (Sierra, 1902; 1948:397).

Once the Mexican Revolution transformed the Mexican political institutions, the relations between elementary school curriculum and nationalism were reinforced. *Forjando patria* [forging a country] (Gamio, 1916; Dawson, 2004) was the leitmotiv of schools. Despite a scarcity of resources, substantial school building efforts were undertaken in the 1920s and 30s (and since) that ultimately have allowed practically all Mexican children access to at least elementary school education (grades 1-6). Since *secundaria* (middle school; grades 7-9) became compulsory in 1992, most Mexican children have attended those additional years of school as well. Even if Mexican schools have experienced deep changes over these one hundred years, today, they continue reproducing this nationalistic character with very little

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contestation (Rippberger and Staudt, 2002; Zúñiga, 1999). A core obligation of the Mexican public education is to teach Mexicanness, to teach love and respect for the country which is related to preparing children to navigate Mexico successfully as adults.

Traditionally, the U.S. public schools have not pursued quite the same task as their Mexican counterparts. Since its inception, public education in the United States has been less overtly nationally-oriented and less nationally controlled. To illustrate the former it can be said that the state curriculum standards prevail over the national ones. To exemplify the latter it can be said that the United States has only had the Department of Education since the Carter administration and national education expenditures are still much smaller than state and the local ones. Still, schooling in the United States has also operated with certain political geographical presumptions which consider their core task is to prepare students for future adult life within their school vicinity or at least the region, but almost certainly somewhere in the United States. Like Mexican public schools, the U.S. public schools have not been organized to presume that preparing students for transnational mobility is or needs to part of their task.

Yet both the assumptions -that the Mexican schools should prepare students for Mexican adulthood and that American schools should prepare students for U.S. adulthoods- are incomplete or inadequate for a growing portion of the student population. That is, students who spend periods of their school -age life in the United States and some others in Mexico. In 1998, Mexican demographers estimated that almost 900,000 school-aged children born in Mexico lived in the U. S. (Corona and Tuirán, 1998). Additionally, they had observed this migratory process was a two-way movement: between 1987 and 1992, about 161,000 minors returned to Mexico. However, their research did not tally how many of these minors would attend Mexican schools, nor did it look into how those who did enroll fared.

The meanings and educational consequences of this transnationalism have not been studied or evaluated much in Mexico. Nor is there much research yet on what can be learned about U.S. schooling considering the educational experiences of students previously enrolled in the United States who are now attending elementary or middle schools in Mexico. This article starts to correct these gaps by sharing results from the first phase of a research project titled "International Migration, School Trajectories, and Poverty." The first phase has focused on tallying the number of Mexican students in the state of Nuevo León who have transnational educational biographies—i.e., they have also attended school outside of Mexico, typically in the U.S.—and then describing the opportunities and obstacles they have encountered as transnational students. Based on on-site visits to 174 schools in the State of Nuevo León during the autumn of 2004, it was projected that for 2004-2005 school period elementary and middle schools in Nuevo León enrolled an estimated of 10,000 students who had educational background in U.S. schools. Some of those transnational students were clearly struggling academically in Mexico; some claimed to prefer U.S. schools; others were faring well in their Mexican education.

The Changing Patterns of U.S./Mexico Transmigration

For most of the seventy years after the Mexican Revolution, most international Mexican migrants were male rural workers who moved alone with the objective of having a short stay abroad in order to improve their own household economy (Goméz de León and Tuirán, 2000). Certainly, many decided to settle in the United States, but the greater part returned to Mexico where their families had stayed. Often, the process had an inter-generational cycle including multiple international trips of fathers on their own, then joined by sons, and then replaced by their sons. During decades, the migrant cycle flow had a specific function: rural workers in Mexico could have an opportunity to improve their income and, at the same time, the American agricultural market got some big benefits with this workforce supply.

Many factors have changed this longstanding pattern, which has not been eliminated, but has made it a minor part of substantively change in flow (Massey, Durand and Malone, 2002). New immigration laws in the United States—most significantly the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), included a broad amnesty for millions of undocumented Mexicans living in the United States and precipitated millions of family members of the amnestied to also petition for legalized status. The economic integration produced by NAFTA, the transformation of the Mexican economy connected to several crises, the NAFTA-related opening of protected industries, and new niches in the American economy welcoming newcomer labor have also changed substantially the previous flow.

Three important changes in the U.S./Mexico migration patterns can be observed. First, new destinations have appeared, and it is evident the presence of Mexican laborers and their families in such vastly different and distant states and regions as: Maine, Utah, Oregon, Florida, Minnesota, Nebraska, Tennessee, Iowa, both Carolinas, and Georgia (Wortham, Murillo and Hamann, 2001; Zuñiga and Hernández-León, 2005). Second, family migration is becoming more frequent. Women alone or wives are more often part of this migratory flow (Cerrutti and Massey, 2004; Villenas, 2001). In the mid-seventies more than 90% of the Mexican migrants made their international trips alone; today, more than 30% of them are making their trips with their families and more than 20% have children who are studying in American public schools (Zúñiga, 2000). Third, we see the coexistence of different migratory status within households and community enclaves, with some having obtained citizenship, others with temporary or permanent residency permits, and some lacking documentation. Surprisingly, those with secured legal status in the United States are, in many cases, those who are most transnationally mobile as they can take advantage of opportunities on both sides of the border at less risk and expense than those who need to sneak across. As Espinosa (1998) has noted, the return of families to Mexico is not just a wish; there is a permanent (or at least a large and stable) bidirectional migration flow now.

As a result of these processes, both Mexico and the U.S. are facing new challenges and opportunities that are radically different of those observed in the past. What can be observe today are families that move between these two countries, enrolling their children at local schools. A fact that has shed more light on this phenomenon is by examining longitudinally the enrollment in American public schools. In September 2000 the public school in Dalton, Georgia, the first system in that state to be outgrown by a Latino population, enrolled more than 2,700 Hispanic students (51.5%), most of whom were born in Mexico[1]. As recently as 1989, the Hispanic student enrollment tallied 151, less than four percent of the K-12 enrollment (Hamann, 2003). In many other school districts, the ratio of Hispanic enrollment increased in an equivalently spectacular manner during the last two decades (Garcia, 2001).

Schooling Transnational Students

The fact is, in significant numbers, there is now a student population pursuing its elementary and secondary levels of public education in two countries. In some ways, this pattern echoes the smaller and longer established flow of students between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland (see, for example, Reyes [2000] and Serrano [1998]), but different in that the United States and Mexico are not contained within a single larger governance structure. Between the United States and Mexico there are large numbers of minors passing from one school system to the other with minimal transition and without many policies aimed at attending this process (Zúñiga, 2000). Those policies that do exist are small and restricted (e.g., the U.S. Department of Education's Migrant Education program which is available only to students who have relocated in the last 36 months because of their parent(s)' relocation for agricultural work) and/or to students who are assimilationist in their orientation (e.g., ESL and transitional bilingual education programs).

Concurrent with and part and parcel of the rise of public education in the 19th and 20th centuries, schools have acted as agents of the nation state, with mononational orientations (Gellner, 1983). U.S. schools endeavor to have their students read, write, and speak Standard English; to have enrollees internalize a certain loyalty to the founding principles of the nation; and to ready them for a vibrant and highly competitive economy. In short, although they would rarely use this label to characterize their purpose, U.S. schools propose to be key sites for teaching the Protestant work ethics and having that ethics adds to the cohesiveness of what is a remarkably diverse society, demographically speaking.

Following, two quick ethnographic examples, both from Whitfield County Georgia, illustrate the juxtaposition of mononational schooling and transnational students. In November 2004, the following two compositions were written by Mexican-born third graders in response to the prompt: *What America means to me*:

> You know, what America means to me is very important. We fight for freedom. Some other countries are not free. We go to Church to learn about God in America. We believe President Bush is a good president. In America we celebrate President's day and one good reason is we have good laws when I grow up in America I am going to be a policeman... That will be a dream come true. America is wonderful. — (Javier Carranza[2])

1 We use "Hispanic" because this is the usual label for classifying school enrollment in the U.S. schools. But in fact, most of the students are Mexicans born in Mexico. Our observation is based on our personal experience. One of the authors has been leading research projects and bilingual school services in Dalton Public Schools and Whitfield County Schools since 1996. He has been visiting twice a year the schools of the area for ten years (Zúñiga, *et al*, 2002).

2 Pseudonym

> I like America because it's a safe country not like the other country. Most people do good things. People help each other. We take care of old people. Laws tell people [what to do] if they don't listen they go to jail. The judge and the police help people listen. This country means a lot to me. — (Victor Domínguez Siliezar –the student wrote his second last name as it is pronounced in English–)

For their part, Mexican schools seek to have their enrollees learn to speak, read, and write standard Mexican Spanish and to grow up to be members of a society that fuses a glorified indigenous past with the best of the West (Bonfil Batalla, 1979). At the same time, Mexican schools are to teach students to honor the sacredness of their homeland, to respect the classic Spanish language literary texts, to know the story of Tenochtitlán as a founding myth of the country, and to teach/interpret the value of Mexico's revolutionary history as a nationalistic and just event.

The mono-national design of the school clarifies how and why transnationally mobile students are classified in the United States as *English language learners, limited English proficient, ESOL students*, etc. Because of these identities, they are not migrant; they are not Mexican, let alone Oaxacan, Veracruzian, Mayan, or Zapotec[3]. Their school identity is a product of the national imperative of schooling to make foreign-origin students into students who fit within American norms and standards as quickly as possible. In turn, the proof of their successful integration is that they speak, read, and write standard English. On the other hand, these same students are given a second U.S. identity, they are classified as Hispanic or Latino (Oboler, 1995). These categories contain expectations, definitions, and parameters, per the racialized hierarchy of contemporary American society.

Although some of the Mexican cum Latino or Hispanic children will remain in the United States, some will return to Mexico. Upon their return, their American school and social identities will be challenged or ignored and they will become or revert to being children of Santiago, Nuevo León; Jalpa, Zacatecas; Atotonilco, Guanajuato; La Soledad, Michoacán, etc. If these Mexican students with U.S. school experience have weak Spanish from the perspective of their Mexican teachers, then it is probable that their local identities might also include *alumno migrante*, *pocho* (i.e. Mexican individual who has not mastered Spanish well), or *méxico-americano*. These identities embed certain presumed educational dispositions and perhaps compel Mexican educators to erase the effects of *norteamericanización* from the student to rescue/restore that student's identification with Mexico (which may or may not be their country of birth, though it likely is the country of their parents' birth).

Mexican schools do not have an informal or official equivalent of the U.S.'s *limited English proficiency*. There are students with limited Spanish proficiency but this skill status is not the basis for a category of *limited Spanish proficient* students[4]. In the United States there is not a category *transnational* student, nor an equivalent. In both systems, the relocated student is viewed as someone who will subsequently stay and that becomes the underlying logic for how they are responded to. Neither system readily contemplates schooling as if it were or could be a joint international task. Nor does either system imagine preparing or supporting students who concurrently feel Mexican and American, who are of two countries, who seek to be successful in two economies, or who are experts in two ways of living. Schools perhaps understand that students can be *between* two worlds, but they do not ask whether students can be *of* two worlds? Our goal has been to find, in Mexico, students who are of both the U.S. and Mexico (at least biographically) and to consider how these biographic facts are salient to students' aspirations, identities, dispositions toward schooling, and educational trajectories.

II. METHODOLOGY

In their recent book, Péquignot and Tripier (2000) invited contemporary social scientists to set aside their traditional antagonisms and rivalries regarding theories and methodologies. Instead, they asked social scientists to take seriously the principle of complementarity, particularly in regards to issues of scale, objects of study, and research strategy. In their treatise on what constitutes "scientifically-based education research", members of a specially convened National Research Council (2002) panel also recommended pursuing research questions using multiple and complementary strategies. We, a sociologist trained to work at intermediate and macro-scales and an anthropologist more accustomed to working at more micro-scales (like schools and classrooms), have accepted the invitation of Péquignot and Tripier, applying it to the fields of educational research and research on international migration. The empirical work presented after this section juxtaposes ethnographic data (like key informant interviews) with the quantitative data collected in thousands of questionnaires.

3 As previously noted, there is a federal policy category migrant student in the United States. That status, related to student's movement and parents' employment, does not necessarily imply an international biography.

4 Mexican educational policy does recognize and offer bilingual programs for students who speak indigenous languages (e.g., Nahuatl, Mixteco, Maya), but that accommodation is not an accommodation to international movement.

Both of us, from our differing disciplinary perspectives, have spent much of the last ten years studying the same complex educational phenomen—the participation of hundreds of thousands of Latin American born children in U.S. schools, Mexican schools, or both. We are each interested in studying and understanding the education of transnational youth and the school, community, and policy dimensions that shape these students' experiences. Moreover, we both agree that the disciplinary tools that each of us bring to the table are complementary. Our research design reflects traditional ethnographic techniques and perspectives and it includes the use of surveys and quantitative comparisons. We hope this blend of methodologies allows our study of transnational students who enroll in Mexican schools after having attended U.S. schools to span from micro- to macro-dimensions. We are interested in noting the size and disbursal of this phenomenon, but also the variation within it and the perspectives of those living these binational educational trajectories.

A central proposition of ethnography is to discover how those being studied make sense of and respond to the world. Ethnography is, thus, particularly useful in education research because it supports inquiry of some important topics: The vision teachers have for various types of students (Hamann, et al., 2001), the ways students take on various identities and roles for various social and academic tasks (Fisherkeller, 1997; Harklau, 2000), the means and criteria educational stakeholders use to develop working taxonomies of differentiation—jocks, geeks, druggies, but also immigrant versus Chicano (Valenzuela, 1999) and *authentic* Puerto Ricans versus Nuyoricans (Reyes, 2000; Serrano, 1998). These and other aspects of identity, group assignment, action, and disposition are all little explored dimensions of the transnational migration of students between the United States and Mexico. Understanding of the perspectives and experiences of students with background in both school systems are especially scarce. At the same time, the scale of transnational migration, both geographic and quantitative, requires examining this topic with more than just micro, local perspectives. To understand the number of Mexican youth with previous experience in U.S. schools or to identify any trends or patterns in their experience related to where in the U.S. Mexican students have been or how geographically stable their U.S. experience was (Did they attend schools in one district or many?), requires us to use different methodologies and to operate at a different scale than is customary of ethnography. For these latter questions we need to adapt the traditional local focus of ethnography and supplement it with research strategies better suited to macro-scale questions.

So, one premise of our transdisciplinary approach is to demonstrate the compatibility of ethnographic methods with other methods characteristic of sociology and social science more generally. More precisely, we want to demonstrate that local ethnographic observations can contribute to better comprehension of macrosocial phenomena like the binational movement of students.

Our methodological focus also embeds its own transnational dimension. One of us (Zúñiga) is a Mexican sociologist who, in addition to focusing his whole career on various social dimensions of transnational movement between the U.S. and Mexico, has overseen his Mexican university's participation in a binational educational partnership that includes sending Mexican trained bilingual teachers to teaching assignments in the southern United States since 1996. The other of us (Hamann) is an anthropologist of education, who began his teaching career leading a bilingual family literacy program for Mexican immigrant parents and their children and who, since then, has developed a double focus in U.S. schools' responses to newcomer and non-native English-speaking students and in the implementation of federal, state, and locally-initiated school reform efforts. Our collective bicultural focus is crucially important for our understanding of the trajectories and experiences of transnational students in both the United States and Mexico. Zúñiga brings a richer understanding of Mexican school organization and teacher training than Hamann does; but the latter has a richer background studying the U.S. experiences of Latino students and of knowledge the U.S. educational policy currents (e.g., debates over bilingual education, high stakes testing) that shaped the U.S. portion of the experiences that the transnational students we studied referred.

It is crucial for the viability of our study that we, collectively, are able to understand: (a) the historical and political foundations of public education in the United States and Mexico, (b) the ethos and the "invisible curriculum" of schooling in both countries, (c) and the quotidian habits and patterns of educational interaction in school contexts in both countries. A foreign observer in Mexico, even one with full fluency in Mexican Spanish, will have difficulty making sense of the mural on the wall of the Escuela Primaria Nocturna Dos Ejidos in Monterrey,

which, like a lot of public school murals in Mexico dedicates a large section to the Día de Muertos (November 2) with dressed skeletons and poems written by students like the one transcribed below:

> A *La maestra Blanca (Blanca, the teacher)*
> *hizo a la muerte enojar (who made death angry)*
> *pues regañaba a sus alumnos (because she chastised her students)*
> *que sólo querían jugar (who only wanted to have fun [in the school])*

On the other hand, it is difficult for a Mexican researcher to make sense of why there are uniformed policemen stationed at Murray County High School in Georgia (as at many U.S. high schools). And, it is similarly difficult for such a researcher to understand why a math teacher at the same school would make a bargain with his students to dye his hair green if they all were able to solve a particular equation.

With these brief illustrations we mean to highlight that schooling in the two nations is comparable not just in terms of formal pedagogy, curriculum, school organization, etc., but also in terms of the habits, customs, and traditions of daily interaction. Thus, macrosocial characterizations, like those that would be captured by comparing formal structures can be usefully, even necessarily complemented by the microsocial if we are to understand the social terrain negotiated by transnational students. We hope that the complementarity in our experiences and training, compensates for any individual limitations in our experiences and in the methodologies we are most comfortable with.

In Mexico, it is unknown how many public school students have had previous experiences in U.S. schools. When such children come/return to Mexico and because of their physical appearance, last name and place of residence, they seem like any other child. So, to make an estimate of the frequency of this phenomenon, we selected a representative sample of public schools in the state of Nuevo León (with a sampling error of ±5%). Our sample was stratified by density of migration and enrollment per *municipio* (municipality). This strategy guaranteed that we would include representative schools in the regions with highest populations and in those with highest migration rates. Ultimately, we came up with a sample of 174 schools (90 *primarias* (elementary school) and 84 *secundarias* (middle school)) and visited each one.

At each school a simple sub-sampling strategy was deployed: once members of our research team arrived at a school, they selected a class from each grade (if there was more than one class per grade level). Then, they surveyed everyone in the selected class. At the youngest grade levels (first, second, and third grades of *primaria*), students were surveyed using an oral group interview strategy, because students in these early grades lacked the Spanish language literacy skills to accurately respond to a written survey. The group interview always began with the question: Has anyone here ever been to school in the United States? Anyone who answered 'yes' was then asked a number of questions individually. Older students in non-terminal grades (i.e., fourth and fifth grades of *primaria* and the first and second years of *secundaria* —the equivalent of seventh and eighth grades) were all given a short written questionnaire of nine questions, with those who answered 'yes' to having studied in the United States were asked to answer some additional questions about their experience. In the terminal years—grades six and nine—all students answered a longer questionnaire. Also, in this case, any student who confirmed that they had previous experience in U.S. schools was then asked to answer an additional battery of questions about both their U.S. experience and their experience coming (back) to Mexican schools. All told, at the 174 schools we surveyed 14,473 students in grades one to nine.

Additionally, we carried out 62 interviews with transnational students. Many of these interviews were individual; others were conducted using a small group format to meet the students' wishes. Also, 18 teachers were interviewed regarding their awareness of and experience with transnationally mobile students. Interviews were taped and then transcribed. The interview sample was opportunistic rather than random, and we had a preference for older students who are expected to be more articulate. However, the transcriptions showed that the diverse sample illustrated the heterogeneity of transnational students' circumstances and experiences.

III. PRELIMINARY RESULTS FROM THE NUEVO LEON CASE

Nuevo León is a state in northeastern Mexico, neither far from Texas, nor from the Gulf of Mexico. Its capital, Monterrey, is considered one of the most important industrial cities in Mexico as well as the first industrial city in Latin America. Its industrialization began in the 1870s, concurrent with the construction of railroads that made it a crucial transportation

hub, which, with the addition of several highways, it still is today. Industrialization began with local investment but relatively quickly was complemented and expanded by investments from the United States and from Europe, which has meant that Monterrey has had important international links for more than a century.

Actually, Nuevo León shares a short border with Texas, though its main physical links to the United States are through the narrow Mexican border state of Tamaluipas. Because of this proximity to Texas, Nuevo León has developed deep and multi-faceted economic relations with that U.S. state that date back to Texas' declaration of independence from Mexico in 1836 if not before. From the point of view of migration, Nuevo León has one of the oldest migration traditions compared to any other Mexican state, dating back in the 19th century. That said, today Nuevo León is classified as a region of mostly low migration density by Mexican government demographers[5].

According to estimates by CONAPO, the Mexican government agency that collects such statistics, of the 51 *municipios* in Nuevo León (*municipios* are similar to counties), 35 are considered to have low or very low migration densities, fourteen are considered to have intermediate migration densities, and two, both rural, are considered high or very high (Tuirán, Fuentes and Ávila, 2002). On the other hand, because of the relative economic vibrancy of Monterrey, Nuevo León is the receiving destination for a lot of internal migration, including some by way of the United States (Zúñiga, 1993). In one *secundaria* we visited on the outskirts of the capital, we found just one student with U.S. school experience (she was born in San Luis Potosí and had spent many years in Texas), but school leaders estimated that 70% of their enrollment came from other parts of Mexico.

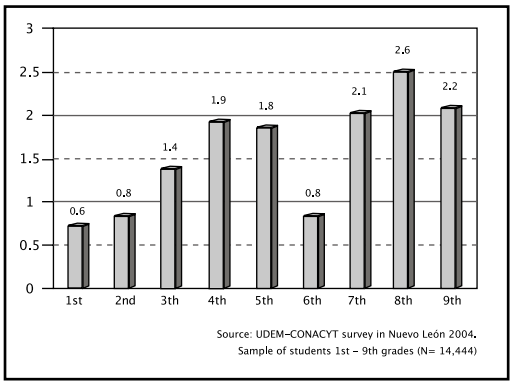
The state of Nuevo León has a centralized school system with 2,528 *primarias* (1st to sixth grades) that enrolled 497,795 students in 2004 and 782 *secundarias* (7th to 9th grades) that enrolled 206,809 students. Total enrollment was, thus, 704,604. Most of the schools were basically in Monterrey, the metropolitan region where almost 90% of the state's population resides.

The size and characteristics of our sample permitted us to estimate the number of students with U.S. school experience differentiated by grade level and density of migration in the *municipio*. From the survey, we identified 242 students who had previously been enrolled in U.S. schools, representing 1.6% of the sample. From this, we estimated that in 2004 there were between 9,371 and 10,357 (mean 9,864) transnational students enrolled in Nuevo León's public *primarias* and *secundarias*. From our methods, we do not know how many youth there might have been in Nuevo León who were age-and-grade eligible to attend school, but did not enroll.

As one might expect, the proportion of transnational students varies by age and grade. Graphic 1 shows that the proportion with U.S. school experience increases in higher grades. Students in the first three years of *primaria* averaged one in a hundred with U.S. school experience. Students in the final three years of *primaria* had a 1.5% U.S. school experience prevalence. And, two out of every one hundred in *secundaria* had previous U.S. school experience[6].

The proportion of transnational students enrolled in rural schools is higher than that in urban areas. In rural schools, we found that 3% of students had U.S. school experience, compared to 1.4% of their urban counterparts. These proportions further varied in ways we would expect, with more students having U.S. school experience if they were from intermediate or high density migration zones. In the low and very low density regions, 1.5% of students had U.S. school experience. The percentage rose to 2.3% for regions of intermediate migration density, and it nearly quintupled (7.6%), compared to the state average, in high density migration zones (See Table 1).

Graphic 1
Percentage of students with transnational experience in Nuevo León, Mexico by grade



5 Density of migration is measured using an index developed by the Consejo Nacional de Población de México (CONAPO) that combines the following variables: (a) number of households that receive remittances from the United States, (b) number of household from which at least one person has emigrated to the United States in the previous five years, (c) the number of households with returned migrants, and (d), as the denominator, the total number of households in the municipio (CONAPO 2002).

6 As we can see in graphic 1, the percentage of transnational students in 6th grade is lower than those of 4th and 5th grades. Now, we cannot explain this observation.

Table 1
Number and percentage of transnational students by migratory density in Nuevo León, Mexico

Density	Transnational	Not transnational	Total
Low	202 (1.5%)	13,003 (98.5%)	13,205 (100%)
Medium	25 (2.9%)	1,045 (97.1%)	1,070 (100%)
High	15 (7.6%)	183 (92.4%)	198 (100%)
Total	242 (1.7%)	14,231 (98.3%)	14, 473 (100%)

Source: UDEM-CONACYT Survey in Nuevo León 2004. Sample of students 1st-9th grades (N=14,473)

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS

On several demographic variables, transnational students in Nuevo León were much like their non-transnational peers. The split in gender of transnational students was almost 50/50 (actually 50.5% boys y 49.5% girls). Looking at gender and grade level, this near 50/50 split generally holds. The only exception is sixth grade which there are notably fewer girls. (See Table 2).

On other variables, there were some substantive differences between transnational and non-transnational. Students with transnational school experience tended to be a little older than their non-transnational grade mates. (See Table 2.) This difference likely captures the greater likelihood that a transnational student might repeat a grade because of limitations in their academic Spanish proficiency, proficiency that U.S. schools do not do much to develop.

Table 2
Comparing demographic variables between transnational and not transnational students* in Nuevo León, Mexico

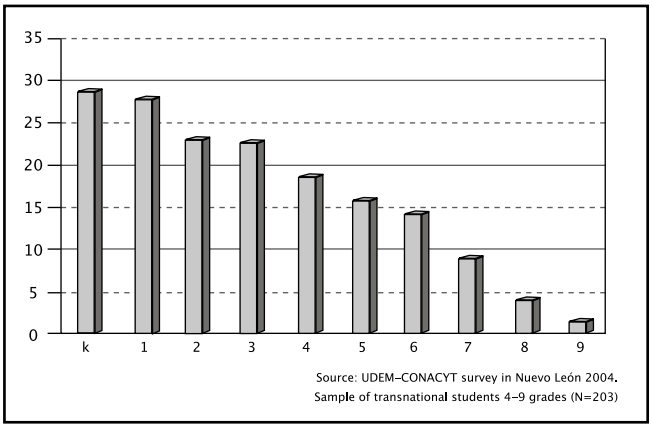
	Transnational		Not transnational	
Grade	Average of age	% female	Average of age	% female
1-3		46.1		47.7
4	9.1	50	9.4	53.5
5	10.2	60	10.5	48.6
6	11.5	36.4	11.4	47.3
7	12.2	47.1	12.4	51.0
8	13.3	46.0	13.3	47.2
9	14.2	45.0	14.2	49.8

*Note: transnational students are those who have gone to school in two or more countries. Students who have lived in two countries but only attended school in one are excluded from this tally.

The majority (90%) of transnational students in Nuevo León had lived with their families or family members when they were in the United States. However, it is interesting to note that 3% indicated that they had been with family friends, and that 1% had lived with unrelated persons from their hometown. It is perhaps disquieting to note that 6% of our transnational sample had lived in the U.S. with people they identified as *other*—i.e. non-kin, non-friends of family. This portion of the transnational student population clearly needs to be analyzed further in future research and publications.

What grades had Nuevo León's transnational students studied in the United States? Almost 30% (28.6%) had been in the United States for kindergarten; 28.1% had been there for first grade, 22.7% for second, 22.6% for third, 18.2% for fourth, 15.8% for fifth, 14.3% for sixth, 7.4% for seventh, 3.4% for eighth, and only 1.5% for ninth. (See Graphic 2). The majority (58.7%) of students with U.S. school experience had attended U.S. schools for one year or less, compared to 16.9% that had attended for two years, 12.7% for three to five years, and 11.5% that had gone to school mostly in the United States (i.e., six to nine years there).

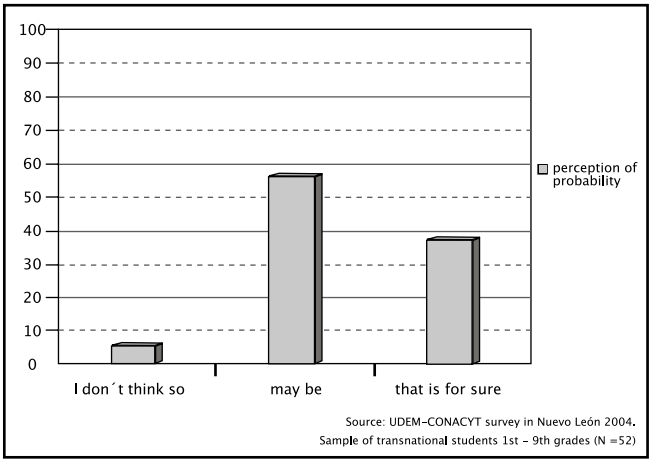
Graphic 2
Transnational students in Nuevo León, México: grades attended in the U.S.



Source: UDEM-CONACYT survey in Nuevo León 2004.
Sample of transnational students 4-9 grades (N=203)

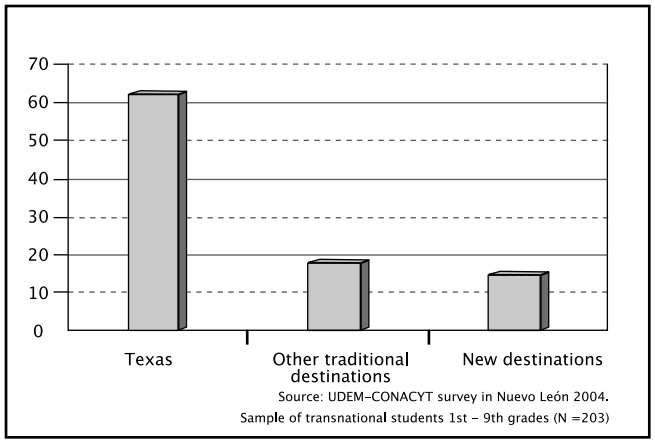
When, on the longer survey, we asked sixth and ninth grade students with U.S. school experience if they thought it was probable that they would attend U.S. schools again in the future, 5.8% responded that it was unlikely; 55.8% considered it probable; while 38.5% responded that they were sure they would attend U.S. schools again. (See Graphic 3). In short, Graphs 2 and 3 show that students are moving between school systems in the two countries, in Mexico at the moment of our survey, but not necessarily permanently (back) in Mexico.

Graphic 3
Transnational students in Nuevo León, México:
Do you think you will continue studying in the U.S.?



Nuevo León has a long history of economic and social ties with Texas, so it is not surprising that the primary U.S. destination for our transnational sample was that state; 65% had attended schools there. That contrasts with California, the next most likely U.S. destination where 20% had studied. (See Graphic 4.) Intriguing and consistent with other research we have have carried out—Zúñiga and Hernández (2005) and Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann (2001)—is that a little more than 20% of those who had studied in the U.S. had done so in "new destinations," including most regions of the United States: Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Masachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington.

Graphic 4
Transnational students in Nuevo León, México:
destinations in the U.S.



All of the transnational students we surveyed and interviewed had studied English when they were in the United States. We conducted a secondary analysis of their experience with English as a second language. Our study of this important topic was limited to students' self-reporting. In the first place we asked them to rate their comfort with English on a sliding scale. Second, we asked the sixth and ninth grade survey respondents to compare whether they considered themselves stronger in English or in Spanish. Third we asked this subsample to describe their use of and experience with Spanish in the United States and with English in Mexico. Finally, in a number of interviews, we allowed students to code-switch between English and Spanish or to respond mostly in English, even though we always initiated the interview in Spanish, and Spanish was the obviously stronger language of most of our field research team members.

In relation to learning English, 41% of the transnational students indicated that they spoke it well. That compares to 51% who indicated some proficiency in English, while 8% declared that they spoke it just a little or not at all. Reported competence in English related directly to the number of years students had lived in the United States. Eighty percent of the transnational students indicated that Spanish was their primary language; 19% indicated that English was; and 1% indicated that they were equally competent in both. Several interviewees reported that they continued to sustain their English in Mexico by using it with siblings. A secundaria student reported that her English teacher (English is taught as a foreign language at this level) often sought her help with pronunciation.

The responses of the sixth and ninth grades varied in terms of their experience with Spanish in the United States. On one hand, we had some who had attended schools where any use of Spanish was prohibited or limited for ESL classes (27%); on the other, we saw students who had attended schools where they used Spanish at any time and place (38%). Others were allowed to use Spanish at recess time (15%), just for school homework assignments (5%), just to communicate with their parents during parent meetings (perhaps as interpreters) (1%), or to help classmates who could not understand English (14%). (See Table 3.)

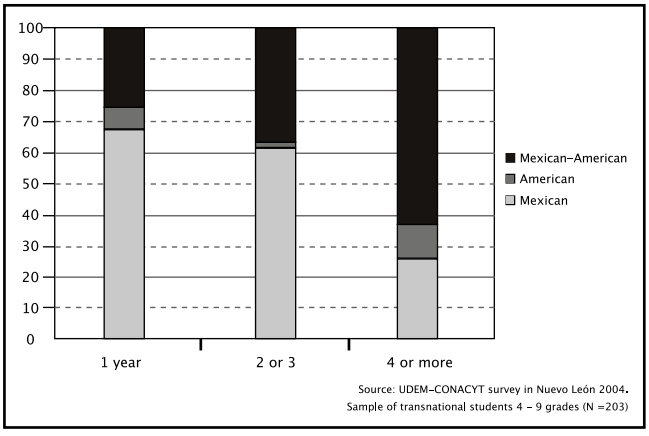
Students reported a broad and contradictory gamut of experiences with English in Mexican schools. Five percent said they were prohibited to speak English at any time at school, while 27% reported that they were allowed to use it whenever they liked. Ten percent reported they used English only to help a classmate (it was unclear whether this meant helping in an English as a foreign language class or helping a limited-Spanish-proficient who, perhaps, had recently come from the United States). Three percent said they used English at recess time to communicate with other English speaking classmates. Nevertheless, the most common reported venue for using English at Mexican schools was in the English class (55%). (See Table 3.) These responses allowed us to identify an irony in Mexican schooling. Those children and adolescents who were most advanced in their study of English because of their experience in the United States were only allowed to use that skill academically in a class—English—that presumed they were not yet proficient.

Table 3
Uses of Spanish in the American schools and English in Mexican schools (percentage of responses)

	Spanish in the U.S.	English in Mexico
Never	10%	5%
Bilingual Classes	17%	
Do homework	5%	
English Classes		55%
Talking with my parents in school meetings	1%	
Help a peer	14%	10%
During recess	15%	3%
Always and everywhere	38%	27%
Total	100% (59 answers) (52 students)	100% (57 answers) (52 students)

In a portion of our study with echoes of Keefe and Padilla's (1987) and Oboler's (1995) studies of how U.S. Latinos ethnically identified, we asked our transnational student subsample how they identified in terms of nationality. A little more than half identified themselves as "mexicanos"; 37% self-identified as "mexico-americanos"; and only 6% identified themselves as "americanos." Country of birth, number of years living in the United States, and the associated preference for English or Spanish were all correlated in expectable ways with the nationalities with which transnational students identified. As one can observe in Graphic 5, the identity "mexico-americano" was more likely to be preferred by those who had spent more years in the United States. Self-identification as "americano" was not correlated with time in the United States, rather it was directly associated with place of birth. Practically all who identified themselves as "americano" had been born in the United States; legally, they were American citizens. But, we also encountered a few who identified themselves as "americanos" who had been born in Mexico and some who had been born in the United States but who did not identify as "americano." Why the correlations are partial rather than complete is a topic that deserves more thorough investigation on a case-by-case basis to understand why children and adolescents self-identify with one country, the other, or both. It would also be worthwhile to investigate how this self-ascribed identity aligns with future orientation (in terms of desire to stay in Mexico or return to the United States, in terms of educational and career aspirations, and so on).

Graphic 5
Transnational students in Nuevo León, México: national identities by number of years in the U.S.



The survey allowed us to collect perception data regarding schooling in the United States and in Mexico. In the first place, students in Mexico with U.S. school experience compose a classic "hidden population" whose experiences need to be included in a full appraisal of whether U.S. schools indeed "leave no child behind." However, they are a population that is excluded by research carried out only within the territorial boundaries of the United States. Although our research design did not include direct review of U.S. report cards and other official measurements of student performance, it is interesting to know what students thought about their U.S. school experience, an impression that likely is intertwined with their general memory of living in the United States. Asking the transnational students whether they liked or disliked their U.S. school experiences, only one in ten asserted that they did not like U.S. schools or only liked them a little ("no les gustaron nada" or "les gustaron poco"). In contrast, 30% affirmed that they liked U.S. schools a lot ("les gustaron mucho") and 40% were even more favorably effusive ("les gustaron muchísimo").

These results contrast with much of the U.S. research literature on Latino education, which frequently complains that it is often traumatic for Latino immigrant students (García 2001; Trueba, 1983, 1998). Our findings are in the vein of Greta Gibson's 1997 article—"Complicating the Immigrant/Involuntary Minority Typology"—at least in the sense that these data suggest more variation and complexity in transnational students ("immigrant students" in the U.S. literature) school experience. On the other hand, our data may be catching the relative friendliness and warmth of U.S. elementary school experience, particularly in the grade levels below hard-core high stakes testing (i.e., below third grade in Texas), or capturing a sympathetic response in bilingual, ESL, or ESOL classes, which, given that most of our transnational sample had spent a year or less in U.S. schools, would have constituted a major portion of their U.S. experience.

Perhaps more interesting than the transnational students' general impressions of U.S. schooling is an examination of how many wanted to eventually continue their education in the United States. Their answers reported were as follows: 74% expressed a desire to return compared to 26% who did not want to return to U.S. schools. This desire was associated with favorable images of U.S. schools and teachers. Below is a weighed sample of open-ended responses by transnational students about their U.S. school experience (including all of the negative comments and about a third of the positive ones):

• *A mí me gustaron mucho los maestros, son muy buenos. [I liked the teachers a lot; they are good.]*

• *A mí me gustó la escuela porque te divertías tanto. [I liked the school because it was a lot of fun.]*

• *Aquí no hay transporte escolar, me gustaría uno. [Here (in Mexico) there is no transportation to school. I would like it if there were.]*

• *Están más bonitas y mejores. [(U.S. schools) are more attractive and better.]*

• *Están mejores porque tienen más recreo. [They are better because they have more recess time.]*

• *Están muy bien, con muchas facilidades para estudiar. [They are good with a lot of facilities for studying.]*

• *Extraño a mi maestra. [I miss my teacher.]*

• *I liked the school because the teachers were nice.*

• *Me gustó porque llevábamos ropa libre todos los días. [I liked them because we didn't have to wear uniforms.]*

• *Nos dan lonches y nos dejan dormir un rato. [They gave us lunch and allowed us to nap for a while.]*

• *Me gustó que cuando salías del salón estabas dentro. [I liked that when you left a classroom you were still inside.]*

• *Son muy padres y aprendes rápido el inglés. [They are very caring and you learn English quickly.]*

• *Que sus equipos de deportes eran muy buenos. [Their sports teams were very good.]*

• *Sí, que te enseñan más cosas. [Yes, they teach you a lot more things.]*

• *Sí, tienen computadores, muchos maestros, deportes. [Yes, they do have computers, a lot of teachers, sports.]*

• *Son más horas de estudio. [The school day is longer.]*

• *Son más lujosas. [They are more luxurious.]*

• *Son muy diferentes las escuelas y aprendes más cosas, son muy divertidas. [The schools are very different and you learn more things. They are very fun.]*

• *El ambiente es muy feo. [The environment is very ugly/ mean.]*

• *Lo que no me gustó es que nadie hablaba español [What I did not like was that no one spoke Spanish.]*

• *No me gustaba. [I did not like it.]*

• *Que los maestros enseñan un poco menos. [The teachers teach a little less.]*

As one can see, only the last four comments described negative impressions of U.S. schools. These were the only four written negative responses. One wrote that the environment was "feo." That term in Spanish indicates negative interpersonal relations, violence, isolation, and rejection. In constrast, there were many positive comments (only a third of which are reproduced here). Most students reported that they liked the way teachers treated them; one even noted that she missed her former teacher. One of the favorable testimonials was even written in English (although all the survey prompts had been in Spanish).

Students reported liking the infrastructure they encountered in U.S. schools—be it facilities for learning, school transportation, cafeteria offerings, or other resources. They also liked the freedom of not having uniforms (in Mexico most schools have uniforms, whereas most U.S. schools do not) and that U.S. schooling included more recess time and sports. In contrast, Mexican schools focus more on learning math and literacy from the early grades onward. In Mexico the relation between teachers and students is more formal. Frequently, students are expected to form lines to enter classrooms, to sit in assigned seats, and to keep silent.

In the direct comparisons that the transnational students made of U.S. and Mexican schools in our survey, this pattern of more favorably regarding U.S. schools persisted, expecially in regards to perceptions of teachers. Thirty-seven percent of the students considered U.S. teachers to be "excelentes" compared to 18% of Mexican teachers who were so ranked. In the second highest category—"buenos maestros" [good teachers]—54% of U.S. teachers and 60% of Mexican teachers were ranked. Summing up the views of the transnational students, 91% described U.S. teachers as excellent or good and 78% placed Mexican teachers in these two categories. Such regard for both systems is cause for optimism, but that there is a significant pro-U.S. preference is clear. Ten percent of our sample classified Mexican teachers as "regulares" and another 4% classified them as "bad" [mal]. None classified the U.S. teachers as bad and only 4% characterized U.S. teachers as "regular' or OK.

Examining the data a little more closely, we can confirm that from the perspective of the transnational students sample, schooling in Mexico has not been chaotic, frustrating or incoherent even though they have spent time in another system(s) that was not formally aligned with what they have encountered in Mexico. Our preliminary data suggest that most students develop the capacity to be comfortable and satisfied with both systems. Few seem to be trapped between the two systems (although our sampling method of administering surveys at school would not have counted any prospective student who had dropped out of the Mexican system even if they were still eligible to do so). Our data justify the term we have been using here—transnational student—because these seem to be students capable of negotiating two schooling universes, two languages, and two projects of nation states.

V. COMPARING TWO VISIONS: TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS AND NON-TRANSNATIONAL STUDENTS

Our sample of 4th to 9th graders (n=10,080) was composed of 9,972 who were born in México, 93 were born in the United States, and 15 in other countries (including Venezuela, Cuba, South Korea, Colombia, Switzerland, Germany, and others). A relatively small portion (1.6%) of those born in Mexico had transnational school experience, where as almost half of those who had been born in the United States had attended school for at least a year there. Thinking of this in another way, almost a fourth (22.3%) of the transnational students attending public schools in Nuevo León were U.S. citizens born in the United States. The 15 born in countries different from the United States or Mexico were children of immigrants to Mexico and reported having only been enrolled in Mexican schools. Yet, thinking of this a third way, not all of those born in the United States and now living in Nuevo León

had experience in U.S. schools, only 45 out of the 93 did (48%). This means we must recognize the presence of American students by birth obtaining all of their elementary and secondary schooling in Mexico.

Taking into account both variables—country of birth and countr(ies) of schooling—we found five types of students. Most numerous (n=9,816) were those born in Mexico who had only attended school in Mexico. The second largest category (n=156) were those born in Mexico who had some experience in U.S. schools. Third (n=48) were those born in the U.S. who had never studied in U.S. schools. Fourth (n=45) were those born in the U.S. who had school experience in both the United States and Mexico. And finally (n=15) there were the fifteen born neither in the United States nor Mexico who were enrolled in Mexican schools. It struck as interesting to study whether students in these five categories had meaningful differences in their views towards schooling and in their future aspirations.

Considering the results from the longer surveys of sixth and ninth graders (Table 4), we can see that the first group (Mexican-born with experience only in Mexican schools) divided into two general groups in regards to their attitude toward the United States and Mexico. One large group (43%) claimed that they liked Mexico more and the other large group (39%) claimed that they liked both countries the same. Only 13% claimed to prefer the United States and 5% claimed they did not like either country.

For the second type of student (those born in México but with transnational school experience) the perspective is notably different. The percentage who prefers Mexico diminishes substantially to 17%, and that who prefers the United States rises to 31%. However, most notably, half of this group noted that they liked both countries equally, while only two percent indicated that they liked neither.

A preference for Mexico declines a bit further for the third type of student (those born in the United States but who have not studied there). The majority (59%) in this group confirmed that they liked both countries, while 35% indicated a preference for the United States. The preference for Mexico was only 6%. The perspective of the fourth group (those born in the United States who have school experience there) was similar to the third group, except the preference for the United States was even higher, rising to 50%, with fewer (43%) in that group indicating they liked both countries. The students born in third countries had a range of opinions, but that group was so small it was difficult to determine any tendency.

These comparisons show a decline in the preference for Mexico from the first group to the fourth and a corresponding rise in the preference for the United States across the same range. Yet, equally striking is the consistent high percentages in each of the groups that like both countries. Both country of birth and experience of schooling in a country seem to be related to liking that country (supporting the premise that schooling leads to thinking favorably about the nation state), but the effect on not liking another country, if there is such an effect, seems more modest.

Table 4
Comparing Mexico and the U.S.:
Do you like Mexico or the U.S.?

	Born in Mexico		Born in the U.S.		
	without transnational schooling	with transnational schooling	without transnational schooling	with transnational schooling	Born in other countries
Mexico	43%	17%	6%	7%	20%
U.S.	13%	31%	35%	50%	20%
Both	39%	50%	59%	43%	60%
None	5%	2%	---	---	---
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

When we asked the students a more specific question—In which country does one live better?— the choice "Mexico" was again less common for those with U.S. experience (birth and/or school) than those without it. In the first group of students (born in Mexico, schooled only in Mexico), 44% said one lives better in México compared to only 28% who thought living in the United States was better. Those opinions flip-flopped for the second group (born in Mexico, but with U.S. school experience); 55% considered that life was better in the U.S. and none thought it was better in Mexico. The third and fourth groups were even more emphatic, with 82% and 79% respectively, indicating that life was better in the U.S. Nonetheless, it is intriguing to note that the largest group of transnational students (those born in Mexico) were most likely (40%) to affirm that one lived well in both countries.

This tendency repeats itself in the direct comparisons of schools in both countries. Generally, the perception is that U.S. schools are better than Mexican ones, with that perception more likely among those with U.S. experience (in school

and/or by birth). Sixty-seven percent of those born in Mexico and without U.S. school experience thought U.S. schools were better. That percentage rose to 78% among Mexican-born students with U.S. school experience, and reached 92% among those who were born in the United States (i.e., groups three and four).

At the same time expectations/allegations of poorer treatment of Mexicans in U.S. schools were less common than expectations of fair treatment. More than half (54%) of the Mexican students without U.S. school experience offered that schools there would be fair, although 23% indicated that they thought Mexicans would be less well treated than other students in the United States. Still, these opinions can be read in a different way: 77% of those without U.S. school experience shared their prejudice regarding the U.S. system; more had a favorable prejudice. Those with experience in U.S. schools were less likely to think U.S. schools treated Mexicans less well even when 11% of the students with experience in both systems did offer such an opinion.

As a final topic, we share our data regarding how students in the different groups thought of each other. A third (34%) of the non-transnational students in Nuevo León thought the transnational students were just like them, while 20% thought that transnational students were different and 16% said they did not know how to explain. Among the group that perhaps had the greatest incentive to prove their "Mexicanness" (i.e., those born in Mexico but with U.S. school experience), fully 55% insisted that transnational students were just like non-transnational students, with only 7% disagreeing. However, because the percentage of "don't knows" and non-answers to this prompt was so high (see Table 5), it was difficult to draw more definite conclusions about this topic. Further study of this topic, perhaps using additional methods, seems warranted.

Table 5
Comparing transnational and non-transnational students: How are they?

	Born in Mexico without transnational schooling	Born in Mexico with transnational schooling	Born in the U.S. without transnational schooling	Born in the U.S. with transnational schooling
Like us	34%	55%	33%	27%
They are different	20%	7%	9%	18%
I don't know how to explain	16%	7%	25%	9%
No answer	30%	31%	33%	46%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Our study began with the premise that school systems in the United States and Mexico are neither aligned nor linked with each other. Both systems presume, irrespective of a student's social or national background, that enrolled students will stay in the system and then lead their adult lives within the nation-state, likely within the vicinity or region. With the exception of a handful of tiny programs like those described in Flores (1996), school systems in neither country expect or make accommodations for transnational students. (U.S. schools do make at least linguistic accommodations to immigrant students, but as all of the transnational students in our sample suggest, many Mexican newcomering students in U.S. schools are not permanent immigrants).

Nevertheless, from our preliminary analysis of the data collected in Nuevo León, most transnational students seem to have figured out how to move between the two systems. (Here again our caveat that our methodology would not have counted school-eligible out-of-school youth should be repeated). The transnational students mostly seem to be able to put together what has not been put together for them yet. This means they are transnational students in the fullest sense of the term; that is, they can negotiate from one system to another. Our study captured a fondness among Mexican transnational students toward U.S. schools. It would be interesting to carry out a corresponding study in U.S. schools of students with experience in Mexican schools to see if these youth also had a fondness for the system they were no longer part of. If they did, then we

could assert with some confidence that transnational students chafe at the incompleteness of schooling within a nation-state. It is not that they dislike what they have, but rather that they know it is incomplete in its fit for the transnational lives they have led and project to continue leading. Transnational students seem to carry with them perspectives from both (all) the school systems they have been part of. While schools are not transnational, some students are.

As we consider our data set, pondering next steps of analysis and of future data collection in other Mexican states, a number of important questions either remain on the table for us or are newly apparent: how does what we found in Nuevo León, which has better funded schools than most others in Mexico compare to what we would have found in other states? Do transnational students experience Mexican schools (or American schools) differently, depending on the number of other transnational students attending their school? Do students' self reports of doing well at school match their actual academic records while transnational students in Mexico do not seem to be faring poorly (at least not in aggregate)? Could they be faring better if school structures and teacher training were more responsive to their life experiences and trajectories? Petron (2003) recently finished a fascinating dissertation on five teachers of English in *secundarias* in Nuevo León who began their study of English in U.S. schools as they accompanied their families to work in the United States. At an age of NAFTA, globalization, increasing value of bilingualism, and an imperative on international/intercultural understanding, might there already be an under-developed resource in Nuevo León schools that could enrich both Mexico and the United States as they come to adulthood?

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