

**Introduction to the Special Issue:
Contemporary Return Migration
from the United States to Mexico –
Focus on Children, Youth, Schools and Families**

Rubén Hernández-León
University of California, Los Angeles

Víctor Zúñiga*
*Tecnológico** de Monterrey*

A nation of emigrants to the United States for most of the twentieth century (Fitzgerald 2008), Mexico has now become a country of immigrants. Most of these immigrants are Mexicans who, after residing abroad for many years, are now returning to their homeland often accompanied by their spouses and U.S.-born children. To be sure, return has long been a feature of the Mexico-U.S. migratory system. For decades, mostly unaccompanied, male rural Mexicans sojourned in the United States following a pattern of circular and temporary migration, returning periodically to rest and visit with family members who stayed behind, and to oversee agricultural activities. While researchers studied the consequences of circular migration on the socioeconomic dynamics of households and sending communities (López Castro 1989; Durand 1994; Jones 1995; Taylor 1933; Alcántara and Sánchez Ruiz 1985; Cornelius 1976; Dinerman 1982), scholars have rarely used the lens of return migration to understand, for

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**The Tecnológico de Monterrey requests the removal of the diacritic from the word “tecnológico” in order to facilitate identification in international searches.

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example, the experiences of reintegration once sojourners were back home. Depending on the observer, these migrants have been seen as *ausentes* (Massey et al. 1991) and *norteños* (Alarcón 1988; Durand 1996) but never viewed as *retornados*. This situation raises myriad questions: How are families and children coping with return migration? What reception are they encountering upon arrival in Mexico? How do children and adolescents negotiate integration, develop new identities and a sense of belonging in their new home? How are Mexican schools dealing with the linguistic and academic needs of hundreds of thousands of new bilingual and bicultural pupils?

The pattern of circular migration that had long characterized Mexico-U.S. migration suffered a profound disruption over the last fifteen years of the twentieth century as U.S. policy made it increasingly difficult to travel back and forth across the once porous border (Calavita 1994).¹ The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 and a new strategy of border enforcement inaugurated with the launching of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, made movement across the international boundary an ever more costly and dangerous endeavor for those crossing without authorization (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodríguez 2008, 85).

Other factors also contributed to the interruption of circularity. The opening of Mexico's national markets during the 1980s and 1990s displaced millions of rural and urban workers (Hernández-León 2008; Cornelius 1991; Roberts 1994) at the same time that the restructuring of the U.S. economy increased demand for immigrant labor in new industries and regions beyond the Southwest (Stull, Broadway and Griffith 1995; Cravey 1997; Grey 1999; Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005; Jones 2008; Schmalzbauer 2014). The legalization program of IRCA regularized 2.3 million Mexicans and anchored many formerly circular migrants in the United States (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002, 90). These newly settled immigrants quickly proceeded to reunite, with and without authorization, with family members, who had traditionally remained in Mexico (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2006, 144). Together, these forces produced one of the largest migratory

1. As the article by Rebeca Sandoval and Víctor Zúñiga in this Special Issue explains, circular migration was the dominant but not the only pattern of migration from Mexico to the United States. After the end of the Bracero Program in 1964, the U.S.-bound flow also included a small but growing stream of documented and undocumented immigrants who, having previously worked in agriculture, slowly made the transition to urban labor markets and settled in the United States.

waves in the history of the two countries: between 1995 and 2005, more than a quarter million Mexicans emigrated *al norte* every year. By 2007, 12.5 million Mexican immigrants, many of them undocumented, resided in the United States (González-Barrera and López 2013; Zong and Batalova 2016). Rooted in the United States by the presence of children and spouses and the availability of year-round jobs and barred from circulating, Mexican immigrants and their families integrated into the United States, transforming a migratory flow known for its prevalence of *casas divididas* (López Castro 1986) into a stream with a growing number of families forging *una nueva casa* (Alarcón, Escala, Odgers 2016).

Mexico's Great Migration to the United States soon turned into a Great Expulsion. By the mid-2000s, the U.S. government complemented its strategy of border policing with a beefed up policy of interior enforcement that began deporting hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants (Golash-Boza 2015). Federal and local authorities worked together through mass expulsion programs like Secure Communities and 287(g),² which placed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in county jails to screen detainees for legal status and deputized police officers as immigration agents (Rodríguez 2012). State legislatures and city governments joined the backlash passing hundreds of bills and local ordinances aimed at criminalizing and deflecting undocumented immigrants (Light 2006; Varsanyi 2010). The policy of mass expulsion has affected not only the individuals in formal removal proceedings but also the spouses and children who frequently leave the United States following a deported family member. As "Moving to the 'Homeland': Children's Narratives of Migration from the United States to Mexico" illustrates — article three in this Special Issue, by Betsabé Román González, Eduardo Carrillo Cantú and Rubén Hernández-León — some Mexican immigrants witnessing the deportation of relatives would pre-emptively prefer to leave the country rather than face separation resulting from detention and removal.

The Great Recession of 2007–2009 and its protracted and devastating aftermath also set the stage for significant return migration

2. Secure Communities is a deportation program managed by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and implemented in partnership with local law enforcement agencies. Billed as a tool to identify and remove undocumented immigrants with serious criminal records, the program has been widely used to net and deport unauthorized immigrants in general. The 287(g) program allows the federal government partnership with local law enforcement agencies to perform immigration control functions under the terms of a memorandum of understanding, which include training and supervision from ICE.

from the United States to Mexico. The worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the Great Recession decimated industries in which Mexicans had found ample employment opportunities. Mexican workers might not have chosen to return to the homeland had job loss been the only consequence, but the national economic collapse was accompanied by state-sponsored mass expulsion. The labor force that had fueled the economic expansion of the late 1990s and early 2000s had become redundant and was a convenient scapegoat for right-wing political entrepreneurs emboldened by the Congressional stalemate on immigration reform (Fluery-Steiner and Longazel 2010).³

Over the past ten years, since 2006, mass deportations and economic crises have unleashed significant return flows from the United States to Mexico. Different estimates based on data from Mexico's population census indicate that in the 2005–2010 period between one and 1.4 million people returned to the homeland (Giorguli Saucedo and Gutiérrez 2012). The combination of declining emigration from Mexico to the United States and an increasing return flow brought net migration between the two countries to a net zero (Giorguli and Gutiérrez 2011; Passel, Cohn and González-Barrera 2012). Subsequently, a Pew Research Center report estimated that between 2009 and 2014, one million Mexicans had left the United States, in contrast to the 870,000 people who had entered from Mexico, yielding a net return migratory gain for Mexico and fully reversing a trend that had been in place for forty years (González-Barrera 2015).⁴

This Special Issue of *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* convenes articles on return migration from the United States to Mexico asking questions about the experiences of children, families and young adults moving to the homeland and about the role that schools have played in the social processes of return and reintegration, including: How do children and families negotiate and make decisions about return migrations? How do the experiences of return of children and young adolescents differ from those of adults? How do children and youths mend the ruptures created by the sudden departure from

3. Mexican immigrants have not been passive bystanders of efforts to criminalize their labor and presence in the United States. Together with other immigrants, they have joined in different social movements and organizations to claim rights and defend against deportation (Voss and Bloemraad 2011).

4. A stable Mexican economy and low demographic growth also explain the decline in emigration to the United States (González-Barrera 2015).

their prior homes, reconstruct their social networks and adapt to their new communities? How do schools and teachers respond to the needs of hundreds of thousands of students who began their educational careers in the United States and had no prior exposure to academic Spanish?

Numerous studies using different sources of data report that the most important motivation for return given by Mexican migrants is the desire to be together with their families. According to these studies, between 60 percent and 90 percent of respondents state that family reunification is the main reason for return (BBVA 2013, 15; González-Barrera 2015, 14; Zúñiga 2015, 151; Hagan, Hernández-León and Demonsant 2015, 152–153). The anthropologists, sociologists, sociolinguists, education and communication scholars contributing to this Special Issue take this motivation seriously: families are at the center of the decision to return. Still, as Rebeca Sandoval and Víctor Zúñiga contend in their review article “¿Quiénes están retornando de Estados Unidos a México?: una revisión crítica de la literatura reciente (2008–2015),” by largely focusing on economic and labor market forces, studies of migration from the United States to Mexico often obfuscate the significance of the family in the movement back to the homeland.

We suggest that the desire to reunify or to keep the family together expresses a protective strategy in the face of the increasingly hostile environment Mexican immigrant families have encountered in the United States in recent years. Households with family members who are undocumented have been particularly vulnerable to the combined effect of mass deportation and the consequences of a prolonged economic downturn which eliminated jobs and lead to widespread home foreclosures and investment loss. In this context, conventional understandings of return as either voluntary or involuntary (as in the case of deportations) shed little light on how and why families decide to go back to Mexico (Zúñiga 2015; Menjívar 2016). As the article by Román González, Carrillo Cantú and Hernández-León discusses, for undocumented parents forced removal and family separation are an ever present threat, which moves a step closer to home when an acquaintance or relative gets trapped by the deportation machine. Moving to Mexico hurriedly and in fear is akin to expulsion even if this happens in the absence of a deportation order. Some undocumented parents make these decisions as a defensive strategy to keep the family together with full knowledge that, for some or for all family members, re-emigration to the United States will be almost impossible. As a protective strategy against actual or potential state violence, return is also the manifestation of the asymmetrical

political confrontation between migrants and the state—another episode of what Néstor Rodríguez (1996) called “the battle for the border.”

Families, of course, are not internally homogenous entities. Family members are at different stages of their life cycles, performing diverse gender and economic roles, and consequently they experience return migration in different ways. Several articles in this Special Issue show how children and adolescents experience return as a profound disruption in their lives and as a rupture with their social environment in the United States. These minors include hundreds of thousands of children who were either born in Mexico but raised in the United States or children who were born in the United States to Mexican immigrants and who are now moving to their parents’ country of origin. In both cases, these children have experienced their primary socialization north of the border, have not had direct contact with Mexico and its social and political institutions, are English-dominant individuals, and have not been exposed to the academic version of Spanish taught in Mexican schools.

The return migration of children and youth clearly bears the characteristics of a full-blown international migration. Upon arrival in Mexico, children and adolescents have to adapt to new economic circumstances and construct social relations with unfamiliar peers, relatives and neighbors; they have to adjust to the social norms and institutional culture of schools as they interact with classmates, teachers, and administrators and learn to read and write academic Spanish. As Shinji Hirai and Rebeca Sandoval argue in their article on the 1.5 generation,⁵ “El itinerario subjetivo como herramienta de análisis: las experiencias de los jóvenes de la generación 1.5 que retornan a México,” the process of return often entails a drastic process of resocialization similar to what immigrants in general experience. As a result of this process, children and adolescents adapt and develop new identities but not without substantial effort and suffering. Many of them long for their circle of friends, schools and the material comforts U.S. society afforded them and imagine their future back in the United States, while others quickly take to their new home. Hirai and Sandoval also propose the concept of subjective itinerary (*itinerario subjetivo*) to understand how individuals reinterpret past

5. The term 1.5 generation is used to conceptualize the distinct experiences of individuals who emigrated during their childhood and early adolescent years and therefore have experienced part of their primary socialization in the country of origin and part of this process in the country of destination.

and present in light of the emotions and changing sense of belonging that return migration powerfully elicits.

Needless to say, age at the time of return, family circumstances in the United States and conditions of arrival in Mexico are factors that shape how children experience migration back to the homeland. As the article by Román González, Carrillo Cantú and Hernández-León demonstrates, young adolescents who return with one or both parents can often count on the economic and emotional support of these adults, who closely monitor their well-being. These children stand in contrast with the case study of one young man of the 1.5 generation who returns by himself (but with relatives waiting for him in Mexico) and who alone navigates the transition from U.S. undocumented to documented status, as analyzed by Hirai and Sandoval in this issue.

While some 1.5 generation youths have returned to Mexico after realizing that their undocumented status limits higher education opportunities in the United States, many more, especially those who are deported, end up in call centers of cities like Monterrey, Guadalajara, Mexico City and Tijuana, where they are hired for their bilingual and bicultural skills to service customers in the U.S. market (Da Cruz 2014). This is the case of some of the young adults studied by José Juan Olvera and Carolina Muela in their article for this Special Issue, “Sin familia en México: redes sociales alternativas para la migración de retorno de jóvenes mexicanos deportados con experiencia carcelaria en Texas.” These men have been deported to Mexico after stints of incarceration, a chief indicator of what immigration scholars call downward assimilation, a negative path of incorporation associated with lack of legal status, poverty and racialization (Portes and Rumbaut 2014). As Olvera and Muela describe, during their time spent in penitentiaries in Texas, young immigrant inmates develop ties to a gang to protect themselves against other prison gangs. Once deported to Mexico, these individuals reactivate these gang-based ties to survive in the urban economy, using skills learned during their years as convicts, such as tattooing and hair styling. The stories of return of these deportees are both worrisome and hopeful: prior incarceration in the United States makes them a target for discrimination and stigmatization in Mexico, rendering them vulnerable and prone to reinstate their criminal careers in the homeland; at the same time, the ability of some to combine creative informal activities with formal employment in call centers suggests a great capacity to adapt and craft viable livelihoods after deportation.

This Special Issue of *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* also focuses on schools, one of the most important social institutions when it comes to the present and future of children and families

returning to Mexico. Different estimates attest to the impact that return flows have had on Mexican schools. For example, Zúñiga (2012, 92) calculated that 420,000 children and adolescents, six to fifteen years of age with prior schooling experience in the United States, were enrolled in Mexican schools in 2010. Approximately 40 percent of these students were born in the United States and 60 percent in Mexico (96). Zúñiga and Hamann (2013, 181) estimated that by 2010, 330,000 U.S.-born children were attending schools in Mexico.⁶ Analyzing the Mexican Population Census, Giorguli and Gutiérrez (2011, 22) calculated that between 2005 and 2010, 310,000 U.S.-born minors migrated to Mexico. In her “Policy Report ~ Informe: The Students We Share ~ L@s estudiantes que compartimos,” included in this Special Issue, Patricia Gándara cites estimates that put the numbers of U.S.-born, school-age children currently residing in Mexico at more than half million.⁷

How have public education policy makers, school administrators and teachers responded to the distinct linguistic and educational needs of these children? As some of the articles in this Special Issue explain, public policy, curricular and pedagogical responses have been limited and inconsistent. Some states, including Morelos, where the study by Román González, Carrillo Cantú and Hernández-León takes place, have developed initiatives to identify, track and attend to the needs of returning children and those who are moving to Mexico for the first time. As the Policy Report by Patricia Gándara indicates, there have been a few federal initiatives to create binational and bilingual curricula recognized by school systems in both countries and programs of course equivalencies so that students who take courses in one country can get credit in the other. Recently, the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP, Mexico’s Department of Education) eliminated the requirement to certify K-12 basic education diplomas and records obtained abroad as a condition for enrollment in Mexican schools (Diario Oficial de la Federación 2015).⁸ This

6. These estimates do not take into account returning children who were not going to school and children who at some point attended school but subsequently dropped out.

7. These numbers, calculated by Mónica Jacobo-Suárez (forthcoming), are in turn based on the 2010 estimates provided by the final report of the *Binational Dialogue on Mexican Migrants in the U.S. and Mexico* (see Escobar Latapí, Lowell and Martin 2013).

8. Internationally known as the apostille, this certification is issued in the United States by the local Secretary of State, who endorses the validity of a public document. The apostille assures the receiving side of the authenticity and validity of the document. Some public documents, including school records, may require notarization in order to receive the apostille (Texas Secretary of State 2016).

change in policy responded to numerous complaints from parents and advocates, who argued that this requirement often prevented children previously enrolled in U.S. schools from continuing their education in Mexico because few families had either the information or the chance to validate school documents before returning (PIPE 2015).⁹

In contrast to these efforts, important programmatic initiatives designed to attend to the educational needs of international migrant children have been abolished as a result of political shifts occurring at the national level. This is the case of the Proyecto de Educación Básica Sin Fronteras (Basic Education without Borders Project). This program sought to facilitate the enrollment of international migrant children in Mexican schools, to develop local policies that ease the integration of children transitioning from the United States to Mexico's public education system and lower dropout rates, and to train teachers and administrators on the educational needs of the new pupils. Rescinding this type of initiative lowers the visibility of international migrant children and their distinct educational needs both as a public policy challenge and as a pedagogical matter (Zúñiga 2013).

Several articles in this Special Issue shed light on the experiences of international migrant children as students in Mexican schools. The common thread connecting these articles is the hardships children and adolescents experience not only as a result of the disruption in schooling but also as a consequence of their invisibility in Mexico's educational system. In the article by Juan Sánchez García and Edmund Hamann, "Educator Responses to Migrant Children in Mexican Schools," teachers who have been educated following a mononational curriculum confront the arrival of bicultural and bilingual students. While these teachers did not react uniformly to the new makeup of their schools, a persistent position expressed by some of these educators in different parts of the country was that the presence of their bilingual pupils did not require accommodations and new pedagogical strategies. According to Sánchez García and Hamann, the teachers also acknowledged that they had not received training to address the educational needs of international migrant children either at the *escuela normal* (teacher training college) or through professional development courses. These findings confirm

9. The new policy still required that the documents presented to revalidate studies conducted in the United States be translated into Spanish but not necessarily by a certified translator.

the invisibility of children transitioning from U.S. to Mexican schools, whose distinct learning experiences and difficulties are ignored at the level of policy, curriculum and the classroom.

In “Children Circulating between the U.S. and Mexico: Fractured Schooling and Linguistic Ruptures,” Catalina Panait and Víctor Zúñiga analyze the learning experiences of the offspring of seasonal migrant workers. Following the cross-border sojourns of their parents, these children and young adolescents lead a transnational life, moving every year between countries, school systems, and oral and written languages. While the experiences of these children might be considered a unique and even extreme case of disruption (given that some of them migrate twice annually, once *al norte* and once back to the homeland), their experiences learning academic Spanish in Mexican schools, after spending months in U.S. schools, speak of the difficulties *all* international migrant children undergo at some point during the return to Mexico. Using the analytical tools of sociolinguistics, Panait and Zúñiga show how these transnational children struggle with their transitions to written English and to written Spanish. As the authors explain, the experiences of these children moving between oral and written versions of these languages are best characterized as a series of ruptures rather than a seamless transition. The children studied by Panait and Zúñiga suffer and struggle to overcome the challenges created by these fissures, which are compounded by their invisibility in the language and educational programs of Mexico’s schools.

As Patricia Gándara explains in her Policy Report for this Special Issue, the governments of Mexico and the United States do not communicate on the education of children who move, return and circulate between the two countries. From the perspective of the United States, these children and young adolescents, many of them U.S. citizens, disappear from view once they leave the country and are no longer the target of English as Second Language and other immigrant integration programs. As several articles of this Special Issue demonstrate, in Mexico these children and youths remain largely invisible despite their growing presence in schools and communities. The lack of attention to the educational needs arising in the context of migration to Mexico might compound the disadvantages these children have already accumulated as racial and linguistic minorities in the United States. As Gándara articulates, stakeholders in both countries need to develop policies and specific programs to harness

the unique advantages these minors possess, including their bilingual and bicultural skills.¹⁰

While the educational needs of international migrant children, adolescents and young adults must become part of the bilateral agenda between Mexico and the United States, concrete policy and programmatic initiatives are more likely to emerge at the national, state and local levels. Large scale return flows challenge Mexican institutions, in particular, to develop actions that welcome and facilitate the integration and reintegration of migrant families and their offspring. We propose that these policies take into consideration regional variations in return migration and specifically the fact that some returnees are coming back to their largely rural hometowns while others are choosing new urban destinations in Mexico (Terán, Giorguli and Sánchez 2015). Also, in order to benefit children *and* their families, these policies need to combine employment and educational interventions. For example, Mexico's National Council for the Normalization and Certification of Labor Competences (Consejo Nacional de Normalización y Certificación de Competencias Laborales, or CONOCER by its initials in Spanish)—a department of the SEP—could develop a program to recognize and certify the formal and informal skills that returning migrants have learned in the United States (Hagan, Hernández-León and Demonsant 2015).

In sum, educational policies need to go beyond the simplification of administrative procedures that facilitate enrollment in Mexican schools. Affirmative actions to ensure that fewer returnees drop out of school should include: 1) bicultural training of teachers in the *escuelas normales* and ongoing professional development seminars, and 2) creating and adapting curricula that recognizes the experiences of international migrant children that values their funds of knowledge (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005), and that supports their linguistic transitions. As we stated at the beginning of this introduction, Mexico has now become a country of immigrants, most of them Mexicans and Mexican-Americans moving from the United States to the homeland. This transformation irremediably involves institutional changes, particularly in schools as key institutions responsible for welcoming and integrating international migrant children and their families into Mexico's social fabric.

10. On the labor market and workplace advantages bilingualism affords to the children of working-class immigrants, see Hernández-León and Lakhani (2013).