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De Paisano a Paisano: Mexican Immigrant Students and their Transnational Perceptions of U.S. Schools

By Carmina Brittain

Center for Comparative Immigration Studies

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Due in part to their demographic significance (Ruiz-de-Velasco & Fix, 2001), students of Mexican origin continue to warrant the attention of the American educational community. The experiences of Mexican students in the United States have been well-documented throughout the years, but the bulk of the studies have failed to recognize the importance of the sustained links some of these students have with Mexico. Most of the current research on immigrant students has focused on the experiences that are directly related to the cultural and linguistic discontinuities they experience with the American mainstream culture (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Valdes, 1997; Olsen & Jaramillo, 2000). This article provides an alternative yet important view on the study of Mexican immigrants in American schools by taking into consideration transnational influences that can shape their academic and social participation in American schools.

The article proposes that the educational experiences of Mexican immigrant students are not only influenced by events related to their daily experiences in the United States, but also by experiences that link them with Mexico and that can be transnational in nature. While some of these experiences may be geographically localized in the United States, they are symbolically localized across borders, creating social spaces in the U.S. that link these immigrant students with Mexico. Further, the interaction of these Mexican students with more established Mexican immigrants prior to coming to the U.S. also influences their perceptions of life in the U.S.

The article is based on the data collected for my qualitative study entitled “*Transnational Messages and the Role of Co-Nationals in the Experiences of Immigrant Children.*” This study

aimed to document how immigrant children interacted with co-nationals¹ and exchanged information about their experiences in American schools. The study conceptualized that the experiences of some immigrants in the United States were closely tied to their interactions with co-nationals who resided either in their country of origin or in the new locality in the United States. These interactions were considered to be transnational because they often brought individuals who lived in different nation-states together in a social exchange. Most of the current empirical investigations of transnationalism has addressed the participation of adults in labor markets, community advocacy, and the political arena, but has not significantly addressed the participation of children and its impact on education. My study aimed to also contribute to this gap in the transnational literature by investigating if first-generation immigrant children were also part of these transnational connections.

Transnational Social Spaces: Crossing and Overlapping Boundaries

Ethnic diversity, transportation, and communication advances have contributed to the formation of a new global economic order where intercultural and international encounters are more prevalent than before (Appadurai, 1996). This new global economic order has led to the globalization of migration, "the tendency for more and more countries to be affected by migration movements at the same time" (Castles & Miller, 1998, p. 8). The impact of globalization on migration has led to the establishment of transnational phenomena—activities and experiences that create ties between two nation-states (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). While some of these transnational activities are generated by large institutions such as financial markets and transnational corporations, some of these activities are also initiated and promoted by

¹individuals born in their countries of origin but who can reside in the U.S. or in the country of origin

immigrants (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). Immigrants in fact create social spaces that allow them to establish and maintain productive ties between their country of origin and their receiving country (Besserer, 1998; Portes, 1996a; 1996b; Smith, 1998). But links between two countries do not automatically represent a transnational connection. As Smith and Guarnizo (1998) suggest, the essence of transnationalism is the degree of impact that one action generated in one nation-state has over others who reside in another nation-state.

The notion of transnationalism has been target of criticism regarding the definition of the term transnational (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). What is transnational? Faist (1998) suggested that many activities can be considered transnational under the current social sciences literature--from remittances to sending a family video across two nation-states. In his attempt to provide a more concrete definition of the term, Faist suggested the typology of *transnational social spaces*. Faist identified that the unit of analysis under transnationalism should be a transnational social space. Any activity would become transnational if it occurred within the framework of a transnational social space.

According to Faist, *transnational social spaces* are human collectivities whose activities *cross and overlap* boundaries. The crossing usually takes place in the form of exchanges of capital (e.g., economic, social, and/or cultural) between the immigrants and their co-nationals. The overlapping refers to the re-configuration of social units such as a family to include individuals who are localized across nation-state borders. Therefore, when immigrant children continue to have social ties with co-nationals either in their countries of origin or in the United States and exchange some form of capital, a transnational social space is created. Also, if children participate in social units such as families that include individuals who may reside either in the country of origin or in the United States, a transnational social space is also established.

Further, for some immigrant children, these exchanges of information and the transnational configuration of families and peer groups may influence their daily lives either in their countries of origin (prior to immigrating) or in the new locality in the United States once they immigrate. If the lives of these children are influenced by these transnational social spaces, then it is important to analyze their experiences under a transnational lenses.

I embrace Faist's definition of transnational social spaces as the units of analysis of transnationalism for three reasons. First, it recognizes that transnationalism is a social phenomenon that occurs from the interaction of individuals who are localized in different nation-states and recognizes the agency of immigrants in the global order. While the movement of immigrants across nation-states is promoted and sometimes forced by major political and economic forces of the new global order (Castles & Miller, 1998), immigrants not only react to these forces, in fact, they can also influence them. This is referred by Smith and Guarnizo (1998) as the distinction between transnationalism from above and below. Smith and Guarnizo argued that the macro-economic and political forces in the new era of globalization have reconfigured labor markets, government agencies, and other institutionalized spaces. These highly institutionalized entities engage in transnational activities, contributing to the formation of a *transnationalism from above*, which often influence less powerful individuals, including immigrants. However, Smith and Guarnizo argue that immigrants are not passive actors that merely react to the influences of transnationalism from above. On the contrary, as immigrants organize and exercise their agency, they also create social pressures that reconfigure macro-economic and political structures creating a *transnationalism from below*. For example, in California, the expansion of economic sectors that are heavily migrant-labor dependent such as agriculture and service sectors has mobilized Mexican migrants to specific areas in California

(Cornelius, 1998). This can be considered an example of transnationalism from above.

However, the Mexican immigrants' transnational practice of returning to Mexico over the Winter and Summer holidays has impacted many institutionalized sectors both in Mexico and the United States. The Mexican government's implementation of the Paisano program is a response to this transnational practice of *returning to Mexico*. The local Mexican consulates in California are very active in promoting an image of hassle-free visits to Mexico for returning co-nationals. On the other hand, U.S. institutions such as school districts have also been influenced by this *returning to Mexico* practice. In many California communities where the Mexican immigrant population is significant, local schools have changed their calendars to accommodate these transnational students in order to maintain an adequate attendance level and retain funds in the school district² By delaying the beginning of the school calendar after the Winter holiday a week or two, these schools attempt to ensure that the Mexican students have come back to the United States and their attendance is counted for the distribution of state funds. This is an example of transnationalism from below—actions of transmigrants affecting policies in the sending and receiving communities. Faist's typology of transnational social spaces allows for the distinction between transnationalism from above and from below as he considers that transnational social spaces can be highly institutionalized or more informally configured.

Second, Faist's definition gives credit to the symbolism of crossing and overlapping of boundaries beyond the actual physical crossing of boundaries. Faist recognizes that individuals are involved in transnational activities even when they do not physically travel across borders. For example, the sending of remittances may not necessarily involve the displacement of

²School districts in the United States receive a fixed amount of money per child enrolled and in attendance from their state governments.

individuals from one country to another. What Faist and others (Smith & Guarnizo, 1998) argue is that an activity is transnational to the extent that these activities influence individuals in different nation-states, regardless of whether these individuals themselves travel across borders.

Third, Faist's definition of transnational social spaces does not conceptualize transnationalism as a “third space” between two nation-states. While, Faist does not require an actual physical crossing for a transnational social space to be formed, this does not mean that transnationalism is not localized in a specific place within two nation-states. As Faist suggests, the foundation of any transnational social space is a human collectivity. This collectivity has to be localized in one specific space and time. While the human collectivity (e.g., a family) may include people who reside on different sides of the border, each individual is localized in one specific locality at one point in time and subjected to the local socio-economic and political forces of the locality. Because Faist's definition of a transnational social space does not require a physical displacement across borders, it is possible to conceptualize a transnational social space as localized in a specific place within one of the multiple nation-states involved as long as the transnational activities create symbolic ties between the sending and the receiving community. For example, the exchange of information about American schools among Mexican immigrant students is an activity that could occur in Mexico or in the United States. But if such information influence people on the opposite side of the borders, the transnational social space is established even if the information was generated only within one locality. For example, as Mexican students in the U.S. shared with peers about their experiences in American schools, these messages were transmitted to potential immigrants in Mexico, influencing their perceptions of life in the U.S. even before they migrated. Further, the creation of social spaces within U.S. schools that have cultural representations of Mexican life via language or cultural artifacts also

allowed students who resided in the U.S. to maintain productive ties with Mexico. It has been documented that Mexican students in U.S. schools often brought Mexican goods such as candy, clothes, CD's, that helped them create a social space where their Mexican lifestyle and cultural norms were accepted and valued (Olsen, 1997). When Mexican students socialized with co-nationals in the school and displayed their *Mexican* identity via their clothes or music preferences, they created a social space within the U.S. school that helped them maintain strong ties with Mexico. Therefore, I argue that concentration of co-nationals in the school context can lead to the formation of a transnational social space if the actions of these students serve to keep ties with the country of origin or they influence people in multiple nation-states (Brittain, 2002).

In this article, I report on the kinds of information (Transnational Messages) that Mexican³ immigrant students shared with their co-nationals about American schools at three

³My definition of *Mexican* in the context of this article is based on the place of birth of the children. By describing the children as Mexican, I do not intend to imply that the main sources of difference or similarities in their views of American schools are based on cultural explanations due to the national origin of the children. I realize that these immigrant children come from different regions within Mexico that provide different mixes of economic, social, and cultural capital available to these children. Further, once in the United States, these children and their families assimilated into distinctive communities which also provided different mixes of social and cultural capital. Therefore, many contextual factors (besides national origin) are at play in influencing the experiences of these immigrant children in the U.S. In addition, the American education system is closely linked to the communities they serve. Therefore, the location of the schools these children attended clearly influenced these immigrant children's views of the *U.S. schools*.

points in time—before immigration to the U.S. (Prior Messages), upon arrival to the U.S. (Upon Arrival Messages), and after a few years of living in the U.S. and attending U.S. schools (Current Messages). I focused on information exchanges because the literature on transnational social spaces (Portes, 1996a) has identified information as one of the most important kinds of social capital that is exchanged among immigrants and their co-nationals. I considered important to investigate these views because they could relate to students' expectations about the cultural models of schooling in the U.S. and the potential reproduction of specific perceptions of American schools from established immigrants to newcomers.

Methodology

The data were taken from the *Transnational Messages* study (Brittain, 2002). This study shared the same sample as the Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study (LISA), conducted by the Harvard Immigration Project. LISA was a five-year, qualitative, longitudinal study of five immigrant groups—Mexican, Chinese, Dominican, Central American, and Haitian students. The main research goal of the LISA project was to document the process of adaptation of immigrant students over time. To that end, LISA collected annual student interviews and ethnographic data on selected school sites. Also two parent interviews (at the beginning and at the end of the study), and interviews with teachers and school administrators were collected during the study. The LISA sample was recruited by identifying school districts that had high concentrations of recent immigrant children. The Mexican and Central American groups were recruited in the San Francisco Bay area in California. Chinese, Haitian, and Dominican students were recruited in Boston. School administrators were contacted and families within the schools were identified and invited to participate. LISA had specific inclusion criteria for students to be recruited in the study, including:

- Both parents and children being born in the target country (e.g., Mexico)
- Children participants had to be 9-14 years of age by the time of recruitment
- Children participants had been residing in the United States for less than five years by the time of recruitment
- The family had a commitment to stay in the United States for the next five years

In 1997 when the project started, I joined the LISA Project as a Research Assistant. In 2000, I approached the principal investigators of the LISA Project—Marcelo and Carola Suarez-Orozco—and introduced my Transnational Messages Study to them. Both investigators agreed to include my questionnaire (See Appendix A) to the LISA 3rd Year Student Interview and that is how I collected the data for my study. The Mexican sample included 78 first-generation immigrant children, age 11-17 who migrated to the United States less than five years before the interview took place. Table 1 shows the Student Profile as a modal distribution of the Mexican sample.

Table 1. Transnational Messages Study - Student Profile

Profile Characteristic	Mexican Sample	%
Student current age	14-15	39%
Student age at time of immigration	7-9	57%
Student years of residence in U.S.	4-5 years	53%
Student gender	Males	56%
Sending Community	Jalisco	33%
Receiving Community	San Patricio, CA	58%
Type of community of origin	Semi-urban	56%
Father educational level	Elementary	53%
Mother educational level	Elementary	46%
Predominant ethnic group in school	Latino	59%

% of English Language Learners in school	40-59%	54%
% of students in free/reduced lunch programs	80-100%	32%
Academic Performance Index⁴	Critically Low	59%

My questionnaire (see Appendix A) was administered to all of the participants in the LISA study in the third year of this five-year longitudinal study. A team of research assistants who are proficient in the culture and language of the participant students administered this questionnaire, which was carefully translated into Spanish. I did participate extensively in the translation process and I was one of the three Spanish translators that worked with the Spanish versions of the LISA's interviews. An English version was also available for those students who had experienced first language attrition. In addition, I conducted training sessions with all the research assistants in order to help them become familiar with the structure of my interview and the theoretical foundation of my contribution to the LISA study. These training sessions also had the purpose of instructing the research assistants on administration techniques for the *Transnational Messages Interview* to promote consistency in the interview process. The categories discussed in this article emerged from the data, not from the research assistants. For the qualitative analysis, I followed an interpretative approach to content analysis, which involved several waves of coding from codes derived from the data.

While I worked directly with about 40% of the Mexican sample for a period of four years, it was important for me to dialogue with the other research assistants who collected the rest of the data. As part of my data collection and analysis processes, I visited several schools

⁴API is a ranking imposed by the California Department of Education to every school in the state based on standardized testing data collected on an annual basis.

on different occasions during a three-year period. In addition, I was responsible for collecting ethnographic data on two school sites, which I used in the discussion of findings.

Because this study was incorporated in the third year of an on-going five-year longitudinal study, I had little control over the composition of the sample. However, I had been collaborated with the LISA project since its inception and I was extremely familiar with the theoretical and methodological parameters of the study. I found that the LISA sample was a suitable sample to investigate the formation of transnational social spaces among immigrant children primarily because it was a sample of first-generation immigrant students.

Learning about American Schools in Transnational Social Spaces

In order to establish the formation of transnational social spaces, I used Thomas Faist's (1998) definition of a transnational social space as a human collectivity of co-nationals whose actions cross and/or overlap boundaries. First, I needed to establish the creation of human collectivities of co-nationals in the school. Theoretically, research has shown that many minority children (including immigrants) attend schools where the population of co-ethnics is considerably high (Orfield and Yun, 1999). According to Orfield and Yun, (1999) we are living a *decade of re-segregation* in American schools, especially in urban areas where public schools are becoming predominantly minority. In many instances, co-nationals constitute the major peer group in the school, becoming the main source of friendships for the newcomers and making possible for human collectivities of co-nationals to exist in American schools (Brittain, 2002). Therefore, there is the potential that a transnational social space could be formed in American school as the availability of co-national peers may be high in some of these schools. Empirically, LISA data collected over a three-year period on these Mexican students showed that regardless of the ethnic composition of the schools, over 60% of the participants in the study

stated that their friends were co-nationals. These children also socialized with other students, mostly co-ethnics. For example, for Mexican children, the second generation Mexican (Mexican Americans) was the second largest source of friends⁵

Faist (1998) suggests that transnational social spaces are instrumental in nature and that the crossing of boundaries occur as the participants exchange economic, social, and cultural capital. Portes (1999) indicates that information is one of the major sources of social capital available to immigrants in transnational social spaces. Given these theoretical parameters, I asked the participant children about what kinds of information (Transnational Messages) about American schools they received and share with co-nationals. Findings revealed five distinctive categories or themes that these Mexican children focused on:

- Academic demands and standards
- English proficiency
- School resources
- Teachers' interaction and styles
- Peers interactions

It is important to note that these five categories were derived from the data. Also, the use of qualitative words to identify the main trends in the data (e.g., *easy* American schools, *caring* teachers) emerged from the data. That is, the students themselves used such words in the

⁵The use of terms such as Mexican or Mexican American are based on the data. Students

referred to their peers as either Mexican, Mexican American, Chicanos, or other Latinos when asked who their friends were.

interview. The author embraced such terms to identify the quality of the message from students' responses.

Table 2 shows the quantitative distribution of the major categories in the sample of 78 Mexican students. As the data show, most of the students did receive *Transnational Messages* from their co-nationals prior and upon arrival to the United States (68% and 77% respectively). The *General* category refers to non-specific answers such as “I heard schools were good.”

Table 2. Transnational Messages over Time – Mexican Sample

Types of Messages	Prior	Upon Arrival	Current
Academic	14%	21%	21%
English	7%	4%	8%
General	14%	12%	17%
No answer	32%	23%	4%
Peers	12%	18%	10%
School	16%	14%	25%
Teachers	5%	8%	15%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The main source of *Transnational Messages* were interpersonal communications among co-nationals, but some students also learned from media sources. Table 3 indicates the main sources of *transnational messages*. Among the Interpersonal Communication categories, parents and family members (e.g., aunts, cousins, grandparents) were the main sources of *Prior Messages*.

Table 3. Students' Sources of Messages about U.S. Prior to Immigration

Sources of Messages	N	%
Interpersonal	53	58%
Imagination	6	7%
Media	32	35%
Visits to U.S.	0	0%
Total	91	100%

In order to bring a more robust analysis to these data besides these simple descriptive statistics, I will describe these major categories by exploring the responses of three case studies—Edgar, Jose Luis, and Yuridia. These case studies represent the major trends in the data, as well as the trajectory of these *Transnational Messages* over time. Further, these three cases represent the average profile of the students in the sample (see Table 1).

Edgar and Jose Luis are brothers, born in the state of Guerrero in Mexico. At the time of the interview, Edgar was 14 and was a freshman in high school. Jose Luis was 13 and was an eight grader. In Mexico, they lived in a small rural area that had no public school buildings. A young teacher used to go to their town to teach the students in a one-room community center twice a week as part of a rural school program. Despite this irregular school program, both children received report cards from Mexico and indicated that Edgar had completed 5th grade and Jose Luis completed 3rd grade in Mexico prior to immigrating to the United States. Their mother was a homemaker, but she used to sell tamales on the weekends to help the family. Their father worked in construction. Both parents had less than a 6th grade education. Jose Luis and Edgar had four siblings, one of them was a young woman who was married to a Mexican-American man and had a child at a young age.

Yuridia came from the metropolitan area in Mexico City around the Naucalpan municipality in the State of Mexico. Unlike Edgar and Jose Luis, Yuridia did receive a more formal education in Mexican public schools. Her report cards showed she completed 5th grade prior to immigrating to the United States. Yuridia came to the United States at 11, and she had

to miss one year of school during the migration process. Her parents had completed high school. Yuridia had two older brothers enrolled in the same high school as her.

Despite the differences in socio-economic status based on parental educational background and residence in Mexico (rural v. urban), both families came because of economic reasons. Jose Luis remembered that his father needed to come to the United States with his uncle for his family to survive. Yuridia commented “we were very hungry in Mexico. Here in the U.S., we can have three meals a day.” Also, in both families, the fathers lead the way of migration by coming to the U.S. first and then bringing their families after a few years. That meant that for these three students, there was a period of at least three years of separation from their fathers.

These three students resided in the same U.S. town called San Patricio. San Patricio is part of the inner-city neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay area. It is a small town of about 3 square miles. However, it has one of the highest unemployment, house density, and violent crimes rates in the state. According to local school officials, there were about 17 gangs operating in San Patricio. Jose Luis attended the local middle school, which is a feeder school to the only high school in the community, which serves two towns. Edgar and Yuridia attended this high school and transferred from the middle school that Jose Luis attended. While Edgar and Yuridia attended some of the same classes, they were not friends or socialized with each other on a regular basis.

Edgar, Jose Luis and Yuridia, along with many others in the study did not attend very structured and well-planned programs. In this particular school district, due to the lack of availability of qualified bilingual programs, few schools provided structured bilingual programs that could promote the development of two languages linguistically and academically. The main

services provided at the middle and high school levels in this district for second language learners were instruction of academic subjects (e.g., mathematics and science) in the first language and two or three hours of ESL. All of the three students portrayed in this article were English language learners with limited proficiency. Their schedules for the five years that they were participating in the study consisted of a two-hour ESL period, and one hour of Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies in Spanish, often taught by a Mexican, Mexican-American, or Spaniard teacher. They also had one hour of Physical Education. This schedule continued year after year. Some of the students as Yuridia and Edgar managed to move to ESL II classes as they moved to high school, but Jose Luis remained in ESL I from fifth to eighth grade. In the next section, I will discuss the five themes from the *Transantional Messages*.

Low Quality of Education: Curricular Content

One common theme among the Mexican students was the *easy* American school. Mexican children shared that they perceived American schools were easier than in their countries of origin. This message remained constant through time—before immigration, after arrival to the U.S., and after a few years of living in the U.S. Prior to immigrating to the United States, Edgar, Jose Luis, and Yuridia heard that American schools were easier or were academically weaker than the Mexican public schools.

“I heard that schools were easy. They didn't give you work like in Mexico”

– Yuridia

“[Co-nationals] told me that schools were easier. That they are stricter in Mexico.”

– Edgar

In the case of Jose Luis and Edgar, even though they came from a small town with limited formal instruction (e.g., twice a week visits from the rural teacher), they also heard from co-nationals that schools were “easier.”

Once these students arrived in the United States and found a considerable number of co-nationals in the school, these co-nationals were a source of information about American schools. Again, these three students and others recalled the same message—*American schools are easier*.

“I heard that schools were less advanced, more behind here [in the U.S.] than in Mexico.”

- Jose Luis

After living in the U.S. for a while and experiencing U.S. schools themselves, some Mexican immigrant students interpreted this easiness as something negative. Some children had negative perceptions about the quality of education in the United States. For some children, frustration toward the “easy” American schools built up when they realized they were not learning anything new beyond what they already knew in their countries or origin.

“I remember that in Mexico they told me that supposedly here I had more possibilities to study, to learn more. The truth is that you don’t learn here. Here what you see in social sciences, you already saw that in Mexico. The science stuff, you already saw it in Mexico. Here everything you are seeing right now, you already saw it in Mexico.”

—Yuridia

Yuridia's disappointment with the “easy” curriculum was based on her perception that what she already learned in Mexico was being taught in the U.S. She stated that she was not learning new content, and was restricted in her opportunities for learning and acquiring a high quality education. Some of these students also expressed that a less advanced curriculum implied limited learning opportunities for them in the U.S.

The concept of the “easy American school” and its implications on the participation of immigrant children in the U.S. schools is important. Traditionally, numerous research studies of Latino immigrant children have categorized them as children with limited educational backgrounds, especially in terms of literacy in the first language and number of formal school years in the country of origin (Olsen, 1988; Rumbaut, 1995; Rumbaut & Cornelius, 1995; Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999). However, the Mexican students in this study, despite of their educational backgrounds in their countries of origin, perceived that the content and quality of instruction in the U.S. was worse than what they experienced in Mexico. These critical views on the easiness of U.S. curriculum and instruction became a serious vulnerability that translated into apathy and negative attitudes towards school. Some students claimed lack of interest in school because the content was a mere repetition of what they already knew. This was true for Edgar, Jose Luis, and Yuridia, who despite of their reasonable interest in school, I witnessed many times how they became disengaged by talking in class, doing homework for other classes, or reading a book, while the teacher was explaining something on the board. When I asked them why they were not paying attention, their answer was that they already knew how to do what the teacher was teaching. As the years go by, some students were concerned whether they would be able to cope with material in higher grades (e.g., high school) given that they were “not learning anything new” in U.S. schools. This created frustration about the possibilities of higher education as these children felt unprepared academically. This was the case of Yuridia, who had learned about college opportunities but was unsure of being able to meet the demands of college:

“Sometimes I feel I am not learning anything new and that if I go to college, I will not be able to understand anything.”

This perception of the easiness of academic content in U.S. schools needs to be understood in terms of the quality of services for immigrant children in American public schools. Most of the students who stated that they felt they learned more in Mexico than in the United States attended schools that ranked the lowest in the Academic Performance Index. That is, they were attending some of the worst American schools in California—at least in regards to standardized testing data. Budget cuts at the federal, state, and local level often results in reduction of programs that are viewed as less crucial by state and school officials (Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997). Sometimes, the most needed schools are left with very few resources to engage in the daunting task of educating our children. In my ethnographic work in inner-city schools in California, especially where the Mexican children were the majority, I witnessed how children in a number of high schools were assigned to the same algebra or basic math classes for several years in a row, with the same teacher who taught the same curriculum year after year. These children were warehoused in these schools, exposed in 10th or 11th grade to the same curriculum that that they had in 9th grade. This practice was common across many schools as the research assistants in the LISA project documented in several school descriptions.

The low quality of education offered in some inner-city schools, which often served large amounts of minority students, including immigrant students is not a new topic and it has been heavily investigated (Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997; McClafferty, Torres, & Mitchell, 2000). However, even though there are a number of exemplary models in urban schools that have brought exceptional curriculum programs to disadvantaged children, it is a reality that many schools are still caught in the practice of providing limited educational opportunities for children due in part to the limited resources available to them. For Mexican immigrant children, the easy

American school (as it reflected low quality of education) became a source of disappointment, nihilism, and hopelessness (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Keiser, 2000).

The English Barrier

Mexican children also expressed negative perceptions about the English language. Mexican immigrant children were told by co-nationals how difficult the process of English language acquisition could be. However, these messages changed over time. For example, prior to immigration, Edgar, Jose Luis and Yuridia expressed enthusiasm toward the possibility of learning English.

“I heard that schools were fine. That's why I wanted to come here because I was going to learn and study here, that they teach you well. That I could learn English.”

—Jose Luis

“I liked the idea of learning English. In Mexico, only kids in private school learn English.”

- Yuridia

Yuridia comment on the value of learning English in the U.S. She could learn English in a public school, without paying a high tuition for the instruction as she perceived it would be in Mexico. While some public schools in Mexico offer English as a Foreign Language classes, this is not the norm in all of the schools. Also, most of the schools who provide these classes only make them available in the upper elementary grades (4-6 grade). Edgar, Jose Luis, and Yuridia came from low income families and their potential to attend private schools in Mexico was very limited. In their view, migration provided them with the opportunity to enjoy some of the perks that are available to students in private school in Mexico, without paying for them. There is more on this issue in the discussion of *School Messages*.

Upon arrival to the U.S., most co-nationals advised the newcomers about the difficulty of learning English.

“[Co-national peers] told me that learning English would be difficult because I didn't know anything of English.”

- Edgar

“[Co-national peers] told me that I would feel lost because I did not know English.”

- Jose Luis

“I heard that English will be difficult to learn.”

- Yuridia

After experiencing American schools, Mexican immigrant students continued to express this frustration toward learning English, now based on their own experience:

“Teachers speak English only but they are nice. Learning English is difficult to learn.”

- Edgar

“It would be better if [my cousin] learned English in Mexico. This way, she would be prepared”

- Yuridia

“It is better if you already know English.”

- Jose Luis

Mexican students emphasized the need to acquire English proficiency and suggested that their co-nationals should be prepared to make English a priority in their learning goals in American schools. Yuridia and Jose Luis emphasized that it would be preferable if students came to the United States with some level of English proficiency.

Mexican children viewed lack of English proficiency as a major obstacle, not only in terms of practical reasons (e.g., able to understand and communicate with others), but also because of the social symbolism that English language proficiency seemed to have. For example, children expressed that lack of English proficiency would bring isolation, exclusion, and social problems (e.g., teasing) to newcomers. English became the language of validation, a marker for belonging in specific social spaces within the school context and society at large. In my ethnographic observations, I documented that for many teachers and other school officials any performance or effort done in other language did not seem to equate to the merit of doing in English. For example, in two-way bilingual programs, teachers often viewed immigrant children's accomplishments in Spanish as something not worthy of praise or recognition, since it is done in the native language and it is assumed to be an effortless task (Valdes, 1997). If English is the only language of success in this country; if children perceive that without English, they are non-existent, this is something that can eventually have negative implications on the children's self-concept and identity (Olsen & Jaramillo, 1999).

The fact that these Mexican children shared with co-nationals that learning the English language was a daunting task promoted pessimistic attitudes towards the process. Just like in the academic arena, children viewed their English language learning opportunities being diminished in American schools. However, in the case of language acquisition, these Mexican children seemed to internalize the process of learning English as difficult, rather than commenting on the quality of instruction they received in these English language acquisition programs. This may be a negative trend as it may affect immigrant children's perceptions of self-efficacy in learning English and influence children to internalize feelings of inadequacy due to lack of English proficiency. For others, however, lack of meaningful instruction was often a source of

frustration. For example, Edgar complained that the ESL class was like a “kindergarten class” where the teacher asked them to sing songs and do rhymes that for a 15-year old boy were too childish.

School as a Provider

Another theme identified in the *Transnational Messages* within the Mexican group was the awareness of services and materials offered in the U.S. school and how these contributed to the lowering of the cost of education. Prior to immigration, Edgar, Jose Luis, and Yuridia learned that U.S. schools provided school supplies, buses, meals, and even medical services and clothes. These students learned this from uncles and cousins who were already in the United States and had children attending U.S. schools. For example, Jose Luis recalled that it would be cheaper to attend school in the U.S. because they would not have to buy books or school supplies. Yuridia was excited to know that breakfast and lunch would be provided. Remember that she shared that her family members often did not have enough to eat in Mexico.

For both Mexican parents and students, a good school was often evaluated in terms of the school resources provided to support children’s needs (e.g., food and transportation), beyond academic needs. In a sense, students view these resources as an opportunity to acquire an education in the United States. In their countries of origin, parents were often responsible for buying books, school supplies, transportation, uniforms, etc. In Mexico, free textbook programs are available until the sixth grade and some parents are left to struggle with increasing school expenses as their children reach middle school. Compared to the situation in their countries of origin, these immigrant children commented that there were fewer out-of-pocket expenses that parents had to pay for in the U.S. schools (e.g., schools providing supplies, books, lunches, clothes, etc.). Therefore, there were more “opportunities” to study in the U.S. because their

parents did not have to pay for it. The parents also spoke of “the opportunity” of sending their children to *secundaria* in the U.S. For example, Edgar and Jose Luis' mom stated:

“I wanted my children to come to the U.S. after 6th grade. With six children, it is difficult to pay for so many books and notebooks. Here, parents do not have to spend money on such things. I could not have been able to send them to middle school in Mexico. I am glad they can go here [in the U.S.]”

As with perceptions of English language, views on educational opportunities are often documented among immigrant populations (Valdes, 1996; Olsen, 1988). Immigrant parents and their children view schooling as something positive. However, while these expressions of positive views about education are “genuine expressions” (p. 152) of immigrants' convictions, they often seemed to carry little evidence that parents and their children have the social capital required to take advantage of upper mobility opportunities via education (Valdes, 1996). This is often the case because of the *dual frame of reference* (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995) that immigrants develop regarding their experiences in the receiving community. Marcelo and Carola Suarez-Orozco make the case that even in very disadvantaged circumstances, many immigrants would evaluate their “new life” in the United States under a positive light because compared to their standard of living in their countries of origin, their standard of living in the U.S. is better. That is, immigrants evaluate their outcomes in the United States based on standards they brought from their countries of origin. For example, Yuridia spoke of having enough to eat in the United States as compared to Mexico. In this case, Yuridia's frame of reference to qualify her experience in the United States was her experience in Mexico. Like Yuridia, Edgar, and Jose Luis, many of these immigrant children attended severely disadvantaged schools that were not able to provide adequate academic preparation to promote

social mobility in their students. But compared to what was available in their communities of origin, these immigrant children valued the resources that U.S. schools provided. It is important to note that the *dual frame of reference* refer to perceptions of immigrants regarding their situation in the new country, but not necessarily their real gains. Resources such as free lunches or school buses do not necessarily translate into more educational opportunities as some of the children perceived them, especially in the context of what is needed in the United States to achieve social mobility. Immigrant children might be able to attend school for more years than in the countries of origin given the reduction in out-of-pocket expenses they experienced in the United States. But in an educational system that is closely linked to the communities it serves, opportunities for true social mobility may not be available to these children if they attend schools in disadvantaged communities in the United States.

Caring Teachers

Mexican students shared that teachers in the U.S. were nice, caring, and helpful toward their students. Edgar, Jose Luis, and Yuridia also heard such messages.

“Teachers care about you. I heard they did not yell at you.”

—Yuridia

A few children also expressed appreciation for the lack of corporal punishment in U.S. schools and often commented that in the United States “teachers don’t hit you.”

“Teachers do not hit you here. They are nicer”

—Edgar

“I felt happy to know that teachers cannot hit you here. In Mexico, my teacher used to hit me with a ruler on my hands and my knees.”

- Jose Luis

Mexican children also emphasized the “caring” nature of teachers. Teachers were not only nice, but also supportive and caring of their students. This indicates that these students perceived teachers as adults that “cared for them”. This message continued upon arrival to the U.S.

“Teachers are nice. They try to help you.”

—Yuridia

However, *Teacher Messages* changed a bit over time. In the case of Edgar and Jose Luis, they started to receive mixed messages about teachers from their peers. Both boys heard from their peers that teachers were “mean” or that they yelled at them. In the case of Jose Luis, he started having problems with teachers early on because he started to hang out with students that were not academically engaged. While teachers commented that he was smart and already knew much of the content, his teachers complained that Jose Luis was always playing or talking in class. Edgar also heard that teachers were mean, but he continued to apply himself in the classroom and most of his teachers were pleased with his performance. For Yuridia, she continued to learn from co-nationals about the “caring teachers”.

The issue of peer influence is important in the analysis of the trajectory of the transnational messages, especially for younger children like Jose Luis. Jose Luis started 4th grade when he migrated to the United States. At the elementary school he learned from his peers that teachers were mean. Prior to immigrating to the U.S., Jose Luis had had learned from cousins, uncles, and his parents that teachers were relatively nice. However, this message did not continue upon arrival to the U.S. By socializing with students that had problems with teachers, Jose Luis learned to adopt certain behaviors that would ensure him access to his peer group. He could not be a “good” student and hang out with the boys he liked. Therefore, he started to challenge his teachers and behave disruptively. Edgar, who

was a bit older when we arrive to the U.S. (6th grade) still heard negative perceptions of teachers, but his peer group was not as oppositional as his brother's. Therefore, his permanence in the peer group did not depend on whether he was defiant or not with teachers. Yuridia was also a good, quiet student who hanged out with other girls who were also studious. In fact, Yuridia became a classroom helper for some of her *caring* teachers. She spent time in recess helping teachers prepare for their classes (e.g., setting up materials in science class). What this did for Yuridia was bringing her social capital. As she was helping her teachers, her teachers introduced her to the idea of going to college, preparing college applications, learning about local community colleges and universities. This pattern started since Yuridia was in middle school. By the time she entered high school, she was better prepared than her peers in regards of college admissions. For example, she learned about high school credits needed for college and she insisted with her counselor to include such courses in her schedule. Her efforts were not successful because her counselor felt she did not have sufficient English proficiency to be enrolled in more advanced classes. But spending time with her teachers provided Yuridia with the social capital to understand the process of getting admitted to college in the United States.

After a number of years in the United States, Mexican students continued to share that teachers in U.S. schools were caring. But who were the “caring teachers”? Most of the time, these teachers belong to the ESL cohort—either Latino teachers or Anglo teachers who spoke Spanish or were interested in Latin American culture. Therefore, these teachers had some kind of cross-cultural understanding to make their content and classroom environments more accessible to immigrant students. But not all of the teachers were regarded as *caring*. Negative comments about teachers in *Current Messages* included perceptions of teachers

who yelled at students or who did not care whether the student learned or not. For example, a particular ESL teacher had the reputation among many of the students in the Mexican sample of not caring for her students. This teacher, an Anglo woman in her 40's taught the second level of ESL. Most of her students were Mexican immigrants with some fluency in English. However, in conversations with this teacher, she shared that in every classroom, she would pick 5-6 students who "really deserved her attention" and dedicate time to them. The rest of the students could do whatever they wanted. I often saw this teacher using her selected students as a symbolic barrier between her and the rest of the students. She would sit in a circle with her few selected students and do a small group lesson while the rest of the class talked, listened to music, read, or played in the classroom.

Teacher Messages revealed important issues about the enormous potential that teachers have to become significant adults in the lives of these immigrant children. The fact that most Mexican children had positive attitudes toward teachers indicated that these can be considered a "resource" for these children in the school—somebody who cares and is nice to them. Studies with immigrant children have documented that there are cultural and linguistic differences that influence the way parents and their children interact with teachers in American public schools (Valdes, 1996; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). There is a divide between immigrants and teachers that is marked by misunderstanding of each other's roles and participation in the educational lives of children (Valdes, 1996). Teachers may not be aware of the appreciation that immigrant parents and their children have for them. Parents may often be distant because of their own perceptions of not being equipped to deal with school issues or because of feeling unappreciated by the school staff. Laurie Olsen and Ann Jaramillo (1999) recognize that teachers need to become more active in understanding the complexities of their immigrant

children's lives and become advocates that invite, use, and honored immigrant children's distinctive points of view. I think that if teachers were more aware of how immigrant children perceived them as caring and approachable, new opportunities for meaningful, learning, and validating interactions could be open. This way, teachers could be sources of social capital for immigrant children as in Yuridia's case. The children could also shared their cultural capital to transform school into settings that are more inclusive.

Negative Peer Attitudes and Racialization of Peers

Finally, Mexican students constructed negative views of peers in two ways—behavioral and specialized. Behavioral messages dealt with views of negative peer behaviors that children wanted neither to be exposed to nor to participate in. While some children shared about classroom disruptions and disrespectful attitudes towards teachers as major offenses, an issue that was clearly emphasized across the Mexican group was gangs. Mexican students expressed concern about the existence of gangs in the school, making these children feel unsafe in the school. Many Mexican students learned of gangs in the schools. Jose Luis, Edgar, and Yuridia were not the exception. In multiple occasions, these students shared that they had been ostracized by gang members in the school.

The emphasis of gangs as part of the school is part of the social mirroring concept (Suarez-Orozco, 2000). Schools become micro-sites that reflect the vulnerabilities of communities where these children live (McClafferty, Torres, & Mitchell, 2000). The children who reported perceptions of gangs attended schools who were considered disadvantaged, with high percentages of children in free, reduced lunch programs and in communities that experience high incidence of crime, unemployment, and overcrowding. In one of these communities, San

Patricio, one of the principals at a middle school reported that seventeen gangs were operating in the community.

The other way that Transnational Messages revealed negative attitudes toward peers was in the form of racialization of peer groups. While some messages demonstrated an awareness that the immigrants would be targets of discrimination based on national origin, other messages also promoted negative attitudes that the immigrant children had towards other student groups, specifically African Americans. Prior to immigrating, students received messages from their co-nationals that depicted fear and mistrust toward African Americans.

“[Co-nationals] told me that Black people do not like Mexicans and they fight a lot.”

- Yuridia

“I heard that Blacks fight.”

- Edgar

By the time students arrived to the U.S., co-nationals in the school continued to express antagonistic sentiments toward African Americans. Most Mexican students were advised upon arrival to the U.S., that they should not socialize with African Americans. For Jose Luis, the antagonistic message about African-Americans was a constant impression:

“I heard there were many gangs where Black people fight and do bad things.”

- Jose Luis' Prior Message

“My [co-nationals] told me not to hang out with Black because they would rob me or fight me.”

- Jose Luis' Upon Arrival Message

“Hang out with Mexicans, so he can understand better....[I would tell my co-national to] run when he sees Blacks. Stay away from Blacks.”

One area of concern about these messages is that the reproduction of negative images of African Americans seemed to be the product of word-of-mouth, rather than of actual interactions with African Americans. Because these *Transnational Messages* sometimes suggested to co-nationals not to socialize with African Americans, these negative perceptions were not the result of direct interaction with this group, but of stereotypical constructions about African Americans. I had the opportunity to follow up with some students in subsequent interviews and many Mexican students replied that while they had not had a personal negative encounter with African Americans, they still feared them.

Lessons from Transnational Messages

The theoretical contribution from this article was to establish that some Mexican immigrant students did interact within the frame of a transnational social space by participation in human collectivities that crossed and overlapped boundaries between Mexico and the U.S. First, by exchanging information about U.S. schools among co-nationals on both sides of the border—a border crossing emerged. Second, these students belonged to human collectivities of co-nationals (e.g., families and peer groups) that included individuals who resided both in the United States and Mexico.

My study also identified how these transnational messages changed over time. Prior to immigration, the exchanges of information between the students and their co-nationals both in Mexico and the U.S. created a transnational social space that affected these students' lives as potential immigrants. Upon arrival, a transnational social space was created in the school as students interacted with more established Mexican immigrant students in the school. This transnational social space emerged because of the symbolism of everyday actions that these

children created that linked the two nations in a symbolic, yet instrumental way. By learning from other Mexicans how to “survive” in an American public school, these student created a “Mexican” space in order to participate in school. By socializing with co-nationals, language and cultural barriers were not impediments to belong to a significant peer group.

The five categories of *Transnational Messages* represented the core of experiences of these Mexican students in U.S. public schools—less demanding curriculum, difficulty learning English, school services, etc. However, these messages were not passive—taking from one co-national to another and accepted as absolute truth. The students in this study embraced many of these messages as real because they came from people they trusted (e.g., parents, friends in the school). Also, many of the students shared that it was important for them to listen to these messages because they came from the experiences of other Mexican immigrants. However, the data also showed that some of these messages evolved over time in different ways. While some remained constant such as the negative perceptions toward African Americans and the positive view of U.S. schools as providing agencies, others changed over time (teachers, curriculum, and learning English). This change seemed to be related to two issues—the source of the message and students' own experiences after immigrating to the United States. Parents were a significant source of *Prior Messages* while peers were the main source of *Upon Arrival messages*. Parents, and other adults were more likely to be influenced by the *dual frame of reference* and by a sense of being optimistic with their children about the immigration process. Most parents in the study indicated that they wanted their children to feel optimistic that life would be better in the United States and often did not share their concerns with their children. On the other hand, peers' messages about U.S. schools are closely tied to the peers' own attitudes toward schools. For Edgar and Yuridia who hanged out with less oppositional students, their messages upon arrival

were more positive regarding teachers. For Jose Luis, their peers' negative experience with teachers influenced their *Upon Arrival Messages*. In the case of messages about the weaker academic quality and the difficulty of English language learning, the source of change over time was the students' own experiences with the schools. For Edgar, Jose Luis, and Yuridia, frustration build up around their limited opportunities to learn academic subjects and English. Their *Current Messages* revealed not their co-nationals attitudes, but their own experiences and frustration.

One important issue about the findings in this study is that they relate to students' perceptions of reality in American public schools. As such, some may argue the analysis is problematic because the discussion does not address in depth whether these perceptions are true or not. But that was not the goal of the study. The study purposefully aimed to identify how Mexican students *perceived* American schools and whether these perceptions changed over time. The main purpose of the study was to assess whether these students' perceptions were conceived by transnational activities such as exchanging information.

Conclusions

This study is a first step in exploring the impact of transnational social spaces in the construction of attitudes and perceptions of Mexican immigrant students toward U.S. schools. Theoretically, the paper provided an alternative framework in the field of education for the study of immigrant students' adaptation into American urban schools by using a transnational perspective. It also contributed to the literature of international migration by including the experiences of children, an area that has not been significantly expanded in this literature.

Knowing that the way children socialize is not exclusively localized in the United States adds to our understanding of Mexican immigrants students in two ways. First, the five

categories point out to five areas of attention that need to be addressed by American public school administrators. The quality of academic curricula and English language development programs, as well as interracial conflict in the school are old problems that have not been fully addressed in disadvantaged school districts. These students perceived that their opportunities for learning were diminished in the United States, not only in terms of academic content, but also in language proficiency. Further, while many of the racial conflict programs in the United States have address the dichotomy of relations between whites and people of color (Bobo, 2001) these transnational messages reveal that the problem is more complex than that. Negative racial attitudes from minority groups toward other minority groups are prevalent and schools are not being proactive in creating spaces that could promote meaningful positive interactions among diverse minority groups. On the other hand, the *TransnationalMessages* also identified some positive perceptions that may be oblivious to school staff such as appreciation for teachers and school services. For example, in my ethnographic work with teachers in these schools, most of the teachers had very negative views of Mexican students. Teachers thought that the Mexican students were too distant or unappreciated of their efforts to help them. The students' interviews showed the opposite. Students were very appreciative of their *caring* teachers. I think this misunderstanding, which may be based on lack of effective cross-cultural communication between teachers and students, is unfortunate. I believe that many immigrant students are missing the opportunity to establish meaningful ties with their teachers that could become sources of social capital as it was the case for Yuridia.

The second issue that the *Transnational Messages* recognized is that while as immigrants and second language learners, these students experienced discontinuities because of language and cultural barriers, the creation of a transnational social space within the U.S. school brought

these students into a very special social space where social and cultural capitals brought from Mexico could be valuable. The *Transnational Messages* provided expectations but also some sort of social capital to help newcomers to interact within the *Mexican* social spaces that more established immigrants had already created in school. Further, while the preoccupation of the existing literature on the adaptation of Mexican immigrant students has been on their assimilation to the U.S. mainstream culture, the *Transnational Messages* have evidenced that many of these immigrant students are not really assimilating in social spaces that are *mainstream*, but rather *transnational*, where the Mexican identity and culture are salient. Family, community, and peers influence students' experiences in school (Heath, 1986; Valdes, 1996). However, for some immigrant children, the construction of family and community may not only include socialization with individuals residing in the receiving community where immigrant children are localized, but also include relationships with relatives and community members in their communities of origin.

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Appendix A

Transnational Messages Questionnaire

1. Sometimes people hear about how life is in the U.S. even before they move here. When you lived in your country, what did you hear about schools in the U.S.?

[IF CHILD HAD NOT HEARD ANYTHING -- GO TO QUESTION 5a]

- 2a. How did you hear these things about American schools? (Q1)

[IF CHILD DOES NOT MENTION MEDIA, THEN ASK:]

- 2b. Did you hear anything about U.S. school on TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, or Internet?

3. How did you feel after hearing these things about U.S. schools knowing that you might be attending a school in the U.S.?

- 5a. Think about when you arrived in the U.S. and you found students from [your COUNTRY OF ORIGIN] in the school. What kinds of things did they tell you about U.S. schools?

- 5b. Do you think these comments helped you in anyway?

YES NO

- 5c. How?

6. You may know that schools are different in every country. Imagine that you are calling your cousin on the phone. He/she and his/her family are moving to the U.S. next month. Your cousin wants to know about your experience in schools in the U.S. He/She wants to know as much as you can tell him/her. What would you tell him/her about U.S. schools?