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Returning Mexican transnational students: Positionality & conflictive relational work

Estudiantes transnacionales mexicanos que regresan: Posicionamiento y trabajo relacional conflictivo

ABSTRACT: Mexican transnational students returning from the United States encounter differences, difficulties and challenges as they integrate back into their home education system. Whilst often enjoying acceptance, encouragement and assimilation from teachers and classmates, returning students also face tensions over language usage, the need to relate to others and (re)establishing their identity. These challenges involve confronting *group codes of conduct* (Anchimbe, 2018), engaging in *relational work* (Locher and Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2011) and establishing individual *positionality* (Jaffe, 2009). We asked twenty-one transnational university students in Guadalajara, Mexico, to reflect on their educational histories since their return. These are often characterised by negative experiences such as isolation, victimisation and exclusion. The results indicate that subtle (and not so subtle) forms of rejection, unresponsiveness and indifference made the students' return and establishing a new-found identity in Mexico more difficult and problematic than it needed to be.

KEY WORDS: Transnational; Mexican; Education; Relational work.

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RESUMEN: Los estudiantes transnacionales mexicanos que regresan de los Estados Unidos encuentran diferencias, dificultades y desafíos a medida que se integran nuevamente en el sistema mexicano de educación. Si bien a menudo disfrutan de la aceptación, el aliento y la asimilación de los maestros y compañeros de clase, los estudiantes que regresan también enfrentan tensiones por el uso del idioma, la necesidad de relacionarse con los demás y (re)establecer su identidad. Estos desafíos implican confrontar *códigos de conducta grupales* (Anchimbe 2018), involucrarse en el *trabajo relacional* (Locher y Watts 2005; Spencer-Oatey 2011) y establecer la *posicionalidad* (Jaffe 2009). Les pedimos a veintiún estudiantes universitarios transnacionales en Guadalajara, México, que reflexionaran sobre sus historias educativas desde su regreso. A menudo se caracterizan por experiencias negativas como el aislamiento, la victimización y la exclusión. Los resultados indican que las formas sutiles (y no tan sutiles) de rechazo e indiferencia hicieron que el regreso de

Recibido: 10/10/2019
Aceptado: 20/11/2019
VERBUM ET LINGUA
NÚM. 14
JULIO / DICIEMBRE 2019
ISSN 2007-7319

los estudiantes y el establecimiento de una nueva identidad en México fueran más difíciles y problemáticos de lo necesario.
PALABRAS CLAVE: transnacional; Mexicano; Educación; Trabajo relacional.

Introduction

Migratory flows across the Mexican-United States border reflect economic, monetary, cultural and social pressures and motives to relocate both permanently and temporarily on either side of the border and have been the subject of a solid body of research (e.g. Kivisto and Faist, 2010; Portes and DeWind, 2008; and Vertovec, 2009). Researchers have also studied educational transnationalism (e.g. DeJaeghere and McCleary, 2010; Sanchez, 2009; Sanchez and Machado-Casas, 2009; and Sánchez and Kasun, 2012) who have examined Mexican migrants studying in the United States. At the same time, research has focused on the educational histories and learning experiences of transnational students who have returned to Mexico (e.g. Borjian, Muñoz de Cote, van Dijk and Houde, 2016; Haman, Zúñiga and Sanchez Garcia, 2008; Zuñiga and Hamman, 2006, 2009; Mugford, 2012). Adding to this body of work, this paper goes further by giving a *voice* to those students who have had to overcome unease, prejudice and discrimination on their return to their home country. Any study of returning transnational students must go beyond just examining the problems and challenges of assimilation back into the target culture – as important as these are. It also means understanding how these students relate to group norms and behaviours, develop interpersonal relationships and construct their identities within the educational system.

To give this research an emic perspective, this paper is structured in the following way: First, we briefly discuss the phenomenon of, and the motivations for, transnationalism with respect to the Mexican context. However, our main focus is to establish a framework for identifying indifference, conflict and rejection in the transnational educational context. We do this by examining the challenges returning students face in trying to achieve social affiliation when confronted with collectivist practices and patterns of behaviour (Anchimbe, 2018), engage in *relational work* (Locher and Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2011) and establish an individual *positionality* (Jaffe 2009).

Employing this framework, we then present and analyse our data which highlight how the Mexican returnees negotiated classroom disinterest and even rejection in their new academic environments and study the consequences and outcomes of such experiences. Data were collected through administering questionnaires and recording interviews with twenty-one undergraduate students enrolled in a public university in Guadalajara, Mexico. Their ages ranged from 18 to 32 and they had studied in the United States for an average of 7.6 years. Conclusions indicate that bilingualism and transnationalism are neither openly celebrated nor welcomed within the research context but rather often viewed by teachers and fellow students with a certain level of suspicion and unease. This suggests that more work needs to be done in (re)in-

tegrating transnational students back into the Mexican higher education system.

Transnationalism

Transnationalism can be defined as embracing "sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations spanning nation-states" (Vertovec, 2009, p. 2). Consequently, the term covers a wide range of phenomena including migration patterns, cross-border schooling, bi-national political activity, socio-cultural interconnectedness and economic flows of capital, labour and goods between nation states (Kivisto and Faist, 2010).

Within the Mexican context, cross-border education has become an increasingly key bilateral issue given the significant number of returning students who are pursuing educational opportunities south of the U. S. border (Borjian, Muñoz de Cote, van Dijk and Houde, 2006; Zuñiga and Harmann, 2006). Conventionally, the phenomenon of Mexican transnational students is studied in United States schools.

> Millions of students attending U.S. schools were born in Mexico, as is well known, and many millions more are the American-born children of Mexican parents. What is less widely known –and less considered in educational research, policy, and practice– is that there are likely hundreds of thousands of students in Mexican schools who have previous experience in U.S. schools. (Zuñiga and Harmann, 2006)

Barcenas has identified binational efforts to deal with the educational needs of students returning to Mexico starting from 1976: "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" (2015, p. 13). Recognition of the need for educational opportunities led in 1982 to the establishment of the *Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante* (BMEI) or the Binational Migrant Education Initiative "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" (Barcenas, 2015, p. 13). According to the Binational Migrant Education Initiative, the principal areas of cooperation centred on primary and secondary school and higher education. However, in higher education, the focus has been on stimulating exchange programmes that promote "the academic mobility of students, teachers and university professors, as well as institutional collaboration" (BMEI activities for 2012-2014)

It is difficult to uncover concrete numbers regarding the returning students. However, in calculating the size of the problem, deportations also need to be taken into account. Barcenas reports that 14,339 minors were deported back to Mexico in 2013. This figure is probably higher given current deportation practices. Transnational student ranks could well grow further if an estimated 600,000 beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program are forced to return to Mexico. In addition, the following factors have contributed to an increased flow of transnational students back to Mexico: the prohibitive cost of schooling in the

United States, especially in higher education (where there is little financial help for undocumented Mexicans trying to attend university); stricter enforcement of north-of-the-border immigration policies; and greater economic and work opportunities in Mexico which attract the students' parents back. (For discussion of parental influence on educational choices between the United States and Mexico, see Reese, 2002) According to Jensen, Mejía Arauz and Aguilar Zepeda, "The number of Mexicans leaving the U.S. is now greater than the number coming to the U.S., signaling monumental shifts in U.S.-Mexico relations" (2017, p. 1).

Besides the potential mammoth leap in student numbers with the possible ending of DACA, understanding transnationalism is important in the Mexican context because of the porous nature of the United States-Mexican border: "The lives of increasing numbers of individuals can no longer be understood by looking at what goes on within national boundaries" (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2009, p. 182). Mexican students will often criss-cross the border looking for educational opportunities as found in the current study. For instance, Noemi, an undergraduate student studying in Guadalajara recalled that

> I came to Mexico when I was 3 and then I went back to the States when I was, like, 4. And from 4 to 5 stayed over there. And then from 5 to 9, I lived here. And then from 9 to 15 I lived over there. And then from 15 to right now I live here, and now I'm gonna be 20. (Mugford 2012, p. 3)

Noemi represents a typical experience in educational transnationalism which is often characterised by fluid and constant movement across borders as students adapt to changing circumstances and develop their own positionality in contrasting academic environments.

Confronting Transnationalism

The dissimilarities, difficulties and challenges that returning Mexican students face can be understood at group (collective), relational and individual levels. Whilst there is no clear-cut division between these different levels, each category poses different obstacles and problems to be confronted.

Collectivist practices

Transnational students (re)enter the Mexican educational system with their own histories, experiences and attitudes towards schooling on both sides of the border. Comparisons and contrasts can be seen in terms of language ability and tensions, group allegiances/alliances and inclusion/exclusion (Anchimbe, 2018).

Whilst monolinguals will often see bilingualism as perfect language ability in more than one language (see Hamers and Blanc, 2000 for discussion), transnational students are often heavily scrutinised by teachers and fellow students over their English-language proficiency and any deficiencies in their Spanish-language skills. Therefore, returning students are under linguistic pressure and are held to a higher communicative standard than their peers. Furthermore, as argued by Jaffe (2007), a minority language (in this instance the use of English in the Mexican classroom), can

be seen as a 'problem' which may lead to linguistic insecurity and therefore undermines the transnational students' communicative confidence and leads to interactional tensions in the classroom.

Since English in the Mexican classroom context is "the language of the outsider" (Zentella, 1997, p. 88), transnational students may be judged on their supposed lack of linguistic allegiance to Spanish and consequently not seen as members of the classroom linguistic "network" (Milroy and Milroy, 1997). Reflecting *group codes of conduct* (Anchimbe, 2018), classroom relationships are especially important in the Mexican (and Latin American) educational systems which promote *acompañamiento pedagógico* (pedagogic accompaniment) between teachers and students. A*compañamiento pedagógico* "integrates school training and personal development" and this means that "[e]ach educational community must actively develop its pedagogical potencial [sic], combining learning processes with excellent human relationships and affection" (Martínez Diloné and González Pons, 2010, p. 522). In the Mexican context, multiplex social networks (Milroy and Milroy, 1997) both in and out of the classroom exhibit norms and practices that may not be reflected in United States classrooms. Consequently, transnational students may not have the necessary social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1972) to interact successfully with other members of the educational community.

Inclusion in everyday class activities is also a fundamental indicator of successful integration into the classroom learning environment. Since bilingual students may "experience schooling from a marginal position 'outside' of the dominant group norm" (Pacheco 2010, p. 76), teachers' own beliefs, attitudes and prejudices will affect how transnational students are regarded in the classroom. Parallels can be drawn with Spanish-speaking Mexican students studying in English-speaking United States classrooms; it is all too easy to place the transnational student "in the category of 'struggling student' by legitimizing, rather than challenging, the evaluations (and their underlying notions of individual knowledge) that determine what it means" (Pacheco, 2010, p. 77). Borjian, Muñoz de Cote, van Dijk and Houde (2016) argue that transnational students must feel that they are in a "'safe' learning environment" (2016, p. 44). This means that there must be the necessary support systems for these students to interact effectively in the classroom. Transnational students are often not allowed to take advantage of (or are ostracised for using) their first language in the classroom (Cook, 2002, p. 303). This is especially relevant in the Mexican educational context where students are expected to produce standard Spanish (Zúñiga and Hamann, 2009). Besides having to overcome potential language difficulties, transnational learners will also have to negotiate their identity in a system that emphasises Mexican identity:

> … Mexican schools seek to have their enrollees learn to speak, read, and write standard Mexican Spanish and to grow up to be members of a society that fuses a glorified indigenous past with the best of the West (Bonfil Batalla, 1979). At the same time, Mexican schools are to teach students to honor

> the sacredness of their homeland, to respect the classic Spanish language literary texts, to know the story of Tenochtitlán as a founding myth of the country, and to teach/interpret the value of Mexico's revolutionary history as a nationalistic and just event. (Zúñiga and Hamann, 2009, p. 44)

In such a context, the transnational student may feel disoriented and powerless and struggle to find an identity both inside and outside of the classroom.

Relational practices

Given potentially adverse and antagonistic collective norms and practices in the classroom, transnational students need to find ways to come across as legitimate and valued class members and assert their socialisation rights. They need to be able to co-operate and interact with others whilst maintaining their independence and freedom to interrelate in their own ways. These twin aims can be understood through Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2008) concept of rapport management and through Bravo's (2008) categories of *autonomía* (autonomy) and *afiliación* (affiliation) which may better characterize the communicative objectives of Spanish-speaking interactants.

Building on Goffman's (1967) concept of face, Spencer-Oatey underscores the desire of interactants to claim a face which represents a "sense of worth, dignity and identity, and is associated with issues such as respect, honour, reputation and competence (cf. Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998)" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 14). This means that transnational students promote three selves: "self as an individual (individual identity), self as a group member (group or collective identity) and self in relationship with others (relational identity)" (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 14). This can be a daunting task given their United States' educational experiences and their evolving Mexican educational identity. At the same time, transnational students expect to benefit from certain socialisation and association rights. First, following the equity principle, interactants see themselves as "entitled to personal consideration from others, so that [they] are treated fairly" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 16). They want to interact as bona fide and equal class members and expect to be treated no differently than their peers. Secondly, the association principle encapsulates socialisation rights as interactants see themselves as "entitled to social involvement with others, in keeping with the type of relationship that [they] have with them" (Spencer-Oatey 2008, 16). This means that they feel that they "are entitled to an appropriate amount of conversational interaction and social chitchat with others" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 16). Transnational students expect to be able to develop, establish and maintain interpersonal relations. At the same time, transnational students pursue interactional goals which are "relational as well as transactional (i.e. task-focused) in nature" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 16). In other words, students want to succeed academically in the classroom as well as get on with others.

Whilst Spencer-Oatey's association principle includes affective association/dissociation (2000) and involvement/detachment (2008), Bravo (2008) develops the concepts of autonomy and affiliation which she defines as follows:

1. *autonomy*: It refers to those behaviours relative to how a person wishes to see him or herself and to be seen by others as an individual with a "contour" of its own within a group.
2. *affiliation*: It refers to those behaviours relative to how a person wishes to see him or herself and to be seen by others with features that identify him or her with the group. (2008, p. 588, author's italics)

Autonomy and affiliation reflect both how interactants perceive themselves and how they want to be seen by others. In terms of autonomy, they seek not only freedom of action which reflect their previous histories, values and experiences, but they also want to be respected and accepted for this by others. At the same time, transnational students want to relate to the group and be identified with the community by the group members.

So, whilst Spencer-Oatey focuses on how rapport with the group can be managed, Bravo centres on how transnational students can position themselves and be accepted by others.

Individual level

Besides negotiating collectivist practices and engaging in relational work, transnational students also aim to adopt a *stance* (Jaffe, 2009) or position towards others. When faced with isolation, victimisation and harassment transnational students can position themselves in terms of Englebretson's (2007) physical, interactional, public, indexical and consequential aspects.

In the transnational educational context, the physical perspective reveals how students react to classroom arrangements and interactional groupings. Students might want to challenge, resist, reject or accept classrooms practices.

The interaction aspect reflects how transnational students and their classmates and teachers view each other. This can be examined in terms of supportiveness/distance, affect/lack of emotion, engagement/estrangement and alignment/misalignment (Du Bois 2007, p. 139).

Transnational students' response to a wider audience of classmates and teachers may also be public since it "is perceivable, interpretable, and available for inspection by others" (Englebretson 2007, p. 6). Consequently, positionality in the public domain can be evaluated in terms of action and non-action.

The indexical element to stance in educational transnationalism reflects the returning students' resultant attitudes, beliefs and understandings that emerge as a result of their classroom experiences. Transnational students may be welcomed or rejected due to their very status as returning migrants or their abilities and skills may be questioned.

Finally, the consequential dimension involves the "real consequences for the persons or institutions involved" (Englebretson, 2007, pp. 6-7). Positions taken in the classroom have longer term implications for the transnational students: "Stance both derives from and has consequences for social actors, whose lives are impacted by the stances they and others take" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 141).

These five aspects of stance – physical, interactional, public, indexical and conse-

quential – provide insights to the challenges and obstacles that transnational students say they have experienced on their return to Mexico. By observing how transnational students confront collective norms, engage in relational work and establish a stance, it is possible to develop an understanding as to how transnational students negotiate isolation, victimisation and harassment and try to overcome sociocultural differences, difficulties and challenges.

Methodology

To understand the problems and hurdles facing transnational students in Mexico, an emic approach has been adopted to highlight students' experiences, perceptions and histories within the Mexican educational system. To help them formulate their own responses, participants were not told about terms such as "transnational" or "returning student." By interviewing transnational university students in Guadalajara, Mexico, we examine how twenty-one undergraduates considered their educational experiences since their return and if they faced negative experiences such as difficult, disruptive or uncomfortable experiences. The participants were interviewed twice: first to give a general overview of their personal context on returning to Mexico followed by a series of semi-structured questionnaires concerning their experiences in the Mexican classroom.

The participants, 12 women and nine men, ranged from 18 to 32 years old, and had an average of 7.8 years schooling in the United States.

Research problem

When returning to Mexico, transnational students may find that they are unprepared to assess and react to uncomfortable and unfriendly attitudes and behaviours such as rejection, indifference and isolation. Whilst not in a position to always understand motives behind such treatment, transnational students, teachers, academic coordinators and other interested parties should be made aware of possible scenarios and actions that can be taken. The aim of this research is to highlight and understand the problems faced by these students.

Research procedure

The 21 students were asked individually whether they agreed to participate in the study. Participants were explained the purpose of and the motives for conducting the study i.e. the educational experiences of students who had returned from the United States. They were assured of complete anonymity with regard to their answers and they have all been given pseudonyms.

The initial interview, the three questionnaires and a follow-up interview were conducted over a ten-week period. All the participants answered in English although they could have replied in Spanish if they had wanted to. Participant answers have not been corrected or amended in any way so as to preserve their authenticity.

Stage 1. In the first stage, basic information was collected about the participants including length of residency in the United States, place of residence, their use of English and Spanish in the U.S. and why they had returned to Mexico. As a second step, specific educational information was gathered including educational level in the U.S., language used in the classroom, language used with friends and language used by teachers. The results reveal individual

experiences of the U.S. educational system and the possible effect on students in moving back to Mexico.

Stage 2. To understand educational experiences when moving back to Mexico, the participants were asked to complete three questionnaires which focused on their sense of acceptance and integration into the Mexican classroom.

The first questionnaire asked participants how they perceived themselves in terms of belonging and identification as they positioned themselves against classmates and teachers. The results of the questionnaire helped to pinpoint possible potential group/collectivist attitudes towards the returning students.

The second questionnaire examined interpersonal and transactional relationships in the classroom and whether interactants felt generally integrated or excluded. Results of the questionnaire helped to pinpoint the level of relational access and collaboration ease or possible points of tension and conflict.

The third questionnaire focused on the interactants' language abilities and whether they had become a source of tension or conflict. The results of the questionnaire helped to pinpoint individual positions that the returning students had adopted regarding their use of language.

The three complete questionnaires can all be seen in Appendix 1.

Stage 3. To triangulate the information, we interviewed the participants with the aim of further elaborating on their experiences. The answers served to reinforce collectivist, relational and individual aspects.

Participants

This study looked at Mexican respondents who had had more than six months of formal schooling in the U.S. educational system and who were currently enrolled in a B.A. degree programme in Mexico.

The vast majority of the participants stated that they had moved back to Mexico for family reasons and an important consideration had been health concerns about other family members. United States immigration policies or migratory status had not apparently been key factors. One respondent, Ana, said that her parents did not want her growing up in the United States.

Only three participants said that they planned to return to the United States after they had finished their studies in Mexico. However, given the fluid nature of the activities of transnational students, it is difficult to be certain about in which country their futures lie. For instance, Karla definitely wants to go abroad after finishing her studies in Mexico.

A summary of the background data is presented in Table 1.

The summarised information indicates that the participants had lived in a variety of states although most had resided in California. Most students had studied elementary school in the United States where English was the predominant classroom language.

Analysis

The results of the questionnaire have been analysed in terms of the group/collectivist, relational and individual challenges that the students faced. Analysis reveals that participants were often more successful in

Table 1
United States educational background of returning students

Name	Time in US	Place	Reason for return	School level achieved	Classroom language	Teacher Language
Dafne	9	San Diego, CA	Family issues	Elementary School	Spanish & English	English
Pedro	8	Kingfisher, OK	Family issues	Elementary school	English	English
Aida	12.	Riverside, CA	Study college in Mexico	High school	English	English
Celia	3	Oakland, CA	I wanted to live in Mexico	Elementary School	English	English
Carla	1	Montebello, CA	I missed my family	Middle School	English	English
Nayeli	6	Not given	Help grandparents	Elementary School	English	English
Bernardo	15	Dinuba & Vallejo CA	Personal reasons	Elementary School	English	English
Fernando	10	Charlotte NC	Parents' choice	Elementary	English	English
Katia	10	Pomona CA	Family issues/ sickness	12th grade	English	English
Berta	2.5	Maryland, Dallas TX	Reunite with the family	Pre-school	English	English.
Miriam	3	Nashville, TN	Grandmother ill	Kindergarten		
Pablo	4	Dillard, GA	Family matter	Middle School	English	English
Karla	1	San Francisco CA	Look after grandparents	Elementary School	English	English
Sebastian	4	Sacramento, CA	Parents tired of USA.	Elementary School	English	English
Esteban	4	Sacramento, CA	Family issues	Elementary School	English	English
Esmeralda	13	San Bernardino CA	Family health issues	Middle School	Both	English
Alberto	4	Not given	Family matter	Elementary School	English	English

Name	Time in US	Place	Reason for return	School level achieved	Classroom language	Teacher Language
Kevin	20	Los Angeles, CA	To study	High school	Both	English & Spanish.
Hugo	11	Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri	Family /study in Mexico	High school	English	English
Ana	13	Santa Ana Riverside, CA	Look after grandparents	Elementary	English	English
Carolina	5	Detroit, MI	Not given	Elementary	Both	Both

establishing their individuality rather than in interacting with others.

Group/Collectivist

Returning students' experiences often reflected a perceived undermining of their language abilities, a questioning of their sociocultural allegiance and perceptions of inclusion/exclusion (Anchimbe, 2018).

Language ability. Scrutiny and insecurity strongly influenced transnational students' language performance in the classroom. Whilst many participants felt that classmates and teachers were supportive of their efforts to speak Spanish, returning students equally found the daily use of Spanish was a challenge. For instance, Ana said that

> One of the things I find most difficult, ever since I moved here, is the language. It is my second language and I still struggle with it…. I was forced to use it and learned by my mistakes.

She feels that her Spanish is continually under scrutiny from her peers:

> I always get asked about my accent and told that I speak "mocho". It is definitely different from when I correct them in English.

Arturo felt particularly under pressure from teachers to speak good Spanish of whom he said:

> Yes, they had the tendency to remark more of my mistakes than other students.

Whilst Arturo's teacher may have felt that he really did need the extra attention, he felt intimidated by his classmates:

> They used to make fun of my accent because I had trouble adapting my natural accent to … the common Mexican one. Like they used to repeat words that they felt I had said in a funny way.

Furthermore, he said that he experienced collective mocking:

> My Spanish was never an issue in terms of intonation. Just the odd word

> that I had no idea how to say in Spanish and that spurned the collective mocking of my Spanish.

Miriam also felt that she was derided for her lack of Spanish-speaking ability and seen as an object of amusement. For instance, she recalls

> [They] were cruel, they would ask me to say complicated words in Spanish, and then laugh at me because I could not say them properly.

With regards to English, the participants felt that they were expected to explain language usage which put them under pressure to explain grammar and vocabulary. For instance, Celia recalls that

> … in English class I would always have to explain or give the answers. In university-in the first semesters, I remember having to provide help for others due to being a native speaker.

However, knowing English was not always viewed as a communicative asset. For instance, Dafne felt threatened over her use of English at university:

> … some students from other majors gave us (the weird looks), as interacting with my classmates in English. They thought that we wanted to show off, I even overheard comments like, "Why are they speaking in English since this is Mexico?" Or, "These guys think they are all that because they speak in English". It looked they were bothered to heard others that look just like them "Mexican" communicating fluently in other language.

However, in the final analysis, language is about having a voice and being heard. For instance, Fernando said

> I am comfortable with them bringing up my "native-ness". Also they always ask me questions concerning the correct use of English (grammar structures, synonyms/antonyms, correct use of words, etc.). This I am completely ok with. However, I feel like I'm not taken as serious during group projects/homework in Spanish as the ones in English. It's gotten to the point where I am the "leader" of any group work that has been assigned in English and I am barely taken into account when there is a task meant to be completed in Spanish. Consequently, I have to make an extra effort to be "heard".

Sociocultural allegiance. Whilst language knowledge and use marked differences between students in the classroom, transnational students' background seemed to be reason enough to question their allegiance to the Mexican culture and values. For instance, Katia remarked that she felt to be an outsider:

> Some tried to make me feel bad since they felt inferior as I could see it due to the fact that I spoke English and they didn´t. They would say things like "go back to the states".

Transnational students were often identified as being from the United States

rather than Mexicans who had lived in the United States. This sometimes led to hostility from other classmates. For instance, Karla was called out by one student for her alleged allegiance to the United States:

> I remember one time I was giving a presentation about how my life was at the US and then this girl stands up and says: "Well, if you like it that much, then why don't you go back and stop annoying us."

Such overt aggression resulted in Karla questioning her own identity:

> I honestly was kind of shocked because she made me think that maybe she was right. I am Mexican; I shouldn't be talking wonderful things from other countries or people from other nationalities. At that time, I felt like I was betraying "my people."

Returning students were all too often considered to be outsiders. For instance, Ana recalls that

> …. there have been situations where a teacher of mine was not fond of my country (United States) and would make negative remarks about it, creating an uncomfortable situation. An example would be talking bad about "gringos". This is when my classmates would look at me and snicker.

Esmeralda also experienced alienation:

> … because I was born in the US and when I got here to Mexico, they weren't friendly about it.

The questioning of the transnational students' sense of allegiance led to an 'us' vs 'them' distinction and did little to foster integration of the returning students back into the educational system.

Exclusion. Questioning of allegiance led participants to feel that they were often being excluded in the classroom. They reported this perception at the interpersonal level and with reference to classroom activities.

At the interpersonal level, exclusion often seemed to come from classmates. For instance, Dafne said

> … some groups keep their distance, they don't take you into account when you are a foreign student. In my case there are various aspects that make me believe that I was being excluded from certain groups, because: I talk too much English, or my age. Being excluded is one of the worst feelings in school, it brings the feeling of being unwanted and unworthy

Meanwhile, Esmeralda recalled exclusion and rejection:

> In the beginning my classmates did not talk to me at all except one. That one was because it was the daughter of the godparents of my mother. So it wasn't really because she wanted to but because they kind of forst [forced] her. They never wanted to make teams with me and they didn't want to talk to me.

Esmeralda attempted to integrate into the group and in "the second year of middle school they got to know me, and they became my friends."

Other respondents also felt isolated and detached as Kevin stated:

> Somehow sometimes I felt isolated yeah, and some time I felt welcomed well just by a few classmates which interacted with me and make me feel part of the group.

In response, Kevin did not allow this rejection to unduly affect him and considered that the best course of action was adapt to the situation:

> I noticed that there were groups starting to form in the classroom, so I stuck to the ones who I felt good with.

Miriam also witnessed the physical stance adopted by her classmates, i.e. ignoring and sending signals to other classmates.

> I believe that ignoring someone, is in a way a form of aggression so I would say I did have to deal with some classmates' hostile attitudes. I tried to avoid awkward/uncomfortable situations as much as I could.

So, Miriam's response was to ignore the situation. She said that eventually she did get along with them "although it did take me some time to do so (a year or two at the most)." Therefore, integration was a long drawn out process.

When it came to classroom interaction, participants reported that teachers attempted to include them. For instance, Fernando said that

> Most of them did try to make me feel welcome, but some weren't really happy about it ….

But other teachers singled out the returning students as being different. Bernardo said that

> Yes, sometimes like when they (teachers or friends) are trying to give an example of the lifestyle in the US. It's not that they put me in the spotlight, but they create a separation in class with my other classmates/friends. Or maybe they make comments like "Well of course you did not know this because you were born in the US." Also, when I share my experience celebrating a holiday, like Thanksgiving they tell me "you're in Mexico now you shouldn't do that."

Ana has similar recollections:

> I can't recount all of the situations but just recently, while studying in the university, I have been in some awkward and uncomfortable situations within the classroom and in school.

Meanwhile, Kevin felt especially isolated:

> … here I am speaking English inside-outside the classroom all the time, like if I was on USA, most of my classmates started criticizing me, saying comments like "WTF is wrong with you we are not in United States". "Man if we are speaking in Spanish, why you

> have to use English to answer?" or "you are a show off". Even I heard some comments like "go back to California you speak too much".

A blatant sense of exclusion was also experienced by Miriam who was openly told that she did not belong:

> … the teacher that I had made a joke about him deporting me to the States because I was not officially Mexican, due to the lack of legal documentation at that time.

Sometimes exclusion was not seen to have been done on purpose, as Fernando comments:

> Sometimes. However, I am aware that it is not on purpose. I belong to my own group, but certain conversations don't allow me to participate as they can be about things I don't know about (places in Mexico, sayings, shows, people; all unknown to me).

Transnational students also commented that they felt excluded during classroom activities. For instance, Dafne sometimes found it difficult to find groups:

> Yes, especially when I was assigned a group to work with in a school task or project by the teacher / or even when we were asked to form groups freely. An example: when the teacher said "okay guys we are going to work in teams please I need 3 teams of 5 people", this was a struggle for me because everybody started to get together (choose their teams) quick, and most of the time I was left behind with the unwanted group. Or get together with the people that, as the same as me had to go through this process of selection. (What I mean is that the insider groups form the same groups "people" to work in tasks, activities, projects, within the classroom).

Meanwhile, Esmeralda felt that teachers treated her well but

> there was an exception with 2 or 3 of them that made me feel like I valued less than the others For example, when there wasn't enough computers I was always the one that had to wait until someone finished or also I had to pair up with someone.

In conclusion, there was the lingering feeling in the background that exclusion was never too far away as expressed by Bernardo:

> When I got here, I did feel excluded but not anymore unless they come up with a comment about being Mexican or American.

In the classroom context, transnational students felt that collective practices undermined their attempts to integrate as their language abilities were singled out along with a questioning of their allegiance and an underlying sense of exclusion. Whilst this was not the experience of all the participants there was nevertheless a degree of powerlessness and struggle to find a voice and make oneself heard.

Relational

On the relational level, the participants attempted to initiate, develop and maintain interpersonal relationships in the classroom. These attempts reflect rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) as participants tried to establish a sense of relational worth and dignity and claim personal consideration and socialisation rights. These efforts can also be seen in terms of Bravo's (2008) categories of *autonomía* (autonomy) and *afiliación* (affiliation).

Worth & dignity. Establishing their sociocultural value and a sense of personal dignity in the classroom was a major challenge for many transnational students. For instance, Pedro felt victimised:

> When I returned to high school in Mexico, some of my English teachers used to discriminate me because of my level of English. They did accept a student having a better accent and pronunciation than them.

Therefore, Pedro felt that he was not valued and esteemed for his knowledge of English. He thought that his teachers considered his language proficiency to be a threat to their professional standing. On a relational level, participants expected to receive personal consideration, perhaps because they were transnational students and needed help to socialise in the classroom. However, they often felt that there were insider groups which were unwilling to accept them. Lack of Spanish-language proficiency may have been a reason as experienced by Katia:

> At the beginning I did feel excluded since I couldn´t maintain a conversation for too long because their topics of conversation and mine wouldn't match. Also, I kind of noticed some classmates would feel imposed by my presence since they thought of me as a pretentious person for being from the States.

Katia felt ostracised because of her so-called threatening 'identity' and apparent arrogant behaviour. Preliminary and instantaneous character assessments put transnational students at a serious disadvantage when trying to socialise in an environment that was not accustomed to having returning students.

Affiliation. Bravo's (2008) category of affiliation also underscores how transnational students' efforts to socialise seem to result in 'disaffiliation'. Attempts to associate were scrutinised from the very beginning as witnessed by Bernardo:

> … they only asked questions like "You're not from here, right?"

or Karla who rejects how she has been labelled by her classmates:

> now that I am in college, I sort of dislike it when they tag me as an American because of my appearance.

Carolina experienced outright disaffiliation:

> It was difficult for me to adapt to the school culture here especially because

> relationships were so different (student-student and teacher-student). I felt bullied because they regarded me as the "new girl from the US".

Katia said that she experienced both affiliation and rejection:

> My classmates did felt somehow uncomfortable and some were amazed. They liked me to translate certain things for them, and some would just put me aside since I believe they felt I wasn't part of their community.

Positionality

At the individual level, transnational students had a choice when faced with sociocultural differences, difficulties and challenges in their attempts to overcome isolation, victimisation and harassment. They could take a stance (Jaffe, 2009) that has previously been discussed in physical, interactional, public, indexical and consequential terms (Englebretson, 2007).

Physical stance taken by others may involve ignoring the presence of the transnational students or their contributions. For instance, Dafne said she was often not taken into account when forming groups for teamwork.

> An example: when the teacher said "okay guys we are going to work in teams please I need 3 teams of 5 people", this was a struggle for me because everybody started to get together (choose their teams) quick, and most of the time I was left behind with the unwanted group

Meanwhile, Miriam often felt her attempts at making jokes were ignored:

> I remember being ignored when I said jokes, especially by my male classmates and an occasional glimpse to make their disapproval noticeable to my female classmates.

Physical rejection also came from the teachers. For instance, Karla recalled that

> my geography teacher was rude to me when I did not understand some linguistic terms she used when she would do dictations. I did not know what a comma was or a punto y seguido [period and new sentence]. So, I approached her once to see if she could explain to me what these were, but she rejected me. I am not certain if it was because I had come back from the States or she just really hated me.

Interactionally, participants were successful in developing interpersonal relations as they celebrated difference, ignored adverse comments and attitudes or just did not react to perceived hostility and aggression.

However, very often, after encountering initial difficulties, participants were able to integrate. For instance, Aida commented:

> … in the beginning it was a little annoying… I felt as if my classmates thought I was superior or conceited simply because I spoke English….

and Bernardo said:

> After we started to socialize, they got to know me more and their ideas about me changed.

However, other participants who were less successful relationally, chose to ignore how they were perceived by others as related by Esmeralda:

> Well I accept that some people will discriminate no matter what. I try to not make it effect me.

or Carolina:

> I was shy, so I didn't really confront them. I just tried to ignore them.

However, many interactants went public and openly celebrated difference. For instance, Diego came to terms with the fact that he might be seen as a know-all but thought that promoting his linguistic abilities were much more important:

> Yes, many times because I did not want them to think I was a show-off. But after some time, I've been in Mexico I realised that I should not be afraid of speaking in my mother tongue with my accent.

Meanwhile, Dafne openly embraces her biculturality:

> I consider my identity as Mexican American, and somewhere in between, (I will define myself more as an American-Mexican), a person from Mexican descendants grown up, raised in USA, an individual whose personality was built during all the years I have subsisted within the two cultures.

On an indexical level, transnational students underscored the emergence of attitudes, beliefs and understandings that celebrate transnationalism. For instance, Nayeli claimed that the behaviour of her classmates

> even made me feel that being a "foreigner" made me more interesting, compared to the rest of the kids.

Meanwhile, coming to terms with her transnationalism allowed Dafne resolve an identity dilemma:

> At the beginning of the major I had this identity conflict, about who I am (if Mexican or American? or even both), I asked myself that question, this context made me think about my roots and the value of my heritage. But I cannot deny the way of thinking from where I grew up (the states) since I have been living almost all my life (the American way).

An awareness of her transnational status helped Katia build up her self-confidence:

> I always felt proud of speaking another language and if people were to offend me because of that then I would simply laugh at them. Being exposed to another culture back in the States and being capable of having gone through that made me a much more confident person.

Finally, one of the consequences of the transnational experience was that that

the participants unknowingly talked about a 'third space' (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004) or 'third culture' (Cohen, 2018; Kramsch, 1993). For instance; Fernando talked about being 'somewhere in between' two cultures:

> I don't identify as Mexican American because I feel like this term refers to someone who was born in Mexico and moved to the United States. I may be wrong, however. Even so, I would identify as "somewhere in between".

Bernardo also uses the exact same "somewhere in between" expression:

> I consider myself somewhere in between because I was born and raised in California. My parents are Mexican, so they also taught me somewhat of Mexican culture. The last 10 years I've been living here in Mexico and I still celebrate some holidays, like Thanksgiving.

The results indicate that the transnational students are well aware of the challenges and difficulties they face in their academic environment. Their responses and reactions provide an understanding as to why they often view themselves as isolated, victimised and harassed but, at the same time, proud and appreciative of their previous experiences and histories.

Discussion

The results indicate that transnational students attempted to respond to the group/collectivist, relational and individual challenges that they faced. On a group/collective level, they had to overcome accusations of difference, deviation and divergence. Meanwhile relationally, they often struggled to develop interpersonal relationships. Nonetheless, they were much more successful in establishing and developing their own positionality as transnational students.

Within the classroom environment, transnational students found language ability reflected a particular area of discontent and contention: English-language proficiency was viewed with suspicion and Spanish-language communication problems failed to draw sympathy from both peers and teachers. Due to their close association with English, students' loyalties were questioned and rather than viewed as a potential classroom resource returning students were often rather perceived as a threat, especially by the teachers. Consequently, transnational students struggled to find a voice in the classroom and overcome *group codes of conduct* (Anchimbe, 2018). Class members were frequently uneasy about interacting with 'outsiders' especially those teachers who showed a lack of sensitivity and consideration with 'jokes' about deportation and not making sure that the transnational students were smoothly integrated into group work.

Relational work was especially challenging for the returning students since attempts of establishing rapport and affiliation were often rejected by insider groups in the classroom. Participants' confidence and attempts at socialisation were subsequently undermined, especially since the transnational students felt they were unfairly and prematurely prejudged. Many experienced exclusion and even isolation and, consequently, found it difficult to establish their own sense of classroom identity.

In establishing their positionality, transnational students were much more successful as they celebrated difference, often ignoring hostile attitudes and unwelcoming behaviours of others. They appear to have identified, on their own, a third 'space' or 'culture' which allowed them to reconcile their cross-border histories, attitudes and values with their Mexican classroom experiences and this offered them a blueprint for coming to terms with their current educational context and their future academic endeavours whether it be in Mexico or and back in the United States.

Conclusion

This study suggests that whilst transnational students do establish their sense of worth and dignity in the Mexican classroom, the path could be made much easier if the parties involved (i.e. other students, teachers and school administrators) were much more sensitive to transnational students' needs and more willing to come to terms with their own doubts, reservations and suspicions. This also means that classroom teachers have a key role to play in facilitating this adaptive process and rather than seeing the students as a potential threat should recognise them as a sociocultural and linguistic resource. One path forward is to fully explore and understand the concept of the third 'space' or 'culture' which represents an intercultural awareness of similarities and differences and which may possibly lead to greater understanding and tolerance.

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Questionnaire 1

From a sociocultural point of view, do you consider yourself to be Mexican, American or Mexican-American? Or maybe somewhere in-between?

In Mexico, do/did your classmates and/or teachers consider you to be Mexican, American, Mexican-American, or something else?

Are you comfortable with way that your classmates in Mexico see/saw you?

Have you felt that your classmates and/or teachers in Mexico treat you differently because of your previous history / experience of studying in the United States? If so, can you provide brief details?

Questionnaire 2

Does/did the classroom contain insider-groups?

Do / did you feel excluded from them because of your background?

Do / did you notice close interpersonal relationships in the classroom which you are excluded from?

Are insider groups or close personal relationships noticeable through the use special names that people gave each other? If so what which were the names, nicknames used?

Questionnaire 3

When you returned to Mexico, did you think people e.g. classmates, teachers etc. were uncomfortable with your linguistic background?

Did you (ever) try to downplay/hide your English-language ability?

Do you feel that English as a language has certain connotations/ associations for Mexicans? (These may be positive or negative.)