

Transnational Students And Public Schools in Mexico

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Both a universal right and a fundamental element for building a society, education is directly linked to human mobility. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that, as migratory flows change, the educational needs of migrants and those around them also change.

Traditionally, Mexico is a country of origin, transit, and destination for millions of people of different ages, genders, and socio-cultural backgrounds.¹ This dynamic creates specific challenges on many levels, particularly for education as a long-term government policy. For more than 30 years the issue of education for migrants has been on the fringes of the national political agenda, sometimes more present on a federal level and others on a state level, but never as an inte-

gral part and a priority in this country's educational goals. However, some programs have been implemented to deal with these groups' needs.

In recent years, student needs in our country have evolved along different lines. Not only has it been necessary to adjust programs and study plans to incorporate information technologies to educate new generations in order to bring their competitive levels up to international trends, but very particularly, attending to the needs of a group of students whose academic careers have been carried out in more than one educational system has become more complex.²

In this article, I will briefly review the evolution of education for migrants and transnational students in Mexico and identify the outstanding tasks for designing appropriate public policies to deal with all their requirements in the 199 678 schools imparting basic all education in Mexico's 2 457 municipalities.³

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CIRCULAR MIGRATION, THE BEGINNING OF EDUCATION FOR MIGRANTS⁴

In 1976, the heavy flows of farm worker migrants between Michoacán and California sparked the first binational collaborative efforts by educational authorities. At that time, what was mainly required was to ensure uninterrupted educational opportunities for migrant children and teens who traveled every year between the two countries following the agricultural seasons. This kind of mobility is incompatible with both countries' school systems, forcing the students to miss months of classes and making their learning lag behind.

After two years of research and inter-institutional cooperation, a collaborative pilot program began in which academic information was shared about the students that had been taught both by Mexico's Ministry of Public Education and the State of California Department of Education. A few years later, in 1982, after the success of that first program, the Binational Migrant Education Initiative (BMEI, or *Problem* in Spanish) was launched with the aim of offering education to migrant children and young people who attend school one part of the school year in Mexico and the other in the United

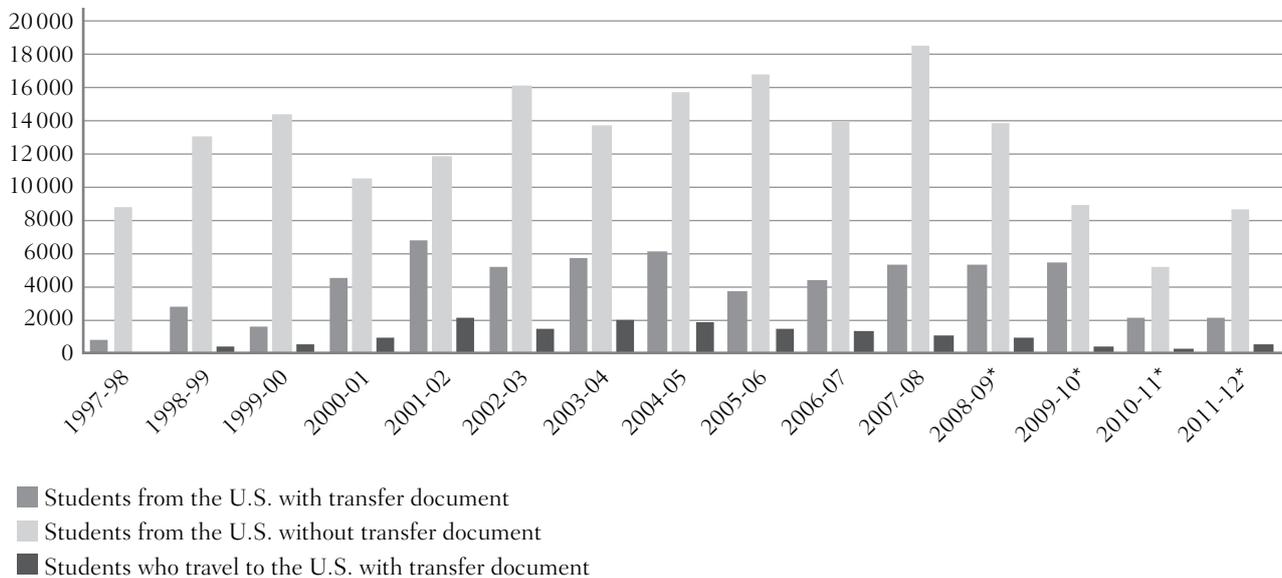
States, who are repatriated by their parents, and those who remain in the United States, as well as to ensure the continuity of their education and that it be of good quality, equal, and relevant to their lives.⁵

Since there is no federal financing for this, the 31 Mexican states that participate in the program pay for it through local budget items and/or funds linked to school administration. On the Mexican side of the border, *Problem* coordinates through a council that includes a representation of the federal Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Relations through the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME), and a national coordinating body with rotating coordinators for each of the five operational crosscutting themes.⁶

The first need detected among migrant and/or transnational students was to overcome the challenge of access to schools. Thanks to the legal framework established in the

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GRAPH 1
NUMBER OF MEXICO-U.S. MIGRANT STUDENTS ENROLLED IN BASIC EDUCATION (1997-2012)



* General access to school at any point in the school year.

Source: SEP, *Informe estadístico de alumnos atendidos en el marco del Problem* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Acreditación, Incorporación y Revalidación, SEP, 2013).

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1990 memorandum of understanding (MOU) on education signed by the Mexican and U.S. governments, the tool to achieve this was the migrant student transfer document, which operates as a binational, bilingual student record that facilitates students' moving between the educational systems of Mexico and the United States more easily.

The extensive use of this transfer document until recently demonstrated the initiative's success. Graph 1 illustrates its use and lack of use since its format changed in 1997 up until 2012. It also clearly shows the proportion of students who entered Mexico's educational system with and without the transfer document. Starting in 2008, increasing numbers of them did not have to present the document to be able to attend Mexican schools thanks to the intervention of Probem authorities and school officials. This is undoubtedly a victory of the system for favoring access to education, with the implementation of other enrollment strategies like diagnostic and placement testing and/or assigning a student to a particular grade by age.

Once the tool had been created to facilitate migrant students' enrollment, the next challenge was to ensure it at any time in the school year. It was then that Probem became the body in charge of obtaining the authorization for migrant students to be admitted to schools by interpreting registration norms, through its state coordinators and in collaboration with the registrars and principals at certain schools. This has become common usage since, as a constitutional right and a recognized universal right to access to education, today, migrant students can enroll in public schools at any time during the school year.

THE QUEST FOR EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AMONG SHARED STUDENTS

The cultural diversity that exists in the U.S. population has also required attention be paid to educational needs. This has undergone an evolution that I will not explore here. However,

I can say that, since the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was signed into law, it began to be possible in the decentralized U.S. educational system to implement programs of educational services for people whose mother tongue is not English with federal funding.

Even given the differences among the state systems, we can point to the existence of transitional programs that use the mother tongue for the first three years and assume that by the fourth year, the students speak sufficient English to continue in regular classes. Special alternative instruction programs also exist that provide incentives to speaking English, in order to give students the communication tools they need, as do bilingual educational programs that provide instruction in both languages to favor monolingual (whether in English or Spanish) students' capacity to do this.

To foster the education of migrant children of Mexican origin in U.S. classrooms, Mexico's Ministry of Public Education operates two programs: the visiting teacher program and the Probem/BMEI teacher exchange. The former began in 2004 in California and now also operates in New Mexico, Utah, Illinois, Oregon, Nebraska, Colorado, and Minnesota.

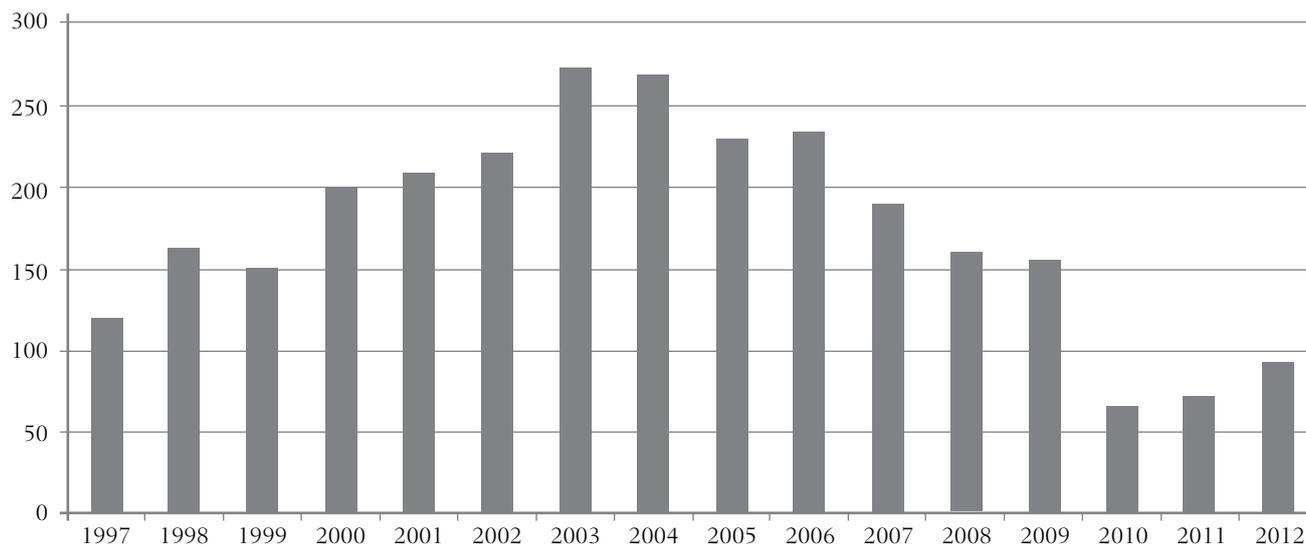
In 11 years, this program has ensured the hiring of more than 200 bilingual Mexican teachers who act as permanent teachers in the bilingual programs of the U.S. schools that request their services. Hired for one year, with the possibility of extending the contract for two more, these Mexican teachers receive the same salaries and benefits as their U.S. colleagues.

The main objective of the Binational Migrant Education Teacher Exchange Program is to strengthen Mexican identity and academic achievement of Mexican-origin students in U.S. schools. With a drop-out rate of 25 to 30 percent and an average nine years of schooling, this population is at a great disadvantage and a high risk for poverty.⁷

Graph 2 shows that, since its creation in 1997, this program has sent almost 3 000 teachers to school districts with high numbers of student populations of Mexican origin for four to eight weeks during the summer to work with students and parents alike on both academic and cultural issues.⁸

While this is the BMEI program with the greatest impact, starting in 2005, the number of participating teachers has clearly declined. The main reason involves the financial limitations of the participating school districts or domestic migration since, as the economic crisis advanced, many schools had to limit their participation, requesting fewer teachers each summer. The most critical point was reached in 2010,

GRAPH 2
MEXICAN TEACHERS IN THE 1997-2013 PROBEM EXCHANGE PROGRAM



Source: SEP, "Informe 2013 Probem" (Mexico City: Dirección General de Relaciones Internacionales, SEP, 2013).

The concentration of returning migrants in certain high-immigration areas turns them into actors who define local and regional needs of certain Mexican states.

when only 65 teachers were sent. However, since that time, the figures have improved little by little, showing the continued interest of both parties in continuing this program.

On the other hand, the dynamic of multicultural educational services in Mexico is very different. In recent years, our country has received increasing numbers of children and young people repatriated from the United States. According to National Migration Institute figures, in 2013, 242 905 Mexicans were deported back to our country; 14 339 (6 percent) of them were minors.⁹ We would have to add to this number the children born in the U.S. and therefore U.S. citizens, who are not included in the statistics because they enter Mexico as foreigners, accompanying their fathers and/or mothers.

The concentration of returning migrants in certain high-immigration areas turn them into actors who define local and regional needs of certain Mexican states. This is the case of the border city Tijuana, where the Probem state coordinating body reported a considerable increase of students

presenting migrant student transfer documents between 2006 and 2012. In those six years, these students increased from 228 to 1 869.¹⁰

In addition to the 290 386 shared students in primary grades in the 2013-2014 school year, we should remember that our country also hosted 9 839 students from Oceania, 5 229 from Central America and the Caribbean, 42 871 from South America, 3 687 from Europe, and almost 2 000 from Asia and Africa. All of them face the challenge of accessing and remaining in our country's educational system.

CONCLUSIONS

Fortunately for migrants in our country, on October 8, 2014, the Special Migration Program (PEM) 2014-2018 became law when it was published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (Official Federal Gazette). This program will not resolve the complex needs of this sector of the population, but it is an important opportunity for transforming public migratory policies with a multi-dimensional, comprehensive approach.

Still pending is the task of adjusting certain concepts and formats in the school administration to be able to identify and follow up with transnational students born in Mexico but who have gone to school in other systems and are covered

with a blanket of invisibility because they do not fit neatly into a category. This deprives them of the services of an inclusive, just, quality, relevant education.

It is important for educational authorities to reflect on the needs of this population. While it represents no more than 1 percent of all the students in our country, they have the same rights as the other 99 percent. It will be necessary to design a comprehensive approach that takes into account the appropriate indicators and favors teaching Spanish as a second language in an increasingly globalized Mexico. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ W. Lothar and P. López Chaltelt, *México: políticas públicas beneficiando a los migrantes* (Mexico City: Organización Internacional para las Migraciones, 2011).
- ² For Dr. Víctor Zúñiga, Dr. Edmund Hamman, and Dr. Juan Sánchez García, transnational students are those who have crossed and re-crossed borders during their education. This refers to borders not only between countries, but also between states, since in a decentralized system like that of the United States, each state autonomously determines the objectives, organization, and structure of its educational system. See V. Zúñiga, E. Hamman, and Juan Sánchez García, *Alumnos transnacionales, escuelas mexicanas*

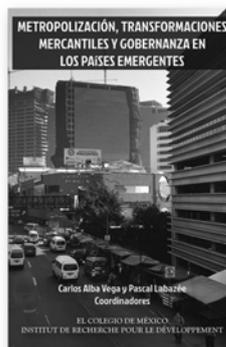
frente a la globalización (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2008).

- ³ Dirección General de Planeación y Estadística Educativa, "Principales cifras del sistema educativo nacional 2012-2013" (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2013), http://www.sems.gob.mx/work/models/sems/Resource/11579/1/images/principales_cifras_2012_2013_bolsillo.pdf.
- ⁴ While there is no standardized definition of "circulatory migration," it can be understood as the trans-border mobility that begins with an initial place of origin, goes to (a) destination(s), and returns to the initial point of departure, with no definite time period in any of these places, but with a full return to the place of origin.
- ⁵ Dirección General de Relaciones Internacionales, "Carpeta de datos básicos del Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante (Probem)" (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2011).
- ⁶ Probem's crosscutting themes are information and dissemination, teacher exchange, access to schools, educational support, and evaluation and follow-up.
- ⁷ R. Díaz de Cossío, "Prólogo," *Memorias del 2º Foro de Reflexión Binacional: Los mexicanos de aquí y de allá: problemas comunes* (Mexico City: Fundación Solidaridad Mexicano-Americana, 2006).
- ⁸ Complete information about this program and how to qualify can be found on the website of Mexico's Ministry of the Interior's Office of International Relations, www.dgri.sep.gob.mx.
- ⁹ Centro de Estudios Migratorios, *Boletín Estadístico 2014. Repatriación de mexicanos*, updated January 13, 2015, http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Repatriacion_de_mexicanos__2014.
- ¹⁰ Susana Sierra and Yara López, "Infancia migrante y educación transnacional en la frontera México-Estados Unidos," *Revista sobre la infancia y la adolescencia* no. 4, March 2013, pp. 28-54.

NOVEDADES

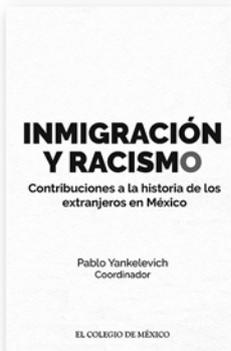


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