

## Children Returning from the U.S. to Mexico: School Sweet School?

Niños de retorno de Estados Unidos a México: ¿Escuela, dulce escuela?

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### *Introduction*

Children are international migrants who are not generally considered in migration studies, either in the U.S. or Mexico. In order to explain this gap in international migration research in Mexico, a brief overview will be provided of how migration patterns between Mexico and the United States have evolved over the years. During the long, initial phase, including the Bracero Program and the period of undocumented flows (1934–1986), migration from Mexico to the U.S. was circular and short-term. Migrants were generally young male adults from rural zones, whose wives and children stayed in their home country (Escobar *et al.*, 1999; Zhou, 2003; Pedraza, 1991; Bustamante and Alemán, 2007). A second, more recent phase began with the *Immigration Reform and Control Act* (IRCA), where many families were reunited in the North (Uribe, Ramírez and Labarthe, 2012) because over two million Mexican migrants benefited from the amnesty granted by the IRCA. Family reunification processes in the U.S. transformed Mexico/U.S. migration from a young-single-male migration pattern to that of a family movement from South to North. As a result, women began traveling alone with some children traveling alone (Pedraza, 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1999; López, 2007; Chavez and Menjívar, 2010). Family reunification in the United

States contributed to the increasing number of both adult migrants and Mexican-born children in the United States (Batalova, 2008; Batalova and Fix, 2010).

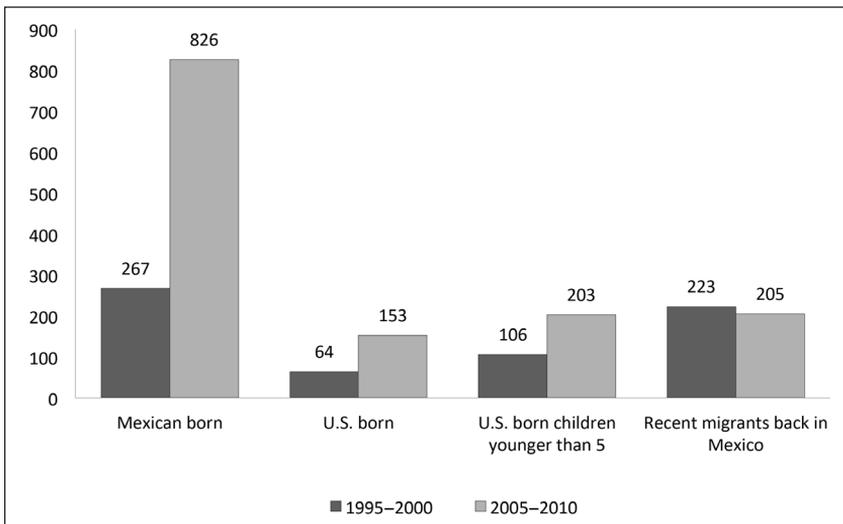
A third recent phase began with the passage of the 1996 *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act* (IIRIRA) (Rodríguez and Hagan, 2004; Hagan, Eschbach and Rodríguez, 2008; INM, 2011). This not only led to a widespread anti-migrant attitude, especially towards Mexicans, in various states, but also to their deportation (Chávez, 2008). Moreover, many jobs that had been attractive to Mexican workers were eliminated in the wake of the economic recession of 2007. As a result, many families were separated through deportation, but reunified in their home country. This phase is characterized, therefore, by the return of adult migrants and their families from the United States to Mexico, including their Mexican—and U.S.—born children (Zuñiga, in press).

### *Adults and Child Returnees: A Quantitative Approach*

In this section, various sources are used to quantify return migration from the U.S. to Mexico. In 2007, eight million jobs were lost in the U.S. labor market as a whole. As a result, the flow of Mexicans to that country was halved between 2007 and 2010 (Ramírez and Meza, 2011), while 1.4 million moved from the United States back to Mexico between 2005 and 2010. Twenty-five percent were 19 years old or under (Giorguli and Gutiérrez, 2011).

In graph 1, four main groups are observed in the total number of U.S.—to Mexico—migrants in 2010: 1) Mexican-born adults who lived in the U.S. for five years and were back in Mexico at the time of the census; 2) U.S.-born children who had lived in the U.S. for five years before the census; 3) U.S.-born children under 5 who had been brought to Mexico by the census date; and 4) “Recent migrants,” who were in the United States for no more than five years (Passel, Cohn, and González-Barrera, 2012:12). The number of Mexican-born migrants returning to Mexico almost tripled, the graph for U.S.-born children doubled, while fewer people stayed in the U.S. for over five years.

*Graph 1. Flows from the U.S. to Mexico by Type of Migrant, 1995–2000 and 2005–2010 (in thousands)*



*Source:* Drawn up using data from Passel, Cohn and González-Barrera (2012).

In 2010, the Mexican Census reported the arrival of approximately 500 000 U.S.-born children of Mexican parents (Passel, Cohn and González-Barrera, 2012). Moreover, the census showed that 6.5 percent of youth under 19 in Mexican schools, had had an international experience, including 2.7 million minors (Escobar *et al.*, 2013).

### *Child Returnees: Realities and Challenges*

The point emphasized in this last section is that when families move back to Mexico from the United States, they enrol their children in schools (Zúñiga, 2000). This proves Mazurek's (2009) point that migration not only involves moving, but also the role of public institutions in the integration or reintegration of migrants, their families and children.

Children who return from the U.S. to Mexico are not a homogeneous population. On the one hand, there are Mexican-born children who left for the United States at a very early age with their parents and now are back in Mexico while on the other, there are

U.S.-born children who came to Mexico for the first time when their parents returned, all of whom have dual nationality. In addition, one must consider other taxonomies of children in terms of their school experiences. There are some who arrived in Mexico with a short or long school experience in the U.S., while others came to Mexico before school age.

The latest research on the school integration of child returnees in Mexico yields at least five conclusions. First, child returnees are “invisible” since there is little or no evidence of their educational background or mobility in either country (Sánchez and Zúñiga, 2010). Moreover, the U.S. and the Mexican governments see migration policies as independent of and sometimes even contradictory to each other (Zúñiga, 2000). Some teachers even claimed that they did not know they had children with U.S. school backgrounds in their classrooms until they repeatedly failed history or Spanish. These children know about American history and have never taken so much Spanish grammar and reading.

Second, children report that they feel frustrated and unrecognized when they arrive in the classroom, with some teachers even calling them “liars” or “shy” when they cannot complete their schoolwork or read and/or write accurately. They therefore feel that their school skills are insufficient for succeeding in Mexican classrooms and tend to leave school before the year ends or miss classes as much as possible.

Third, children think that teachers in Mexico do not respond to their needs. They often feel embarrassed and unappreciated when teachers mock them in front of other students by making them read out loud or by asking questions they know they cannot answer. When children were asked if the principal knew about these problems in the classroom, they said that everybody knew but nobody cared. They feel as if they are alone in a world where no-one understands them.

Hamann (2001) argues this, adding that these children and youth need to be protected by two worlds but instead, are abandoned by both. At the same time, they are required to develop meta-cognitive abilities to interact in multiple places and cultures

(Zúñiga and Hamann, 2013). It is therefore important to include their experience of social and institutional integration in the study of return migration.

Fourth, compared to United States policies and programs, little has been done in Mexico to incorporate immigrant children into the school system (Zúñiga and Hamann, 2008). Children of return migration, whether Mexican—or U.S.—born, agree that in American schools they were enrolled in different programs for language acquisition, reading, writing, sports and so on. When they compare their school experience in the U.S. and in Mexico, they often talk about all the activities they engaged in both during and after school in addition to the technology they used to have in their classrooms and at home.

Fifth, children face several everyday ruptures when enrolling in Mexican schools, not only in terms of contents and materials, but also in school practices, forms and rates of evaluation, teaching styles, criteria for success or failure, types of pedagogical feedback, the role played by parents and other family members, school timetables, homework and/or other responsibilities (Hamann and Zúñiga, 2011). In general, one can conclude that there are no school *transitions* from the U.S. to Mexico, but rather school *ruptures*. In other words, child returnees are not welcome at Mexican schools.

*Concluding Remarks: What is Being Done in Mexico  
to Welcome Child Returnees?*

The Binational Program for the Education of Migrants in Mexico and the United States (Probem in Spanish) was launched in Mexico in 1982, with annual conferences, which focused on creating educational material for teachers and students and administrative issues, rather than incorporating children into the school community. There has been no further news about this program since 2006 (SEP, 2006). In 1990, the Probem incorporated the Memorandum of Understanding on Education between the Mexican and United States Governments (DGRI, 1990), in which governmental

and non-governmental authorities promoted a dialogue between teachers, researchers and students in both countries. The strategy was intended to locate and follow immigrant students' geographical mobility to track their academic achievement.

In the state of Morelos, for example—where a research project on a sample of return migration students has been implemented—Probem implemented an ambitious database to locate most of the children who returned or came to Mexico for the first time with their family members since 2010 at every school. Although this has been a difficult task requiring the full-time dedication of four people, their hard work has achieved workshops not only for principals, classroom teachers, English teachers and special education teachers, but also for parents, and most importantly, for children. These workshops include drawing and writing contests, sports competitions, monthly visits to schools with free, updated material and help with paperwork.

Unfortunately, a second Probem initiative, known as Basic Education Program without Borders, designed to “contribute to improving school achievement among students returning to Mexico from other countries who are enrolled in the National Educational System and to promote appropriate school services for children who leave our country,” was shelved in 2013 due to changes and decisions taken at the federal Secretaría de Educación Pública (Secretariat of Public Education) (SEP, 2008). That program was especially designed to support international migrant children, recognizing them as vulnerable children who require institutional responses to meet their particular needs.

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