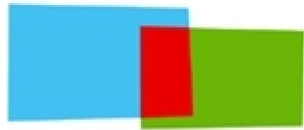

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Raising Questions for Binational Research in Education: An Exploration of Mexican Primary School Structure

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Abstract | Resumen

Educational opportunity in the United States and Mexico is an important factor in the process of expanding social and economic opportunities, as well as political and civil rights in both countries. Yet, by national and international indicators, many Mexican American and Mexican children are underserved by public schools in both countries; and very little research in education addresses the issue from a binational perspective. This paper addresses the need for further binational research by presenting a qualitative study exploring the structure of Mexican primary schooling and thereby raising questions for further study. More specifically, the *el turno escolar* (the school shift) and the *el grupo escolar* (the school group) are explored through a secondary data analysis of interviews and observations gathered in 2004.

Executive Summary | Resumen Ejecutivo

Currently, there are more than 10 million Mexico-born persons living in the United States. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of foreign born from México in the United States more than doubled (Grieco, 2003). The most recent figures from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that approximately one in three of all foreign-born persons living in the U.S. are of Mexican origin (Larsen, 2004). Moreover, approximately one in seven school-aged children in the United States is of Mexican ancestry and, of these, two in three are children of immigrants, having at least one parent born in Mexico (Hernandez, 2006).

Fusing demographics between Mexico and the United States over the past few decades is only one of many indications of the merging reality between the two countries. Especially following the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the United States and Mexico have shaped and will continue to mutually construct one another's economic, political, demographic, social, and cultural conditions. In this process, the United States has in many ways inherited and contributed to the historical corollaries of poverty and inequality in Mexico. Yet few serious binational approaches have been suggested to deal with the challenges and opportunities of social change.

This paper focuses on the role of public schooling as a mechanism of social change between the two countries. It reviews in brief the present educational circumstances of Mexican American (including first and second generation children from Mexican immigrant families as well as those students who are third generation or more) and Mexican children, including the historical shortcomings of public schools to facilitate economic participation, the development of human capabilities, and democratization in both countries. Moreover, the introduction presents some of the infrastructural and practical differences between United States and Mexican public schools. I argue that a binational framework is needed to conceptualize educational opportunity for Mexican and Mexican American children, which would necessitate further dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and educators in both countries "to propose questions and interpretations of data that move us forward" (Orfield, 2005).

As a way to contribute to this dialogue, I present a secondary analysis of qualitative data collected in 2004 at a few primary schools (but predominantly at one school) in Morelos, Mexico. The original purpose of the study was to explore practical meanings of schooling, learning, teaching, and school community (Jensen, 2005). This secondary analysis has revisited and reevaluated those interviews and field notes associated with two structural elements which emerged from the original study: *el grupo escolar* (the school group) and *el turno escolar* (the school shift). It offers a description of the structural elements, their practical features, and their respective associations with educational access and quality within México. Following the presentation of the findings is a brief discussion of possible avenues for further binational research, policy, and practice in education. A few associated research questions are presented.

Because these data were collected over a brief period (six weeks) and from a small, isolated sample, it would not be justifiable to make claims about "Mexican schools" generally. Indeed, this paper will likely (and intentionally) raise more questions than answers. Most fundamental will be to evaluate the commonality of the phenomena discussed in this paper. As improvements in educational opportunity for Mexican and Mexican American children are greatly needed—and interrelated—at the primary and secondary levels, it is my hope that this paper will contribute to further collaborations.

Raising Questions for Binational Research in Education: An Exploration of Mexican Primary School Structure

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Introduction

U.S.-México Relations

Corollary the 1,951 mile border shared between México and the United States, these two nations have greatly influenced, presently shape, and will continue to mutually construct one another's economic, political, demographic, social, and cultural conditions (Durand & Massey, 2004; García Canclini, 2005; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002; Pastor, 2001; Zúñiga & Hernández-León, 2005). The relatively recent mass of Mexican migration to the United States has created much debate and controversy in terms of public policy decisions and private negotiations, in the contexts of social responsibility, opportunity, and equity (Alba & Nee, 2003; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002).

At the same time, México continues to confront the economic and political growing pains associated with entering the world economy while struggling with its socialist roots and long history of poverty, disadvantage, and political corruption (Pastor, 2001). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) boosted México's overall economy (especially in northern states), but the distribution of wealth and access to economic opportunity remains available to a minority (Pastor, 2001). This has induced a large amount of internal migration within México (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002) and millions crossing the northern border (both legally and illegally) into the United States (Martin, 2004). Hence, the cultural, demographic, and economic links between the two nations are stronger now than ever—we indeed share a mutually dependent destiny.

K-12 Education for Mexican and Mexican-American Students

Educational systems, in both countries, play significant roles in this migratory exchange (Bracho, 2000; Crosnoe, 2006; Izquierdo & Sánchez, 2000; Martinez-Rizo, 2003; Muñiz, 2000; Reardon & Galindo, 2007; Reimers, 2000; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005).

In México, the history of public schooling is drenched in inequity (Bracho, 2000; Martinez-Rizo, 2003) and continues to be in need of immense reforms in order to prepare its general body of citizens for meaningful civic engagement (Reimers, 2000) and to compete in the global economy (Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Serving approximately 87% of all students in the country (Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005), the Mexican public education system, which receives a relatively robust percentage (6.3%) of the country's gross domestic product (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005), is organized into four levels—preschool (K1-K3), basic education (grades 1-9), upper secondary education (10-12), and higher education. Currently, K-12 schools wrestle with insufficient enrollments and high drop out rates beyond the primary level (Martinez-Rizo, 2003), insufficient supply of upper secondary schools (particularly in rural areas; Muñiz, 2000), quality teacher preparation, and low student achievement levels (Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). It has been estimated that less than 1 in 10 Mexican adults has graduated from *la preparatoria* (U.S. equivalent to a high school diploma; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). In addition, there is a dearth of research and evaluation that can inform efforts to improvement educational opportunity (Bracho, 2000; Martinez-Rizo, 2003; Reimers, 2000; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005).

At the receiving end of Mexican migration patterns, policymakers and educators in the United States struggle to prepare teachers to meet the educational, linguistic, and cultural needs of children from Mexican immigrant families (the majority of whom are themselves U.S.-born, according to Hernandez, 2006) and to develop relevant curriculum, instructional strategies, and family outreach initiatives (Seitzinger-Hepburn, 2004; Shields & Behrman, 2004; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999; Zhou, 1997). Though annual funding per student in the United States exceeds international averages (e.g., US$ 9,098 at the secondary level in the United States compared to US$ 2,378 in Mexico), student academic achievement averages remain relatively low compared to other industrialized nations, due, at least in part, to its large and tremendously heterogeneous student population (OECD, 2005).

The largest proportion of immigrant children in the country (Hernández, 2006; Hernandez, Denton & Macartney, 2007), children of Mexican descent demonstrate among the lowest levels of academic achievement and attainment across the K-12 spectrum (Reardon & Galindo, 2007). High school drop-out rates among Mexican-Americans are reported to be around 40%, varying by immigrant status and other social indicators (Saenz, 2006). Research suggests that Mexican-American students, on average, make intergenerational advancements in terms of their performance and graduation rates (Reardon & Galindo, 2007), but more work is needed to understand this process and how initiatives targeted within the school, classroom, and between the school and family can expedite success for these children, leveraging the strengths, values, and cultural practices of Mexican immigrant families (Arzubiaga, 2007; Valdés, 1996). This work will need to confront the historical lack of access to high-quality schooling which children of Mexican ancestry have faced in the United States (Moreno, 1999).

Education in Development: Binational Research and Reform

The increase and improvement of educational opportunity—providing access to high-quality basic, secondary, and post-secondary schooling to the general population—plays an important role in the process of expanding human freedoms such as social and economic opportunities as well as political and civil rights (Becker, 1994; Sen, 1999). Educational access and quality can facilitate economic participation, the development of human capabilities (e.g., cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional potential), and democratization. However, the benefits of educational opportunity for the general population are contingent on certain sociopolitical freedoms, guarantees, and securities (Sen, 1999). The reach and effectiveness of human freedoms (including educational opportunity) must constantly and rigorously be exposed to evaluation in order to inform efforts which seek to improve life opportunities for individuals (Sachs, 2005).

Because issues of educational opportunity in the United States and México are interrelated, it has been recommended that these two nations engage in more dialogue—that researchers and policymakers frame educational issues from a binational perspective, seeking to improve educational circumstances on both sides of the border (Martinez-Rizo, 2003). This means assessing and understanding the goals and workings of educational systems and their surrounding economies, cultures, and social orders.

It seems intuitive that both nations would stand as benefactors from a binational research agenda in education. The United States could benefit through a process of establishing and integrating culturally responsive curriculum, instructional strategies, and parental involvement approaches (Jensen, 2005; Seitzinger-Hepburn, 2004; Shields & Behrman, 2004; Valdés, 1996); and México could benefit by developing sound research on school access expansion and ways to improve incrementally the quality of educational service delivery (Martinez-Rizo, 2003; Posner, 2004; Reimers, 2000). A bilateral approach would be helpful to confront a number of shared social issues. It has been suggested, for example, to sort through the complexities surrounding illegal immigration and to develop policy reforms on both sides of the border (Martin, Martin, & Weil, 2006). A bilateral framework could calm heated debates through increased and innovative avenues for legal migration, cooperation in border enforcement, new and effective means for workplace enforcement, and a series of welfare enhancing mechanisms in México.

Several challenges, however, make it difficult to engage meaningfully with México on issues of educational quality and reform. Political, economic, cultural, and linguistic differences between the United States and México can be barriers (Pastor, 2001). In addition, the histories of public education in the United States and in México are quite different, meaning that challenges to and opportunities for immediate and empirically sound reforms within each country are quite different (Crosnoe, 2006; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). The U.S. system, for example, has long embraced a paradigm of educational decentralization though this has been challenged over the past few decades with increased levels of state and federal interventions (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). On the other hand, the Mexican education system continues to be highly centralized at the federal level in terms of funding, curriculum development, and governance. Some efforts in México, however, have been made to decentralize education. In 1992, for example, México dencentralized the basic education system (grades 1-6) to its 32 states in order to improve the efficiency of educational administration, giving its states more control over educational budgets and greater influence over policy (Torres & Pescador, 1999). This change was mostly administrative as most states continue to receive the majority of their financial resources from the federal government.

Beyond differences in public education infrastructure, México and the United States differ on other levels. Honoring vast variations within each country, there are important

differences between nations in terms of the goals and the process of schooling (Jensen, 2005; Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Public schools in the United States generally value individual effort and achievement—enhanced by the No Child Left Behind legislation (Nichols & Berliner, 2007)—while Mexican teachers tend to encourage collaboration through group solidarity (Jensen, 2005; Levinson, 2001; McLaughlin, 2002). Again, assertions concerning classroom cultures can be quite fuzzy and difficult to ascertain at the national level, but available evidence suggests that American schools tend accentuate academic outcomes, while being *educado* in México is more holistic, simultaneously integrating behavioral, social, and academic performance (Levinson, 2001; Muñiz, 2000; McLaughlin, 2002).

Values and educational philosophies between nations are also apparently disparate. Mexican public schools often are more integrated into the community and dependent on parents to manage several administrative concerns (Izquierdo, & Sánchez, 2000; Jensen, 2005; Muñiz, 2000). U.S. schools, on the other hand, tend to be more autonomous and generally have sufficient school personnel and fiscal support. They have more resources, on average, and, therefore, are able to introduce more technology into the classroom. In our efforts to promote bilateral engagement regarding educational process and outcomes, it is essential to recognize and validate cultural and practical differences between systems, and to continue to refine our assertions in the face of competing evidence. Moreover, mutual understanding can only enrich our knowledge-base and move forward momentous reforms to improve policy and practice of K-12 public education in both countries.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the structure of Mexican primary schooling through qualitative data analysis to begin to raise questions for binational research, policy, and practice in public education to innovate and improve access and quality for children of Mexican heritage in the United States and for children in Mexico. More specifically, the *turno escolar* (school shift) and the *grupo escolar* (school group) are explored through a secondary data analysis of interviews and observations gathered in 2004.

Methods

Data presented in this study were collected from a series of observations and interviews with school administrators (n = 3) and teachers (n = 10) in the state of Morelos (a small centrally-located state) in the fall and summer of 2004 (Jensen, 2005). Over a brief, six-week period I observed classroom practices, interviewed parents of enrolled children, observed teacher-parent activities, interviewed school staff and students, and made observations of school practices in various locations throughout the school (all interviews were conducted in Spanish, while observations were written in both languages). As a part of this study I visited three public primary schools yet the majority of the data collection took place at Mejardo (pseudonym) located in Temixco, Morelos, México—in a neighborhood characterized with a high rate of emigration to the United States.

Using a phenomenological approach to data collection, I attempted to gain entry into the conceptual world of Mexican primary school actors. Through a series of interviews, participant observations, and some archival record analysis, I was able to get a glimpse into how students, parents, and school staff perceive schooling and the community of *la primaria*. Data collection was structured to unwrap what primary schooling means to Mexican children and their parents, how education is defined and fashioned within *la primaria*, and what cultural processes tend to constitute public schooling in a *primaria mexicana*. Data from field notes, observations (in classrooms and other locations on school grounds), and interviews were categorically coded and analyzed based on etic and emic themes. Categories were constructed by what I deemed to be meaningful in the cultural school context. Nearly 20 categories emerged as a result.

This paper represents a secondary data analysis of these data and is concerned with two structural elements of *la primaria mexicana*: a) *el grupo escolar* and b) *el turno escolar*. It offers a description of the structural elements, their practical features, and their respective associations with educational access and quality within México. Following the presentation of the findings is a brief discussion of possible avenues for further binational research, policy, and practice in education, and associated questions are presented.

Findings

El grupo escolar

Certain trends within the Mexican public primary school have evolved over time, yet data ascertaining the generalizability of phenomena are lacking. Over the past few decades, some argue that efforts to expand access to basic education throughout the republic (which has raised enrollment rates and increased class sizes; Reimers, 2000) have reinforced these school practices in *la primaria*. Such practices define Mexican public primary schooling. Children attending public primary (or elementary) schools are easily recognized by their uniforms which often display the name, logo, and respective colors of their school. While the intricacy of uniforms appears to fluctuate between schools (Jensen, 2005), children enrolled in *la primaria* are often required by school administrators to wear a school uniform. These typically consist of a collared shirt with khaki pants for boys, a skirt and stockings for the girls, and dark shoes. Parents are expected to purchase the uniforms through their own financial means. On one occasion, the school principal at Mejardo indicated to me that students arriving to school without a complete uniform are told to return home by their teacher or another school staff member.

Children at each of the schools I visited were assigned to a *grupo escolar*. As school staff matriculate new and incoming students into *la primaria*, children were randomly assigned to a teacher, classroom, and, therefore, a *grupo escolar*. The *grupos escolares* not only experienced their first year of public primary schooling together, but, unless the child moved to another school, he or she also shared teachers and classrooms with the same group of students throughout their primary school career. Levinson (2001) offers an extensive amount of ethnographic data as a window into the schooling context and pedagogically pragmatic impacts of the of *el grupo escolar* in a Mexican middle school. Indeed, considering children spent up to six years together in social and educational settings within *la primaria*, uniquely attracting psychosocial and practically functional processes, teachers and administrators reported that certain behaviors and characteristics emerged from each *grupo escolar*. Through the *grupo escolar*, students at Mejardo became intimately acquainted with collaborative learning exercises, the vitality of group work within the classroom, and the need to develop strong and meaningful social bonds in order to academically and socially subsist.

Intrigued by the socioeducational dynamics of *el grupo escolar*, I interviewed some sixth grade students about their experiences in their *grupo* during a recess at Mejardo. Half of the subset of students from *grupo* 6A who I interviewed on this occasion had spent all six years at Mejardo together. (B = Bryant, C = children answering simultaneously; English translations are presented here)

B: During these past years, have you managed to always get along with each other?
C: (answering at the same time, loudly) Yes!…No!...Sometimes
C1: (one student stated) Sometimes we fight
B: (asking them to answer one at a time) When do you fight?
C2: (I call on one child to answer) During physical education
C3: (another child responds) playing soccer we are rough
B: And when do you get along?
C4: In class, during our work
B: And what if you weren't always in the same group together?
C4: We would never adapt because we would always have to make new friends.

During the same recess, I interrupted another bunch of sixth graders from playing a soccer game during recess to ask them similar questions regarding the *grupo escolar*—these children had previously agreed and were enthusiastic to participate in an interview, to have their voices chronicled on my cassette recorder.

B: Has there been difficulties in the *grupo*?
C: No…Yes…Sometimes
B: When do things go well?
C1: When there is a *convivio* [party]
B: What would it be like if you were to change grupos each year?
C2: We would never get accustomed

Children's notions of schooling were conceived within the context of their *grupo escolar*. In spite of periodical conflicts, students found it difficult to conceive schooling at Mejardo without the construct, fraternity, and support of their *grupo*. Impressed by the degree of solidarity the *grupo escolar* appeared to produce, I was surprised by Ricardo's (the school principal) response to my query regarding the reason(s) schools assigned children to permanent *grupos*. Anticipating a reply in connection with a need to systemically catalyze group work ethic and/or the socializing benefits of the *grupo escolar*, I suppose his answer reflected the pragmatic perspective of a school administrator. He simply stated that children were formed and kept in

los grupos escolares as a way of facilitating matriculation at the beginning of each school year and to ease the burdensome task of record-keeping.

Nonetheless, the *grupo escolar* at Mejardo had emerged as a regular practice which played an important role in the school culture. Children were aware of the *grupo* to which their friends and peers belonged. *Grupo* 1A would become 2A the following school year, 3A the following year, and so on. While children's social circles outside of the classroom (e.g., during recess) were self-selected, children within the classroom learned to work communally and collaboratively to complete assignments. Collectivism within the *grupo* was learned in first grade, their first year at Mejardo, and was reinforced by the *grupo* arrangement in subsequent school years and by successive teachers.

Regardless of whether *el grupo escolar* was established to smooth the progress of administration or as a conscious pedagogical strategy, the concept and practice was enmeshed in Mejardo culture. The notion of individual achievement rampantly emphasized in traditional U.S. schooling might be considered inappropriate when applied to Mexican immigrant children who are socialized within contexts such as the *grupo escolar*. Based on the principle of cultural responsiveness, policymakers, practitioners, and administrators who promote group cohesion as a component of reaching academic standards may more likely be to achieve viable student outcomes.

Interviews by teachers revealed repeatedly that a Mexican child who was *educado* was able to integrate him or herself within the *grupo* to work collaboratively with other students. Some teachers expressed characterizations of *grupos* as "good" or "bad", depending on the respective reputations, which were certainly developed over time and as a function of interaction between school staff. This explicit emphasis on group identity, group work, and an overt value on social adaptation in relation to students' behavioral and cognitive development within the *grupo escolar* has several implications for further binational research. Educational researchers in both countries are compelled to investigate further the relationships between culturally-bound characterizations of competence that teachers hold of their students, their social and behavioral development, and ways in which these concepts influence learning and development of students within *los grupos escolares*. Keeping learning and development at the center, some questions for further research related to the *grupo escolar* are the following:

1. How prevalent are the *grupos escolares* in public schools throughout the Mexican republic?
2. How is the relationship between long-term classroom grouping (i.e., *grupos escolares*) and student engagement, learning, and development?
3. Does grouping serve as a tracking mechanism, differentiating students by any known characteristic(s)? If so, which?
4. What are the implications of *grupo* attributions and characterizations on teacher expectations and instructional approaches?
5. If group solidarity and collaborative study are indeed the norm in Mexican *primarias* (an empirical question), what are the implications for teaching and learning for children of Mexican immigrant families in the United States?
6. How could curricular adjustments help incorporate group identity, collaboration, and, therefore, improve student learning for Mexican American students in the United States?
7. What are the associated instructional strategies and teacher characteristics needed to implement such a curriculum?
8. What associations do *groups escolares* have with parental participation in school?
9. In what ways can these associations be leveraged to increase the presence of Mexican immigrant parents in U.S. schools?

El Turno Escolar

Every day at 1:30 pm, I discovered that Mejardo school transformed into *la primaria* Pacheco (pseudonym). An entirely separate institutional organism, Pacheco had their own principal, teachers, and janitor. Though they shared the same classrooms, bathrooms, multi-purpose room, administrative offices, and play areas, Mejardo and Pacheco were independent schools. Other than buildings, territory, and (nationalized) curriculum, the two *primarias* shared nothing administratively or otherwise. Through some investigation, substantial differences between the two schools were noted. Pacheco elementary school, for example, had less student enrollment than Mejardo. Pacheco was an afternoon school *(el turno vespertino)* and Mejardo was a morning school (*el turno matutino*). The names of each school were painted above the school entrance and both received financial support from the state and federal government. Taken by

the idea of having morning and afternoon school shifts, I began to ask teachers and school administrators questions related to why the two *turnos* existed and what social and/or educational differences were present between the two. I interviewed Eric (teacher at Mejardo and principal at a *vespertino* school) at one juncture and Maribel (retired teacher) on another occasion.

Maribel, mother of a third grade teacher at Mejardo, taught in the Mexican public primary education system for 33 years, 24 of which she spent balancing two classes, one from each *turno*. Because of her lengthy experience teaching the two *turnos* simultaneously, I felt her responses regarding *matutino* and *vespertino* comparisons would reflect a significant mark of confidence and integrity. After establishing that a salient difference between the two *turnos* is that class sizes are generally larger in the morning, I probed further. (M = Maribel)

> B: What other differences are there between the two *turnos*, in addition to class size?
> M: At Mejardo, […] the children that go to the *turno vespertino* [afternoon school] are the children that have problems, be it economic or learning [problems]. The parents do not like to wake their children up early or they do not like to be asked [by the school] for supplies for [school] work. In the morning, there is more demand with regards to [the children's] uniform. They have to be clean."

Captivated by the idea that children in afternoon schooling were more likely to be economically disadvantaged than those that attend in the morning, I asked Maribel to elaborate.

> M: [Children in the morning session] live in a very different manner than children in the afternoon [session]. The children in the afternoon come from the shacks. One day that you are able, tell [my son] to accompany you to see a cardboard house, the houses in which these poor people live.

Trying to get a sense of whether poorer children attending school in the afternoon reflected the general scenario across the country or whether this was merely a phenomenon localized in Temixco, I inquired:

> B: Generally, are the poorer children in public primary schools attending the second rotation of school [in the afternoon]?

> M: No, there are schools, for example, in Cuernavaca […where] children, because there is no space, have to attend school in the afternoon. This does not mean they are at a lower [socioeconomic] level.

Though Eric later indicated to me that there are indeed general social and economic differences across public *primaria* morning and afternoon rotations, Maribel did not affirm this.

Maribel continued discussing specific discrepancies between children attending the two *turnos*, at Mejardo and Pacheco schools. She mentioned that Mejardo children generally had higher academic achievement than those in the afternoon at Pacheco, and attributed lower performance to poor parental support.

> M: Afternoon children have more absences. Their parents do not give them support with their homework and they do not read to them. They do not take them to the library.

Reflecting back to when she taught first grade at Mejardo and Pacheco the same academic year, she stated "With the morning children, they were able to advance more and quicker [than the afternoon children]." She maintained that children in the *turno matutino* were more likely to have attended kindergarten—*prescolar*—and were more likely to live in a house "that has running water, has power, and a bathroom."Making a generalization about children at Pacheco, she asserted "The majority of afternoon kids have a deficiency, which is not their fault."

Regarding typical behaviors of Pacheco children, she said that they were less orderly and were more likely to fight. According to Maribel, children from the *turno vespertino* at Pacheco came to school dirtier, with uniforms that were poorly maintained. She stated that because of the underprivileged care they received at home, "Afternoon children had fewer possibilities than morning children because of many reasons—because of their parents [and their] economic means."

Subsequent dialogue with Eric—a sixth grade teacher at Mejardo and principal at a *turno vespertino* school approximately 10 blocks from Mejardo—revealed additional insight in connection with *matutino/vespertino* dissimilarities. The school at which Eric worked as school principal during *el turno vespertino* served 137 students at the initiation of the 2003-2004 school year, of which 115 remained by the end of this academic year, and the day of our interview on June 15th, 2004. In our interview, Eric pointed out that this attrition rate was a trademark of

afternoon schools and that *vespertino* children display inordinately high amounts of mobility—a trend not demonstrated by morning children, at least in Temixco. He stated: "[At Mejardo], this year I began with 22 boys and 22 girls in sixth grade in the morning and now we are finishing the year and there were not any [students] who arrived or left."

According to Eric, *vespertino* families moved from community to community and/or state to state looking for work and a permanent residence. I asked if U.S. emigrant families were more likely to have been served by a *matutino* or *vespertino* school, Eric stated that he had not given the concept much thought and was not quite sure. I assumed that this uncertainty was related to the fact that, unlike Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Estado de México, Zacatecas, the state of Morelos had not historically exhibited the same relatively high rates in U.S. emigration (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Información [INEGI], 1993, 2001, 2007).

Eric's view that *vespertino* children suffered deficient treatment at home coincided with responses from Maribel,

> E: There are significant differences. The *vespertino* families are more humble, economically speaking. […] *Vespertino* children lack [and] are alone the majority of the time. […] There's no one to supervise that they are taken care of, that they bathe.

He stated that in the homes of *matutino* children "there is more vigilance". He mentioned that not all *vespertino* children came from neglectful homes and not all *matutino* children had the fortune of having loving parents—that "there are exceptions". Nonetheless, he emphatically reiterated that, in general, *matutino* parents "cooperated" (meaning they volunteered time and resources to the school; see Jensen, 2005) and participated more with the school and their children's teachers.

> E: The parents that do not like to cooperate, the parents that do not have time to meet with the school, the parents that do not have money for a meticulous uniform—because a meticulous uniform in the morning session, he who does not wear it is sent home. But here, in the afternoon, it is permitted that children come wearing whatever. In the morning I suppose parents have two uniforms minimally so that when one gets dirty, the other is ready and everyday the child can wear his uniform. In the afternoon, there are children who do not have a uniform because their parents do not have the economic possibility or they have not shown an interest—often it is that they do not have an interest.

He continued,

> E: In the afternoon, we, the teachers, are more tolerant, although we should not be—but we are because our grupos have to have students. If we are as demanding as we are in the morning, these children would escape to their houses and would not study.

Clearly, Eric saw a vast difference between the *vespertino* and *matutino* home environments and that school personnel deals distinctly with the children from each *turno*. In many ways, the present discussion of the school shift presents limited data and only a narrow source of information—interviews from two educators. However, several questions for educational researchers interested in issues of educational inequality and school effectiveness for Mexican and Mexican American children emerge from these interviews. Some questions of importance to a binational audience of educators, researchers, and policymakers are the following:

1. How common are the *turnos escolares* throughout the Mexican republic?
2. How generalizable are Eric's and Maribel's observations that students' home and educational experiences differ between *turnos* to public schools throughout the country?
3. What are the implications of *turno* attributions and characterizations on teacher expectations of students and the instructional approaches they employ?
4. What are the proportions of Mexican children attending *turnos matutinos, vespertinos*, and other shifts?
5. What is the relationship between the school shift, student engagement, learning, and development?
6. Do the criteria for retaining students differ between the two *turnos*? If so, how?
7. Are first-generation Mexican immigrant children in the United States more likely to have attended one *turno* than another?
8. Do conceptions of education and schooling differ for children and families attending *el turno vespertino* and *el turno matutino*?
9. What are the implications of these differences for the integration of immigrant students and parents into U.S. schools?

10. If *el turno escolar* is a nation-wide phenomenon (an empirical question), what are the implications for teaching and learning for children of Mexican immigrant families in the United States?
11. How could curricular adjustments improve student learning across *turnos*?
12. What are the associated instructional strategies and teacher characteristics needed to implement such a curriculum?

Conclusion: Some Binational Implications

The purpose of this secondary analysis of qualitative data collected in Morelos, México in 2004 has been to explore further two aspects of Mexican primary school structure: the school group and the school shift. Though data presented represent a limited perspective—data were mostly collected at one site over a 6-week period—they can be used to raise questions that have yet to be seriously considered by educational researchers, and even less so from a binational perspective. Voices from both sides of the border are beginning to raise a binational research agenda to a higher level of importance in order to expand our knowledge-base and provide greater educational opportunity to children in the region. Public education systems in the U.S. and Mexico alike are positioned to benefit from further dialogue and to bridge the often pervasive gaps between research and educational delivery (Heyneman, 2005; Orfield, 2005). Currently, however, this dialogue is largely relegated to polemics and anecdotal information, without a serious binational research agenda that incorporates multiple research designs including representative sampling methods in combination with grounded qualitative approaches. Such a binational agenda could provide México, for example, with a broader base of individuals applying statistical methods to evaluate associations among contextual factors (e.g., *el turno escolar* and *el grupo escolar*) with differences in student learning and school access.

In recent years, several Mexican scholars have noted a shortage of rigorous quantitative analysis in education research (Martinez-Rizo, 2003; Posner, 2004, Santibañez, Vernez, & Razquin, 2005). Moreover, a binational research agenda could help U.S. researchers develop and assess engaging curricular and instructional strategies that integrate notions of group work, collaboration, and solidarity. Results from this work could provide empirically grounded

recommendations to policymakers and school practitioners interested in improving schooling outcomes for children in Mexico as well as Mexican American children in the United States.

It is likely the case that this paper—and the findings of this secondary data analysis—raises more questions than answers. Most fundamentally, the commonality of the phenomena discussed in this paper, including the school group and the school shift, will need to be evaluated through further research. Given the short time span of data collection and the small, isolated sample studied, it would not be justified to make claims about "Mexican schools" generally. Yet a number of questions surface from this study, suggesting several ways in which U.S. and Mexican researchers could collaborate to develop empirically sound infrastructural, curricular, and instructional changes to be tested in order to improve schools and learning opportunities in both countries. Historical and contemporary circumstances show that improvements for Mexican and Mexican American children are greatly needed, and that past efforts have failed to decrease pervasive inequalities in educational opportunity for these children (Martinez-Rizo, 2003, Moreno, 1999, Reimers, 2000). I am optimistic that through binational collaborations and innovations, this scenario can begin to shift.

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