



**Education and Migration – Mexico-United States: Opportunities for Binational Collaboration**  
by

**Lonnie Rowell, Yara Amparo Lopez Lopez, Vasthi Maribel King Ristori, Maria Mercedes Veyna Figueroa, Eva Mejia, Elizabeth Schlicher, Angel Chavarin, Briana Colorado, and Lea Garza**

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**Introduction**

The phenomenon of migration between Mexico and the United States has been widely discussed by specialists and researchers from both countries. However, the focus most often has been on the economic and political arenas. To date, less is known about the educational implications of migratory activity into – and out of – the United States. Furthermore, virtually nothing has been written that examines the educational implications of migratory activity into Mexico from the United States.

Educators that have direct contact with students who cross the border (in either direction) have expressed a variety of concerns related to the impact of migration.

**“This Border Brief examines the phenomenon of education and migration as it relates to experiences in the U.S.-Mexico border region.”**

difficult reality faced by children and young people living various processes of transition, both geographic and socio-cultural, is examined in order to generate greater community awareness and promote better solutions to the problems of trans-border migration in the region.

**Background**

Overall, the majority of legal as well as undocumented migrants to the United States originate from Mexico. According to an earlier TBI Fact Sheet

(Trans-Border Institute, 2006), “2.3 million Mexicans migrated to the U.S. legally from 1991-2000, while 5 to 6 million Mexican migrants reside in the United States without authorization (out of an estimated 11.1 million unauthorized residents).” The Pew Hispanic Center (2009) reported that “No other country in the world has as many total immigrants, from all countries, as the United States has immigrants from Mexico alone” (p.1).

From an educational standpoint, the migration statistics hint at the enormous challenges faced on both sides of the border. First of all, the large population of Mexican immigrants has changed the demographics of youth in the United States, and this fact alone is having an enormous impact on the educational system. The 2000 census showed that one of every five children in the United States (or approximately 13.5 million children) was living in immigrant families (Beavers & D’Amico, 2005). This figure includes both children born in the United States to foreign-born parents and children who themselves were born outside the United States. The latter group makes up 24% of the 13.5 million children living in immigrant families (Beavers & D’Amico, 2005). Along the California-Mexico border, about half of all children are in an immigrant family and about 19% are not U.S. citizens (Children Now, 2007). It is important to note that oftentimes families have mixed citizenship status, with some siblings and parents being undocumented (Capps, Fix, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Hernandez, 2005).

Mexican immigrants face disadvantages and challenges in several areas. They have lower levels of education compared to other immigrant groups and the U.S. born population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Additionally, among Latinos, those of

## Education and Migration – Mexico-United States: Opportunities for Binational Collaboration

Mexican heritage report lower parent education levels (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009b). Mexican immigrants are also more likely to hold lower-paying jobs without benefits in lower-skilled areas (Children Now, 2007; Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Foreign-born Hispanic youth in general are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, or become a teen-parent (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009b). In fact, the Pew Hispanic Center reports that among 16-24 year-old Latinos in the United States who were born abroad, only 21% are enrolled in school.

The statistics and challenges of immigrant children living along the California-Mexico border mirror those presented above. In fact, low high school graduation rates are especially prevalent in border communities where the percentage of white graduates who meet college entrance requirements is often double that of Latino graduates (Children Now, 2006, p. 6). In 2005-06, 23% of students studying along the border were classified as English Learners, who, not surprisingly, had lower passage rates on the California High School Exit Exam (Children Now, 2007). Furthermore, immigration patterns show that incoming families move into relational and geographic enclaves due to social and economic forces. This may add to the social and linguistic segregation experienced by Latinos and make the task of learning English through day-to-day interactions with English speakers more difficult (Mount-Cors, 2008). Overall, what is clear is that students emigrating from Mexico and entering mainstream U.S. schools face numerous hardships and stressors that serve as barriers to their academic and social success in schools.

What has been less understood is the reverse phenomenon, that is, the experience of Latinos returning to Mexico after having lived in the United States. According to research conducted by education officials in Mexico (personal correspondence, A. Lopez, October 2009), an increasing number of children are entering schools in Mexico after having lived in the U.S. for a number of years. In some instances the children are returning with parents who have been deported from the U.S., while in other instances families are returning to Mexico in the wake of experiences with the strong anti-immigrant and anti-Latino immigrant climates in the United States, or due to economic pressures associated with the global recession. From a cross-cultural comparative perspective, it is not difficult to see how

this issue is a major challenge for the people and government of Mexico. For example, of the 2,428 political jurisdictions that exist in Mexico, 96% had some degree of migratory activity into the United States in 2009 (personal correspondence, A. Lopez, May, 2010). In 492 of these jurisdictions, there was either a high or very high level of migratory activity. Significantly, 48% of these jurisdictions with high and very high migratory activity are found in only three states: Jalisco, Michoacan and Zacatecas. Mexico and these traditional migrant sending areas must now increasingly confront the challenge of successfully reintegrating children and adolescents into its educational system.

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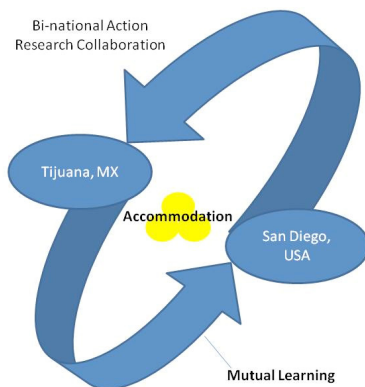
The Mexican educational system has established a category of students with a high vulnerability index, related to difficulties in accessing, remaining in, and completing basic education due to: cultural factors (gender, language, age); structural factors (socioeconomic status, geographic dispersal, migration); disability – both long-term and short-term (illness, teenage pregnancy) - and related disability factors (elderly, malnutrition); or a combination of factors (e.g. disease, situational migration-the streets, street-related public health issues, migration-language-gender, etc.). Given the significant reverse-migration pattern that has emerged in Mexico, increased attention to the vulnerability of students returning to the Mexican educational system after attending school in the United States has ensued.

Based on work conducted by the Baja California State Educational System (Sistema Educativo Estatal [SEE]), the following observations have been made in the case of children who at some time in their lives have attended an educational institution in the United States and then returned to Mexico and enrolled in the Mexican educational system.

- Many girls, boys, and adolescents returning to Mexico are not returning to school, and those who do return to school often face conditions of inequality, thus leading to school failure.

## Education and Migration – Mexico-United States: Opportunities for Binational Collaboration

- Many girls, boys, and adolescents returning to school in Mexico do so without academic records from their time in the U. S. educational system, thus making it difficult to certify credits for educational progress.
- In many cases, girls, boys, and young migrants are incorporated into schools as auditors, making it impossible for these students to receive any formal recognition for school completion.
- Students returning to Mexico face disadvantages in content knowledge and their educational progress is thus slowed. (For example, students returning to Mexico who do not have documentation to verify their level of education in the United States are given diagnostic tests to evaluate content-based knowledge. Significant portions of this knowledge are often outside the scope of the knowledge acquired by these students while they were in the United States. This may include knowledge of the history of Mexico and knowledge of the Spanish Language for instance.)



### Migrant students in schools in Mexico

Because migrant students from the U.S. entering schools in Mexico face many obstacles, difficulties, and challenges that are sometimes impossible to overcome, these students often decide to abandon their studies and enter the workforce or participate in anti-social behavior, such as drug abuse, graffiti, vandalism, and prostitution, among others. Some

students, however, adapt well and move forward with their studies and personal/social development.

According to Lee and Chuang (2005), whatever the particular context of immigration, the experience carries with it the trauma associated with leaving behind what one has known all one's life. Immigration is a psycho-social-geographical transition that involves a series of losses and changes, most of them obvious and expected, but some of them hidden and unexpected (Lee 2010). Arredondo-Dowd (1981) described grief as the main reaction felt by immigrants.

Overall, three types of students can be identified in terms of responding to the challenges posed by migration: those who adapt, those who are in the process of adapting, and those who do not adapt, socially speaking.

Based on preliminary findings from work conducted by the Baja California State Educational System (Sistema Educativo Estatal [SEE]), students

who adapt are those that manage to join a group of friends who share common interests and tastes, are confident, are active, are positive and persistent, are dedicated to study, are competent, friendly, caring, and able to express their ideas or feelings because they have mastery of the Spanish language. They also participate in school sports or in extracurricular recreational activities. In regard to academics, their performance is very good or excellent, as they consistently achieve high scores. As a result, teachers seldom realize their immigration status. Sometimes these students are used as peer helpers to support other classmates in order to raise their levels of comprehension in various subjects and consequently are treated as 'equal' or as simply another student whose education has been entirely in Mexican schools.

**“Overall, three types of students can be identified in terms of responding to the challenges posed by migration.”**

Students in the process of adaptation are identified as such because they manage to establish bonds with two or three students of the same age (who may be in the same class or in different classes, neighbors, acquaintances, etc.) or adults (teachers, educational

## Education and Migration – Mexico-United States: Opportunities for Binational Collaboration

counselors, advisors, janitors, etc.), yet demonstrate insecurity when participating in class and exhibit nervousness when exploring a new subject. These students may experience difficulty expressing their ideas clearly due to the lack of fluency in Spanish, are sometimes restless in class, and maintain average grades with minimal progress. They run the risk of being labeled by their peers and teachers because of their limited Spanish fluency. These students often are targeted for ridicule and are mocked continuously.

Students who do not adapt are those that have a negative attitude due to rejection of the changes to which they are being subjected: a new country, new school, different educational system, new teachers and peers, often without warning, and all at the same time. On multiple levels these students are experiencing the trauma stemming from deportation or relocation. Students who do not adapt are isolated, regularly seek seats away from their peers (preferably at the end of the rows of desks), and remain silent, apathetic, sad, discouraged, and often depressed.

They are in a sense ‘lost in time and space:’ in Mexico in body but in their psyches and spirit still in the United States. They feel rejected from the United States, yet are “nobody’s” in Mexico. Additionally, these students do not perform well on the tasks and exercises that are set in class (because they do not understand the teachers and do not ask for assistance for fear

of being labeled). They are frequently found walking alone, and are often humiliated and punished unjustly (‘you sweep the yard because you did not do the homework assignment’, or ‘go run an errand because I do not see you working in class’, or ‘this student deserves an expulsion because s/he doesn’t answer what I ask’, etc.).

Too often, teachers of students who are struggling to adapt reject such students because they are generally categorized as not being on task during class, lacking respect, challenging teachers, and lacking in productivity with homework, etc. On rare occasions there is a teacher who is willing to sit down to support their studies, yet most often teachers conclude that there is “no point in wasting time” trying to assist these students. When immediate action is not taken to correct such misconduct of many educators, there is a risk of isolating and halting

the academic and social development of migrant students.

### Seeking creative solutions to the challenges of adapting

It is important to learn about and establish rapport with students migrating back to Mexico and to understand their needs, concerns, problems, difficulties, specific immigration status and histories, and interests. It is also important to motivate migrant students to work on personal issues, to assist them in developing introspection and self-recognition, and to foster in them a foundation of self-awareness and self-discipline, with the purpose of gradually advancing their integration into the community.

Professional development for all educators working with migrant students is also important. Here, an important step is to develop collaborations among educators who are willing to adapt the content of their curriculum in an effort

to help these students reengage with education and return to a healthier path of personal and social development. Working on teacher attitudes and understandings is

also critical. The attitude of the teacher towards all students should be based on respect, empathy, and kindness, with the purpose of fostering a genuine bond through teacher-student rapport that bridges genuine caring and sound instruction for the acquisition of knowledge. Teachers and other school personnel also need to be skillful in facilitating and managing the environment of the classroom, both the physical conditions, as well as the interaction among members of the class, emphasizing respect, empathy, and solidarity.

**“The attitude of the teacher towards all students should be based on respect, empathy, and kindness...”**

In February 2009, a project titled *Support Group for Migrant Students* was developed by faculty and students at the Universidad Iberoamericana Tijuana and adopted by the Baja California State Educational System in Baja California as part of an educational intervention titled *National Program: Basic Education Without Borders*, which was launched by the Mexican Ministry of Education through the

## Education and Migration – Mexico-United States: Opportunities for Binational Collaboration

Binational Migrant Education Program (PROBEM). To date, this project has rendered excellent results.

The *Support Group for Migrant Students* aims to provide support for the geographic and socio-cultural transition process for boys, girls, and adolescents with learning experiences in the United States who are entering the Mexican educational system. The purpose of the project is to integrate these students into the community in a positive and socially responsible manner. As an experiential approach on the Educational Frontier, this project - systematically documented through written records, photographs and video recordings - supports migrant students in the areas of psychology, education, vocation, and community service. The *Support Group for Migrant Students* has been recognized nationwide in Mexico as the first of its kind formed and developed in response to the challenges associated with students migrating back to Mexico. While the project is still undergoing evaluation, plans have been formulated to explore the feasibility of applying the project at other educational levels, in various forms and in other regions of Mexico.

As a further extension of this work, graduate students in School Counseling at the University of San Diego (USD), working in conjunction with the Binational Action Research Collaborative (BARC) co-founded in 2006 by the director of USD's Center for Student Support Systems along with faculty from the Universidad Iberoamericana Tijuana and the Baja California State Educational System, piloted the use of a modified version of the *Support Group* at a public middle school in San Diego County in May 2010. Preliminary findings from this pilot project also were positive, providing confidence in the project's application on both sides of the border.

### Conclusion

The extensive migration between Mexico and the United States poses numerous challenges for both countries. From an educational standpoint, as this Border Brief has demonstrated, children suffer regardless of the direction of their migration. At present, neither government has addressed adequately the educational implications of the trans-border phenomenon between the U.S. and Mexico.

However, preliminary collaborative work in the border region, initiated across the border by educators in the states of Baja California and California points to some hopeful possibilities for bi-national collaboration between Mexico and the United States. This experience suggests that, if properly coordinated, it is possible for educators in the United States and Mexico to establish a collaborative programmatic framework for improving the conditions for the development of migrant students during their stay in one or another of our countries.

The significance of what can be gained regarding the professional development of educators through such collaborations should not be underestimated. Given that there are over 500 distinct ethnic groups in the United States, future teachers will be faced with greater diversity in their classrooms, schools, and communities (Ward & Ward, 2003). Yet, as recently as 2004, research (Cummins, 2004)

indicated that teachers often do not understand students who are culturally different from them. Another study (Kea, Trent, & Davis, 2002) indicated that none of the student teacher participants believed their Teacher Education Program prepared them well to educate students from various cultural backgrounds. Bi-national collaborations can help provide professional development opportunities that help bridge these gaps.

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Furthermore, as this Border Brief has described, bi-national collaborations also can assist with improved dissemination of new knowledge coming from work in the border region to address the support needs of students. The findings regarding the impact of the *Support Group for Migrant Students* in Mexico and the preliminary findings based on the adaptation of this group for use with immigrant students in the United States point to the potential success of educational interventions with children and youth experiencing the trauma, grief, and disorientation associated with trans-border experiences between Mexico and the United States.

## **Education and Migration – Mexico-United States: Opportunities for Binational Collaboration**

### **The Authors:**

Lonnie Rowell, Ph.D., is Associate Professor & Director of the USD Counseling Program in the School of Leadership & Education Sciences. He also is the Director of the Center for Student Support Systems (CS3) in SOLES. Yara Amparo Lopez Lopez, Vasthi Maribel King Ristori, and Maria Mercedes Veyna Figueroa work for the Baja State Educational System in Tijuana, Mexico. Prof. Rowell and Mtra. Veyna Figueroa were co-creators of the Binational Action Research Collaborative (BARC) in 2006. Eva Mejia, Elizabeth Schlicher, Angel Chavarin, Briana Colorado, and Lea Garza are graduate students in school counseling at USD. They worked together in 2009-2010 as BARC graduate student researchers.

## Education and Migration – Mexico-United States: Opportunities for Binational Collaboration

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