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## **Educating for Bilingualism in Mexican Transnational Communities**

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### **Abstract**

This position paper describes the educational situation facing *retornado* families and children, Mexican transnational immigrants moving between the New York City region and Puebla, Mexico. Following an overview of issues in transnational migration and education, we describe factors underlying the current lack of adequate first language and second language instruction for the Spanish-English bilinguals returning to live in Mexico. We offer suggestions for how Mexican educators can better serve transnational bilingual students through instruction, taking into account the views of parents and the need for teacher education which contemplates the specific linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of returning immigrant children.

### **Transnational Migration and Bilingualism**

According to Wei and Sherman (2001, p. 378) "indigenous children of immigrant parents are emerging as the largest new bilingual population across the world." Significantly, a great deal of work on language development and language use in immigrant populations is based on the assumption that immigrants settle permanently in their adopted country. Thus, researchers, policy makers, and educators have focused primarily on the processes by which immigrants assimilate linguistically, culturally and ideologically to the receiving community. In many places, however, immigrants maintain their language and cultural identities and practices with the expectation of returning to their communities of origin. A significantly different form of migration, "transnationalism" is characterized by the "dense networks of social relations that transcend national boundaries" (Binford, 2000, p. 1; c.f. Guerra, 1998) created when individuals and families move physically, emotionally and economically back and forth across borders and between cultures.

In this position paper we are concerned with the linguistic and educational effects of transnationalism, the two-way movement of families and children between countries. Specifically, we argue that Mexican schools and host communities are poorly organized

to deal with, and perhaps augment, the bilingualism that is often the by-product of international migration.

### **Transnationalism Between New York and Puebla, Mexico**

Our stance here derives in part from our experiences as researchers and teacher trainers in the central Mexican state of Puebla, one of the states with the highest levels of migration to the US<sup>1</sup> out of a population of slightly more than five million residents, it is thought that perhaps one million people—nearly one in five—spend some part of each year in the US (Martínez, 2002). Of three principal expulsion zones in the state, the region just south of the capital city of Puebla, (including the communities of Atlixco, Izúcar de Matamoros, Cholula, and Calpan) provides a compelling context because of the rapid increase in international migration over the past decade. In addition, and in contrast to migratory flows from indigenous-speaking regions to the north and south, the central region has abundant water and natural resources, as well as well established systems of electricity and irrigation (Cortés, 2001). These communities are also interesting linguistically because many residents have undergone language shift (from Nahuatl to Spanish) in recent generations, a process that has been hastened through participation in state-sponsored schools (Cifuentes, 1998).

Migration from Puebla to the New York City/New Jersey area began in the 1970s, and has accelerated considerably since the early 1990s (Binford, 2000; Smith, 1994). Today, approximately 50% of the Mexicans living in New York City--perhaps as many as 200,000 people--are from Atlixco and other communities in the State of Puebla (Consulado General de Mexico en Nueva York, 2000). Employed primarily in low-paying service jobs, many dream of saving enough money in the US to open a small business that will permit them to leave the impoverished agricultural sector upon their return to Mexico (Gendreau & Giménez, 2000). Although the migrant population continues to be dominated by unmarried males, a growing number of *poblano* women and families with children live in the greater New York area. Return rates, typically higher for families (Cortés, 2001), have understandably increased since the events of September 11, 2001 and subsequent economic downturn in the US. Indeed, in the weeks following the attacks, officials in the national Secretariat of Education prepared for the return of as many as 400,000 transnationals, including many students who had spent at least some of their growing up and school years living in the US (Reyes, C., 2001, October 5).<sup>2</sup>

### **Transnationals as Spanish/English Bilinguals**

Known locally as '*retornados*' [returnees], some of these children had never lived outside the US. Indeed, those who have lived a significant portion of their daily lives in English return to Mexico with differing degrees of competence and schooling in English. Importantly, because only a minority of Latino children in New York City schools receive content instruction in Spanish (MacSwan, 2000), transnational children who return to Mexican schools may fare poorly because of limited academic proficiency in Spanish.

Unlike their counterparts in US schools, transnational students in Mexico are not highly concentrated in particular schools. Rather, they attend a number of urban and rural schools scattered across the region. Indeed, in nearly every classroom we have visited, at least one student has lived in the US, and many more have parents and other close relatives with that experience.

Among Mexico's elite, bilingualism is closely associated with academic and economic success. This is seldom the case for the country's folk bilinguals (Romaine, 1999), particularly those who speak an indigenous language in addition to Spanish. Transnationals constitute an interesting group because they tend to be poor (like folk bilinguals) and to speak English (like elite bilinguals) rather than (or in addition to) an indigenous language.

Transnational families share a strong belief in English-Spanish bilingualism, often perceived as a tool for escaping the need to migrate to the US. A mother whose two young children were born in New York City reported, "Por eso me doy cuenta que para mi hija sea mejor estudiar, porque ellas (mis dos sobrinas) son bilingües. Me doy cuenta que ella tiene más oportunidad por ser bilingüe."<sup>3</sup> [That's how I realized that for my daughter it would be better to study, because my two nieces are bilingual. I can see that she will have more opportunities by being bilingual.] Thus, families of *retornado* students employ various strategies in order to help their children develop and retain bilingualism. Some parents send children home to Mexico in order to help them maintain proficiency in Spanish (Malkin, 2000). An English teacher confirmed this pattern, commenting, "Los padres vienen con los niños, (dicen) 'es que nació en Estados Unidos, ha estado allá cinco años pero ya nos venimos para acá y queremos que no pierda el inglés.'" [The parents come in with their kids, (saying) 'He/she was born in the United States, he/she was there for five years, but now we're back here and we want to make sure that he/she doesn't forget English.'].]

However, unlike Spanish proficiency, which may be quickly regained or developed through participation in numerous, overlapping domains once in Mexico, there are fewer viable options for the continued development and maintenance of English. Because public English instruction does not begin until the secondary level (equivalent to grade 7 in the US system), and due to a perceived lack of quality of English instruction in public schools (described in the following section), middle-class Mexican families often send their children to one of the growing number of language institutes. However, the cost of private instruction, ranging from a few dollars per class to more than one thousand dollars per month, is typically far beyond the budget of most transnationals.

### **Support for Transnational Bilingualism in Mexican Schools**

In the following section we describe the considerable challenges Mexican schools face in meeting the language needs of the growing *retornado* population.

#### **Barriers to Appropriate Bilingual Instruction for Retornados**

As in the US, few schools in Mexico provide instruction that is linguistically and culturally appropriate instruction for their transnational students. In this section we

discuss what we see as the three major factors contributing to this problem: (a) the shortage of linguistically qualified teachers trained to recognize and meet the special needs of transnational bilinguals; (b) limited access to or the non-existence of materials relevant to these learners; and (c) perhaps most difficult to remediate, prescriptivist and pejorative attitudes towards the language varieties spoken by *retornado* students and their families.

In terms of English language proficiency, relatively few Mexican teachers have been trained to meet the special needs of transnational learners. Despite the fact that the national curriculum mandates English instruction at the *secundaria* [middle school] level, few teachers have developed high levels of proficiency in that language (Domínguez Betancourt, 1995). Vega González (2002) describes the case of in-service teachers whose aural comprehension in English made it difficult for them to effectively use the audio cassettes featured in the national curriculum's communicative approach to English language instruction. Indeed, teachers-in-training often choose to specialize in English instruction in order to improve their own English for future job prospects in other fields, rather than from a desire to become practicing teachers (Smith, 2001a).

The lack of English proficiency on the part of teachers has particular consequences for *retornado* students. Students whose initial literacy has been developed primarily or partially through English seldom receive reading support from teachers trained to recognize developmental issues due to cross-linguistic influence from English. In terms of emerging writing, Spanish monolingual teachers are less apt to understand English proficient students' tendency to represent the consonants of the language rather than the vowels (Goodman, 2002). At the secondary level, students with highly developed English are typically given an examination which exempts them from further instruction. In some cases, English proficient students are regarded as a threat by their less proficient teachers, who simply tell students not to attend class during the period of English instruction. Perhaps most disturbing is the effect on children's perceptions of their own potential to achieve advanced levels of bilingualism. The words of a six-year-old girl two months after her return to Mexico, illustrate this point: "Voy a tener que ir a los Estados Unidos para recordar mis colores...ya no me acuerdo." [I'll have to go back to the United States to remember my colors...I can't remember them anymore]. Thus, as early as first grade, children are capable of equating a language with a country, and are capable of expressing beliefs about the possibility of maintaining bilingualism while living in Mexico.

A second factor is limited access to materials that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for transnational bilinguals. Books are generally more expensive in Mexico than in the United States and Europe, and English-language books are particularly expensive and difficult to find in the smaller towns and rural areas where many *retornados* live. Even in larger cities one rarely finds bookstores or libraries with bilingual children's books. In terms of Spanish language reading materials, the considerable effort and investment by the national government to provide millions of copies of free primary readers (*libros gratuitos*) at each grade level has resulted in texts that are directed almost exclusively to the experiences and interests of monolingual, urban learners (Hamel, 1999). Only recently, through the *Libros del Rincón* and other programs, has the government begun to commission books by Mexican authors dealing

with issues of immigration (see Anza Costabile, 2000). Thus, educators who wish to address such themes in their classes face limited options in terms of appropriate materials.

A third barrier to appropriate instruction for transnational students is rooted in widely-shared prescriptivist notions of language. Elsewhere, we have considered the effects on oral and written language use of ‘layered colonialism’, in which participants in Mexican schools must negotiate an overlapping series of language ideologies constructed during the Spanish colonial period, French imperial rule, orthographic conventions dictated by the Real Academia Española [Spanish Royal Academy], and, more recently, the growing economic and cultural hegemony of the United States (Jiménez, Smith & Martínez León, 2002). Like their non-migrant peers, transnational students receive instruction which allows them great freedom to say what they want, while their written language is tightly controlled and closely monitored to ensure adherence to conventional forms. This emphasis on form is hardly new, as illustrated by the following statement announcing the creation of a Mexican Academia de la Lengua in 1835: "La decadencia á que ha llegado entre nosotros la lengua castellana...por falta de principios en la mayor parte de los que la hablan y escriben..." [The poor state to which our Spanish has fallen...due to the lack of principles by most of those who speak it and write it] (Cifuentes, 1998, p. 292). Compare the above statement with the comments of a local secondary school teacher:

*Tengo como proyecto promover y colaborar en el conocimiento y uso correcto del español a través de la lectura y escritura en la región, en donde puede advertirse un empobrecimiento de nuestro idioma en la expresión oral y sobre todo en la escritura, donde la ortografía queda marginada.*

My goal is to promote and contribute to knowledge and proper use of Spanish in this area, where there is an obvious impoverishment of our written and spoken language, especially in spelling.

It is not surprising, then, that transnational parents report being told by teachers that their children do not speak ‘correct’ or even ‘real’ Spanish. Like their non-immigrant peers, transnational bilinguals face strongly prescriptivist language attitudes, particularly with regard to written language (Kalmar, 2001).

This focus on form over content is also apparent in educators’ views on the varieties of English used by transnational students. A powerful example comes from the director of an English institute, who reported “*Viene mucha gente a pedir siempre, gente que viene de Estados Unidos. ‘Es que yo estuve seis años en Estados Unidos y yo ya lo hablo.’*” [Lots of people come to ask about working here, people who have lived in the United States. ‘I was in the US for six years and I can speak English.’] Despite the fact that their oral proficiency in English is often more advanced than that of English teachers,

such speakers are typically not regarded as worthy language resources or models for schools. The director explained:

*La idea del inglés americano que tenemos es que como hay una congregación de razas y de gente de todo el mundo, lo han deformado. Entonces lo que ha pasado con el americano es de que cada quien lo habla como quiere ¿no? Los negros tienen una entonación, su vocabulario, los chinos su entonación, su vocabulario, a parte, ¡los mexicanos incluso! Entonces, no hay un inglés real, un inglés puro, pues.*

The idea we have of American English is that it's been deformed by the mix of cultures and people from all over the world. So what's happened with American English is that everyone just speaks it however they like, you know? The African Americans have their own intonation, their own vocabulary, the Chinese have theirs, even the Mexicans! So there's no real English, no pure English.

In this school, then, as in other private schools and institutes in the region, British English is taught in the belief that it is the purest form of English, one with which a speaker will always be well received. Despite the growing demand for linguistically qualified teachers of English in the region, such prescriptive attitudes make it unlikely that transnational bilinguals will be sought out as English teachers.

Thus, educational systems in Mexico, like many counterparts in the US, tend to view transnational learners in fixed ways that have little to do with children's lived experiences or actual bilingual proficiency. By recognizing only those experiences immediately consonant with nationally determined priorities, these official perspectives lack the sophistication needed to understand the rich experiences of transnationals. In the following section we turn to recommendations we believe can help Mexican educators meet the specific linguistic, cultural, and academic needs of *retornados*.

### Towards Appropriate Pedagogies for Transnational Bilingual Learners

Given the barriers we have described to the promotion of transnational bilingualism in Mexican schools, what can educators do to move towards more appropriate pedagogies for transnational bilingual learners? We offer suggestions in three areas: (a) use of learners' and families' Spanish and English funds of linguistic knowledge to improve instruction for all learners; (b) consideration of the perspectives of the families and community members regarding education and language instruction; and (c) the need for increased sociolinguistic awareness on the part of educators and educational policy makers.

How can educators in Mexico prepare themselves to work with transnational bilinguals? First, we believe that the English and Spanish language funds of knowledge held by *retornados* should be utilized as resources to improve instruction for all learners.

Earlier, we gave the example of a school director who would not hire *retornado* bilinguals to teach in her English language school. However, there is evidence that some public schools are beginning to do just that. Having lived in the US on and off for most of his teens and early twenties, José now teaches English to children and young adults in both private and public schools. In the private school, where British English is considered the prestige variety, José is careful to accommodate linguistically. In contrast, in the public school attended by the children of *retornados*, José's attractiveness as a teacher lies precisely in his linguistic transnationalism, his ability to teach using the English of the community. While schools should certainly insist on language teachers with the most advanced proficiency possible, the ability to successfully use more than one variety or register of English should be seen as an asset rather than as a handicap. Teachers with this knowledge can assist students to become more aware of the differences through use of basic contrastive analysis techniques.

Similarly, *retornados* who have acquired elements of other varieties of Spanish through their life and school experiences in New York should be recognized and cultivated as linguistic resources, rather than made to feel that they do not speak the 'correct' variety of Spanish. The notion of "funds of linguistic knowledge" provides a model for teachers can develop bilingual curriculum based on the language variety spoken in minority language households (Smith, 2001b). Some simple but concrete ways to do this with transnational bilinguals would be to have students write and conduct surveys involving classmates who have had contact with other varieties of Spanish, and to compile a glossary of regionally specific terms and expressions. Oral history interviews with transnationals, in English and in Spanish, could be transcribed and transformed into locally appropriate, inexpensive texts for first language (L1) and second language (L2) learning for all students.

Second, to create more appropriate forms of instruction for transnational bilingual learners, schools need to attend more closely to family and student perspectives. *Retornados* hold strong views about their experiences in US and Mexican schools. Although some studies have found that Mexican and Mexican-origin students believe that Mexican schools are superior to US schools in terms of attention from and preparation by teachers (Valenzuela, 1999) and formation of group identity (Levinson, 2001), transnational bilinguals in Puebla express their preference for aspects of US schools. For example, Victoria, the mother of a six-year girl, contrasted her daughter's kindergarten classroom in New York City with her first-grade classroom in Atlixco.

*"Yo creo que allí había más apoyo, porque allá son dos maestras por grupo por lo regular siempre. Entonces hay más ayuda para ellos y es gratis también. Aquí no. No, no me gusta. Está muy mal, vaya, no se, tal vez la maestra o tal vez es la escuela a lo mejor... Por ejemplo, (aquí) hay una maestra, como que yo creo que allá les tenían más control. Son como treinta (alumnos en la escuela de Atlixco) y allá eran menos y dos maestras....No, aquí hay demasiados (niños)."*

I think there was more support there, because each group always had two teachers. So there's more help for the children and it's

free too. Not here. No, no I don't like it. It's really bad, I mean, I don't know if it's because of the teachers or maybe the school... For example (here) there's only one teacher, but there I think they had more control. Here, there are like thirty (students in the school in Atlixco) and there were fewer with two teachers... No, here there are too many (students).

The importance that Victoria places on small class size is shared by José, who moved to Connecticut at the age of thirteen. Recalling his surprise at how few students there were in his junior high classroom in the US, José reported

*“Los grupos allá son más pequeños y acá son grandes. Aquí estábamos hasta 40 alumnos y allá, pues, éramos como 20 más o menos. Llegué y dije, ‘!Ay, qué poquitos son!’ Y ellos luego decían, no, pues ya arriba de 20 sentían que eran muchos, pero sí, eso sí, en serio.”*

The classes there are smaller and here they are large. Here we were as many as 40 students and there, well, there were about 20. When I got there I said, “Wow, there are so few students!” And they said no, here they think that more 20 students is too many. They really said that.

However, as José observed, the favorable material conditions (low student-to-teacher ration, quantity and quality of books, and appearance of classrooms) in many US classrooms do not necessarily lead to better instruction.

*Pues, en la enseñanza no vi mucha diferencia. Es casi igual allá que acá. Pasa lo mismo, como en todas las escuelas, el maestro está dando su clase y algunos (estudiantes) ni lo escuchan. Están volteando, haciendo cosas.... Igual que aquí, unos ponen atención y otros no. A veces los maestros tenían dificultad para controlar a veces al grupo porque están plática y plática. Entonces, es igual que acá.*

Well, I didn't see much difference in the teaching. It's basically the same there as here. Like in all schools, the teacher is giving his/her class and some (students) aren't even listening. They're moving, messing around....The same as here, some pay attention and some don't. Sometimes the teachers had problems controlling the class because the students won't stop talking. So, it's the same there as here.

Thus, as Valero (2002) suggests, conditions for successful pedagogy with transnational learners are not limited to appropriate materials or linguistically qualified teachers, but must include attention to the attitudes, emotions, and beliefs held by such

learners and their families. Currently, however, few institutional practices encourage teachers to identify the range of individual needs and experiences of their students. As a result, the particular needs of transnational learners go unnoticed. By listening to what Mexican students and parents have to say about schools in the US and Mexico, educators can more easily meet the expectations transnationals bring to the education of their children.

Third, in the areas of educational policy and teacher education there is a need for increased knowledge of bilingualism, language acquisition and second language teaching methods. The need for greater sociolinguistic awareness on the part of educators who work with *retornados* is especially pressing. Binational teacher exchange programs are a step in the right direction, as are recent efforts by the Mexican government to send teachers from Puebla and other regions of high out-migration to spend time observing and assisting in US classrooms. Unfortunately, based on the assumption that migration is a one-way street, the focus of such programs tends to be limited to meeting the needs of Mexican students in US schools. We would like to see the scope of these programs extended to address the knowledge base of teachers returning to Mexico. Specifically, programs like the *Programa Binacional*, in which Puebla and other states send public school teachers to US communities to assist Mexican-born children in US schools (Martínez, 2002), could be changed to give teachers academic or professional development credits for demonstrating increased awareness of the cultural and linguistic resources acquired by *retornados* in US schools. We envision such teachers as two-way “cultural workers” (Freire, 1998) capable of engaging their colleagues on both sides of the border in a dialogue about how best to work with transnational bilinguals.

### **Implications for Further Research**

In terms of future research, we foresee an important role for research that documents the school and language experiences of transnational bilinguals on both sides of the border. Due to the complex logistics of maintaining contact over extended periods of time with participants who are, by definition, highly mobile, (see Guerra, 1998; Levinson, 2001 for examples), case studies of single families and even single students seem a likely means of beginning to build a knowledge base. Ideally, the voices of transnationals themselves will be central in future research, as we have tried to make them here.

Finally, because Mexican schools are not unique in facing the uncertainties and challenges posed by the task of educating transnational bilinguals, we believe that the experiences and insights of researchers and educators working in other contexts of transnational migration--linguistic and cultural borders such as those between Belize and Mexico, Germany and Turkey, and Spain, South Africa and the Maghreb--can prove useful. Siguán's (2000, p. 15) observation about the accommodation of North African children in Spanish schools is fitting here: “*Nos estamos acercando a sociedades pluriculturales. Y no sabemos cuál es el sistema educativo adecuado para estas sociedades.*” [We are approaching pluricultural societies. And yet we are not sure which educational system is most appropriate for these societies]. Similarly, although we are far from a state of precise knowledge of the best practices for transnational bilinguals in

Mexico, we are hopeful that the ideas presented here may contribute to a linguistically and culturally appropriate pedagogy for this new type of bilingual learner.

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### Notes

- 1 Some of the data in this paper were reported at the 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the National Association for Bilingual Education, Philadelphia, March 22, 2002.
- 2 In the months since the September 11 attacks, the flow of return migration to Puebla appears to have been on a smaller scale than originally feared by government officials.
- 3 In all cases, we have preserved the interviewees' exact words in Spanish.