

# **MEXICAN-IMMIGRANT STUDENTS TRANSFORMING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES AT A BORDER SCHOOL IN THE UNITED STATES**

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## **Abstract**

As children of Mexican immigrant families enter schools in the United States of America, they face differences between their prior schooling experiences and the expectations in the new schools. Research on immigrant children has examined language and academic adaptation variables, yet little consideration has been given to the perspectives of children and their families and teachers. Utilizing principles of interactional ethnography, we examined elementary school student and their family and teacher perspectives about the differences between the children's prior schooling in Mexico and their current experiences in an elementary school located in Ollin, a town in Texas, near the Mexico border.

Over the course of one academic year, we interviewed ten children, eight parents, and six teachers, conducted observations in schools on both sides of the border, and collected relevant documents to examine the larger social and educational contexts participants referenced in the interviews. Using an ethnographic perspective, discourse and contrastive analyses, and triangulation of sources and types of data, we focused on children's perspectives to uncover the challenges they faced and the ways they overcame the challenges in their new, post-migration, school in Texas.

Children foregrounded two primary challenges: language and play time. However, we discovered that the children, their parents and teachers did not let the challenges stop their educational opportunities. Instead, despite the challenges, children, with support of peers, teachers, and parents, actively transformed the challenges and constructed new opportunities for learning and adapting to their post-immigration school. This paper demonstrates how focusing on children's perspectives makes visible that children and immigrant families become active agents of change, transforming challenges into learning opportunities. In the ongoing deficit models of education and negative rhetoric about immigrants, the paper shows how the people themselves take ownership of their schooling and create social and educational welfare for themselves and others.

Understanding immigrants' active participation in their schooling has a potential to impact the ways other families, educators, and policy makers view and describe their own and others' experiences of learning, schooling, and international migration.

**Keywords:** *immigrant children; children as agents; language learning; U.S.-Mexico immigration; ethnographic perspective; immigrant experiences; transforming challenges.*

International migration around the world has been steadily increasing over the past twenty-five years, with the majority of the 91 million, or 60% increase, occurring between 2000-2010 (United Nations, 2015). By 2015, developed regions gained 64%, while developing regions added 36% of the 244 million international migrants. According to the 2015 United Nations (UN) Migration Report (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2016), the United States of America (USA) hosted the largest numbers of international migrants, adding 23 million people between 1995 and 2015. While most of the migrants came from India, China, Philippines and Mexico, "Mexico-to-USA was the largest bilateral migration corridor in the world, with an annual average of nearly 500 000 migrants born in Mexico being added to the population of the United States of America from 1990 to 2000" (UN Migration Report 2015, p.5, 7). Connor (2016) of the Pew Research Center estimated that currently there are about 12 million Mexican-born people living in the USA, although the immigration from Mexico to the USA slightly decreased in recent years. Based on Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) 2010 Census (Censo de Poblacion y Vivienda), six out of ten families emigrating to the USA are from the Mexican state of Tamaulipas which borders with the USA state of Texas. Even though the majority of Mexican immigrants to the USA are 18 to 54 years of age, followed by 13 through 17 year olds, children ages 0 through 12 are also a significant group crossing the border from Mexico to the United States (U.S.) (Lopez, 2005).

Many reasons, ranging from safety and economics to family reunification and career or educational opportunities lead people to leave their homes and embark on long, often treacherous journeys to reach the USA (Adelman & Taylor, 2015, Henne-Ochoa, 2016, Nazario, 2007). Families often seek not only better jobs, but also expanded educational opportunities for their children (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). However, as children enter schools in the USA, they face multiple challenges, including the new educational system, language, relationships, and academic expectations (Arzubiaga, Nogueron, & Sullivan, 2009; Dorner, 2012). How children and their families view and address those challenges largely remains invisible; therefore, our overarching research goal was to examine children's and their parent and teacher perspectives on children's transition from schools in Mexico to an elementary school in the USA.

### **Brief overview of relevant literature**

Much of the research on immigrant students and their education has focused on the challenges children face as they transition from their prior educational backgrounds into the USA schools. Challenges cited in the literature include academic aspects of language (Collier & Thomas, 1996), differences in subject matter coverage (Candela, 1997; Kitchen, 2007), differences in pedagogical styles and ways of teaching (Macias, 1990; Bryan and McLaughlin, 2005), student grouping or tracking (Oakes, 1992), classroom organization (Tabbors, 2007), emphasis on standardized testing (Mahon, 2006), and understanding the social, cultural, and structural organization of the new school (Valenzuela, 1999; Suarez-Orozco & Todorova,

2006). Literature also shows that immigrant students face social challenges of establishing peer networks (Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999; and Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2006), relating to peers with different experiences (Fabes, Hanish, & Martin, 2003), and using their prior experiences in a new school environment (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Enumerating the challenges, researchers and educators have called for programs and interventions (e.g., Crosnoe, 2005) that would enhance child welfare and would help students adapt to the new schools faster. Such programs range from bilingual education (Collier & Thomas, 1996) to after-school tutoring (Alanis & Sutterbi, 2008), to parent education (Zang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz, & Bowman-Perrott, 2011), and family literacy (Smith, Jimenez & Martinez-Leon, 2003) programs. While these and other programs have made an impact in immigrant student transitioning to the new school (Collier & Thomas, 1996), their emphasis remains on what schools and the educational system should provide, and view children and their families as recipients of the interventions designed for them. To date we found limited research that examines the perspectives of recent immigrant elementary school students or their families and teachers to make visible what children do to adapt to the new schools. The scholarship on recent immigrant student's experiences particularly lacks perspectives of the main actors: children themselves.

### **Research aims**

Our goal for this article is to examine the perspectives of the recent immigrant children, showing how they take agentive roles in transforming challenges they face in a new elementary school into opportunities for learning, relationship building, and school adaptation. We seek to uncover insider perspectives of the children as well as teachers and parents, as they discuss children's schooling experiences in both pre-immigration Mexican and post-immigration American schools. By contrastively analyzing what the children and adults inscribe as differences among schools and as challenges children face, we make visible how the participants themselves recognize the challenges and turn them into opportunities for learning and transformation of their schooling experiences. Through this study, we demonstrate how research, which focuses on children's insider perspectives, can make visible the way children are agents, or active participants (Hill, 2006; Vandenberg & Bie, 2006), in the construction of their own schooling experiences.

### **Research approach**

The study was guided by principles of interactional ethnography (Castanheira, Crawford, Dixon, & Green, 2000; Colleagues and author, 2012), which enables scholars to examine how members of social groups discursively construct and represent their everyday life experiences in classrooms and other social settings. We adopted an ethnographic perspective (Green & Bloome, 1997; Heath & Street, 2008) as a guiding framework for examining how student discourse and experiences are situated within the larger social, cultural, educational, and family contexts that influence children's schooling. Ethnographic principle of *cultural relevance* (Green et al., 2012; Heath, 1982) enabled us to focus on uncovering insider perspectives while the principle of *contrastive analyses* (Green, Dixon & Zaharlick, 2003) guided the way we analyzed data using multiple data sources to develop understandings of the aspects of schooling important to the children. The *holistic perspective* of ethnography (Green et al., 2003) enabled us to focus on participants' discourse, while situating what they said and how they said it in the larger social and educational contexts. The holistic perspective also guided our search for

and analyses of *intertextual references* (Green & Heras, 2011; Green et al., 2012) children, their parents and teachers inscribed as shaping the opportunities and challenges for learning.

The study took place at Ollin South Elementary school located in Ollin, a town in the USA, located on the Texas-Mexico border, neighboring the Mexican town of Yolitzli (all names are pseudonyms). The Ollin South Elementary is located in a low socio-economic Hispanic dominant neighborhood. All 534 students enrolled in the school came from economically disadvantaged families, 98.9% of students were Hispanic, and 72.1% of students were considered at risk of failure, as determined by the 2009-2010 Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report (TEA, 2010).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with children, parents, and teachers over one academic year. Ten recent-immigrant elementary school children (ages 6-11) who had prior schooling experiences in Yolitzli in Mexico were interviewed twice. The first, semi-structured, interview focused on eliciting student responses about what they liked and disliked in their schools in Ollin and Yolitzli and what challenges they faced when they moved to the new school in Texas. The second, open-ended, interview used photo- and visual-elicitation techniques (Harper, 2002) to gain more in-depth information about the experiences children were bringing to the new school. Photos of Yolitzli schools and classrooms were presented to the children to spark their memories about their Mexico schooling experiences. Then the children were asked to draw both their prior and current schools. In the interview the children then described their drawings, providing insights about the differences among the two schools and how those differences impacted what they could and could not do in the current school in the Texas. In addition to children, eight parents, and six teachers participated in the study. Teachers and parents were interviewed to gain broader perspectives about the participant children's schooling experiences. Observations were also conducted in Yolitzli schools and in the children's current school at Ollin South Elementary to note the patterns of interaction and content covered throughout the day.

Data were analyzed using an abductive (Green et al., 2012) approach to identify topics participants talked about in the interviews and the interrelationships among the topics. After identifying a broad range of topics from analyses of interview transcripts, we grouped the topics into two main categories that participants made visible as important in shaping their schooling experiences: academic and social aspects of schooling. In addition to interviews, we also used intertextual references to school schedules, children's drawings of the schools, and fieldnotes of observations from the Mexican and USA schools to triangulate our findings and provide additional or deeper layers of evidence to explain the challenges children faced and how they transformed those challenges into opportunities for themselves and others.

### Results

As we explored how recent immigrant children coming with previous formal schooling in Yolitzli describe their schooling experiences in a public Ollin elementary school, we identified two main aspects of schooling children, as well as their parents and teachers, emphasized in the interviews. The first aspect was academics and included topics of language and content areas of reading, mathematics and science. The second aspect was the social aspect of schooling, which included the topics of recreational time to play, friends, and peer support. Children actively participated in understanding and adapting to their new school and its academic and social demands, transforming the challenges they faced into opportunities for learning. For this paper, we selected one academic aspect – language, and one social aspect - recreational

time, as telling cases (Mitchell, 1984) to make visible children's active role in transforming the challenges into new ways of learning, understanding, and interacting that bring student prior experiences into their new life-worlds.

### **Differences in language: an academic challenge and an a resource for learning**

Recent immigrant children from Mexico came to the USA school having engaged in all aspects of schooling in their native Spanish language, whereas in the new school they heard primarily English, with some Spanish used in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom or in regular classrooms with bilingual teachers who were able to provide the support for the new students. Early-exit bilingual program at Ollin South had set an expectation that the students would transition into all-English instruction by their second year in the school. Consequently, upon arriving from Mexico, children were faced with the challenge of learning the new English language of schooling, while at the same time being expected to learn grade-level content and perform on standardized tests (Collier and Thomas, 1996). Students at Ollin South Elementary were keenly aware of the language differences and the constraints of those differences.

Difficulty with English was one of the first things children said in response to the interview question to talk about the new school. When Karla, a 4th grade student (9 years old) in Ms. Fernández' classroom, answered the question "what could you tell about the new school at Ollin South?" she started by saying that she expected it to be hard because she did not speak English: *Que seria un poco dificil [la escuela] con el inglés, porque yo ya estoy entendiendo, más o menos, pero al principio no* (That it [school] would be a little bit hard because of the English, because now I am getting it, more or less, but at the beginning no). Karla expressed having *a little bit* of difficulty with school because of the language, thus demonstrating her understanding of the relationship between language proficiency and school success.

Patricia, another 4th grade student, also faced difficulties in transitioning from Yolitzli to the new school. Patricia's mother explained, *Cuando regresó Patricia a la casa el primer día, ella regresó con dolor de cabeza, llorando, porque no entendía el inglés, el sistema, de cómo manejaban la escuela* (When Patricia came back after the first day of school, she had a headache and was crying because she did not understand English, the system, or how to navigate the school). In this statement, Patricia's mother exposed the interrelatedness of her child's welfare and the challenge of not knowing English and not understanding the system of the new school. As the children made visible the challenges they faced, they enabled adults to see the new school and children's experiences from the child's point of view.

**English in Yolitzli: examining what students brought.** In order to understand children's perspectives and experiences with English at Ollin South, we needed to interrupt our analysis (Green & Heras, 2011), step back from analyzing what participants said about the new school, in order to examine what experiences children brought to the current school from their prior schooling in Yolitzli. To understand children's and parents' statements that children had not had many opportunities to learn English prior to coming to Ollin, we used the contrastive perspective of ethnography (Green et al., 2003) to examine the fieldnotes from observations in Yolitzli schools. While the Mexican national curriculum required that all public schools teach English for forty to fifty minutes every day (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2011), second author's observations in Yolitzli schools helped us understand what the participants meant when they said they didn't hear, read, speak or use much English.



During second author's observations in one of the second grade classrooms in Yoliztli, an English teacher came into the classroom to replace the regular teacher for the prescribed forty minutes of English. This teacher, who was a native Spanish speaker but who had learned English as a foreign language, spoke to the students in Spanish, explaining the activity: students were to repeat after her the English personal pronouns I, you, he, she, it, we, you, and they. The teacher read these pronouns from a book and asked the children to repeat them by following the book. She also asked them to memorize the personal pronouns for homework in preparation for her lesson on the next day. All the instruction of the English teacher was conducted in Spanish, with English used only to read the pronouns.

Observations like this were common in three of the Yoltizli schools that the second author observed. The teachers' actions and interactions with students indicated that teaching of English in Yoliztli was conducted primarily in the Spanish language. The grammar-translation method (Kellerman, 1984) for teaching English used in the observed Yoliztli classrooms was dependent on the text and the teacher, with students having few possibilities to use English in meaningful ways to learn academic content or to communicate with others. Observing and examining fieldnotes from Yoliztli enabled us to construct a potential backdrop for understanding further the challenges children and adults participating in this study discussed about language use at Ollin South Elementary.

**Spanish and Spanish-speaking peers at Ollin South as a resource for navigating the new school.** When children came to Ollin South, they were immersed in an all-English environment. Finding ways of communicating with others became one of the first challenges children needed to overcome in order to succeed in navigating the new school. Children became active seekers of resources and help, and soon learned that many of their peers at Ollin South also spoke Spanish, the language of their homes and border-town communities. Once recent immigrant children learned who these Spanish-speaking peers were, they asked these peers for help in understanding the school and what they needed to do in their classroom.

Peers became an important resource in helping new students transition into the new school environment and find ways of communicating and learning. Gudelio narrated how a Spanish-speaking peer helped him learn to play with a computer at school: *Y estaba jugando con una computadora que no sabía porque estaba en inglés. Me ayudó un niño de cuarto, y cuando me dijo cómo jugarlo lo entendí* (And I was playing on the computer that I did not know because it was in English. A fourth grade kid helped me, and when he told me how to play the computer, I got it). Gudelio explained that because the computer commands were in English, he could not play with it. However, a classmate stepped in to help, and Gudelio "got it." Gudelio's words made visible the importance of having peers who spoke the immigrant children's native language and could step in to help. Using Spanish, Gudelio and his peer transformed the challenge of English commands on the computer into an opportunity for communication and relationship-building with each other.

When immigrant students realized that there were other children at school who could speak Spanish, they were able to communicate in formal and informal settings in the languages they knew. Ms. Fernández, a fourth-grade teacher, argued that the border-town area provided immigrant children an environment conducive to smoother transitioning into the new school:

*The thing is that here in the border, because even if they [local children] are native speakers [of Spanish], they are able to speak in English, and they are still strong in Spanish. The kids here don't feel too much intimidation because they know the other*

*students also speak Spanish. So it is o.k. if they speak in Spanish, they still understand because they will talk to them.*

Upon entry into Ollin South, the students participating in this study soon learned about the possibilities of using Spanish and English in different ways, and took actions to reach out to peers and to teachers to learn what they needed in the new school. By finding ways to communicate with peers and teachers, new students transformed the challenge of English into opportunities for building communication and learning pathways. Teachers also played an active role in supporting student success and promoting their use of Spanish as a resource for learning in the English environment.

### **Spanish and english as academic resources**

The border-town communities, their similarities in economic and social ways of living (Romo, 2007), and access to people who spoke Spanish and English enabled children coming from Mexico to use their knowledge of Spanish as a resource for learning in the new environment. While the main language of instruction and communication at Ollin South was English, children were also exposed to Spanish. At Ollin South, teachers were required to follow the district's early transitional model for English language learners and provide native language support to make content comprehensible for English language learners. Using Spanish to enhance recent immigrant children's access to the curriculum was one of the support strategies teachers at Ollin South employed to help their students.

Ms. Fernández described how she used Spanish and English and how she supported her students transitioning from Spanish to English instruction:

*The Spanish, I'm only giving it in the content areas. Since we tested already in the state, now they are going to receive it in English as well. The science, the health, the spelling, everything else they got it in Spanish, but now they are transitioning. They still get it in English, but I'll give a side by side in Spanish so they can start putting the words together.*

Ms. Fernández explained which language she used for the subjects she taught in fourth grade, and the changes that she made once students received the state assessment. She indicated that she started the school year providing reading instruction in Spanish. Later, once students had taken the reading state assessment in Spanish, Ms. Fernández started transitioning them into English. She emphasized that even when she conducted her lessons in English, she still provided the Spanish language support and used different strategies in order to make content comprehensible for her students.

All participants in the study talked about ways in which their knowledge of Spanish became a resource for accessing the instruction in English. Karla said she relied on Spanish translation to try to understand the stories and instructions given in English. In response to an interview question of what had been the hardest in the school, Karla immediately answered *English*. When asked what she did in order to do better in school, Karla stated that she used her knowledge of Spanish to translate words into English: *Es que entiendo pocas palabras, y las que no me sé las pongo en español* (It's because I understand few words, and those that I don't know I put them in Spanish). Using a concurrent translation strategy (Larsen-Freeman, 1986) Karla drew on her knowledge of Spanish to meet and overcome the challenge of accessing instruction in English.

Teachers were also aware of the importance of using Spanish to reach out and help recent immigrant students. An excerpt from the interview with Ms. Fernández demonstrates how through speaking the students' native language, Ms. Fernández established the communication process necessary for students to access instruction in the classroom. In the analytic transcript provided in Table 1, Ms. Fernández narrated the interaction she had with Juliana, one of her fourth grade students. She explained how Juliana approached her to express the need to talk (line 94) while still being unsure of how the teacher was going to respond (line 95). The transcript demonstrates how Juliana used a contrastive perspective to explain her uncertainty about approaching the teacher, while at the same transforming the contrast into an opportunity to build a relationship with her teacher at Ollin South. Juliana indicated that her need of asking the teacher but not knowing what to expect at Ollin South was shaped by the actions of the teachers she had in Yoliztli (lines 96 through 97). Juliana did not know how Ms. Fernández would respond (line 95) if she would ask something (line 95) because in Yoliztli the teachers would tell the student to *sit down and just pay attention* (line 97). However, the student chose to transcend those experiences she was bringing from Yoliztli; by approaching Ms. Fernández, Juliana created an opportunity for herself to build a pathway toward accessing academic instruction in her new school.

**Table 1.** Ms. Fernández' account of her conversation with Juliana

Line	Transcript	Actor	Action/expectation	Context	Consequences	Cause
94	I wanted to ask you	I (student)	Wanted to ask M.F.	Ollin South		
95	but I didn't know if you were going to respond	I (student)	Didn't know If MF would respond	Ollin South		
96	like my teachers in Mexico.	My teachers		Yoliztli		
97	They will tell me sit down, and just pay attention.	They (students' teachers)	Tell me sit down, pay attention	Yoliztli		
98	If I ask they are going to scold me,	I	If I ask	Ollin South	They will scold me	
99	they were going to get mad at me				Get mad	
100	because I did not know the language.	I				Didn't know the language
101	I thought you were going to speak all in English.	I	Thought you were going to speak in English	Ollin South		
102	and I was so scared	I			Was scared	
103	because what if I don't understand at all.					I don't understand



Continued Table 1

104	But once I started speaking to her in Spanish	I (teacher)	Start speaking in Spanish	Ollin South		
105	she came to me and said				Student came	(once I started speaking)
106	Ay ma'am I'm so relieved	I (student)	Am relived	Ollin South	relieved	
107	because I thought I was never going to speak to you	I (student)	Thought I wasn't going to speak to you	Ollin South		(teacher speaking in Spanish)
108	And I said why not?	I (teacher)	Said (asked)	Ollin South		
109	We have bilingual students here...	We (school)		Have bilingual students		
110	and I know Spanish too.	I (teacher)		Know Spanish		
111	Yo también sé español	I (teacher)		Know Spanish		
112	so don't worry about it.				Don't worry (to the students)	(bilingual students; Teacher knows Spanish)
113	Im going to talk to you in Spanish	I (teacher)	Going to talk in Spanish			
114	and whatever you need	You (student)	Need			
115	you let me know	You (student)	Let me know			
116	and I'm going to help you, so	I (teacher)			Will help you	
117	From that day on she felt confident,	She (student)			Felt confident	
118	and she was able				Was able	
119	and she was so willing				Was willing	
120	because					(Teacher actions): talking to the student; speaking Spanish
121	she	She (student)			(would do)	
122	whatever I would ask from her	I (teacher)	Ask of her			
123	Even if she did not know how to do it,	She (student)	Did not know how to do it			

124	she will try	She (student)	Try			
125	And that motivated her	Her (student)				
126	and this year now she's speaking a lot more	She (student)	Speaking a lot more			
127	You can have a conversation with her	You (anybody) Her (student)	Have a conversation			
128	and she will speak to you in English.	She (student) You (anybody)	Speak in English			

Our analysis of this interview segment revealed layers of actions the student and the teacher took to overcome the challenges Juliana faced in the new school, transforming the student's learning experiences in Ms. Fernandez' classroom. Juliana used a contrastive perspective and situated herself and her actions in a broader educational context, providing an explanation for the teacher to understand her actions holistically. Juliana explained how her prior experiences at a Yolitzli school influenced her expectations for consequences at Ollin South. She expected that *if I ask* (line 98), the consequences would be teachers scolding her (line 98) and getting mad (line 99). Juliana also expected the teacher to *speak all in English* (line 101). In line 102 the student confessed she *was so scared*, attributing this consequence of being scared to her being unable to understand English (line 103). However, despite the fear, Juliana took action and approached Ms. Fernández, enabling her new teacher (and us as researchers) to understand the importance of knowing the child's prior schooling experiences.

Juliana's actions of approaching the teacher enabled the teacher to address student fears and to create pathways for communication the student needed to succeed in school. After narrating the way Juliana revealed her fear ("scared," in line 102), Ms. Fernández demonstrated the actions she took to help the girl. In line 104 Ms. Fernández stated that she started speaking to Juliana in Spanish. The teacher inscribed the consequence of this proactive stance toward the student as Juliana coming to talk to her (line 105) and becoming *so relieved* (line 106) that she could now talk to the teacher. The way Juliana said *ay ma'am, I'm so relieved* (lines 106) using informal expressions, signaled her relationship with Ms. Fernández was different from the way she had viewed the teachers in Yolitzli, where the teachers *will tell me to just sit down and pay attention* (line 97).

In this interview segment Ms. Fernández signaled that the student helped her understand the differences in the schooling contexts related to language and interaction. Ms. Fernández also demonstrated that she built relationships with her students. By showing that she reached out to the students by talking to them in Spanish (line 104), the teacher shifted the focus from the language to the importance of interaction. The teacher explained how she asked the student *why not?* (line 108) in response to Juliana's indication of her fear that she would not be able to speak to the teacher (line 107). By explaining that not only did the school have bilingual students (line 109) but that she as a teacher also knew Spanish like the students do (line

110), Ms. Fernández helped Juliana see that it was okay for the student use her knowledge of Spanish to communicate and learn at Ollin South. The teacher reinforced her message by stating that she would talk to Juliana in Spanish (line 113) and that she was available to help in different ways (lines 114-116): *and whatever you need you let me know*.

In lines 117 through 119, the teacher revealed the consequences of her actions for the student. Juliana felt confident (line 117), was able (line 118), and was willing (line 119) to try. In lines 120 through 121, the teacher started providing an explanation for the preceding lines in which she indicated the student was more confident, able and willing. However, Ms. Fernández aborted the explanation and continued describing Juliana's actions. She remarked that Juliana would do *whatever I would ask from her* (line 122), *she will try* (line 124), and even if she did not know how to do something, she would try (line 123). While the teacher aborted stating the reasons of these actions (line 121), the previous narration of this conversation with Juliana signals that the teacher attributed the change in the student to her own actions of talking to the student and speaking in Spanish as well as to the school context which included other bilingual students. The teacher finished this narration by focusing on how teacher actions and school context contributed to the students' active participation at Ollin South. The student was now motivated (line 125). She was also speaking a lot more (line 126), *you can have conversations with her* (line 127), and now she spoke in English (line 128).

Through this narration the teacher demonstrated how the student actions of approaching the teacher, overcoming fear, and explaining to the teacher the prior experiences in Yoliztli, enabled the student and the teacher to transform the challenge of knowing little English into opportunities to understand the environment of the new school and to establish pathways for communication. In lines 117 through 128, Ms. Fernández inscribed the consequences of the dynamics of interaction with the students: Student was willing to do what the teacher asked of her. Juliana's openness to learn and reach out to the teacher demonstrated how language in the classroom can become a bridge for accessing instruction.

At Ollin South, the transition between Yoliztli and Ollin South classrooms was smoother because students could draw on their knowledge of Spanish to access curriculum, talk to others, and help others understand what the student brought and what she needed to succeed in the new school. Ms. Fernández expressed the importance of teachers being receptive of what their students were willing to communicate: *If you don't listen you are going to miss what they want, and you are going to miss out when they are asking for help and if you listen they are going to say what they need*. The communication between teachers and students was an important part of the students' school experiences. When students, like Juliana, took proactive stance in their own education, they transformed not only their own opportunities for learning, but also enabled teachers to develop ways of supporting all recent immigrant children. Children's knowledge of Spanish became an asset rather than a detriment in accessing instruction in English. It also enabled the children and teachers to use their multiple languages as means of communication that supported student-teacher and student-peer interactions.

Children's active role in transforming challenges in the new school into opportunities for themselves and others was also visible in the way they created play and social interaction spaces. In the next section we provide a telling case of how students used their contrastive perspectives of Yoliztli and Ollin to adapt and carry over the play time they miss from Yoliztli into a new space at Ollin South.

### Missing recreation time at Ollin South: adapting expectations to the structures of the New school

When participant children were asked about the things they used to like about their school in Yoliztli, they talked extensively about time to play, peer support, and friends. Yoliztli schools had a thirty-minute recess time built into the schedule to allow children free time for play and social interaction. Children also had one weekly seventy-minute period of Physical Education. In contrast, at Ollin South there is no recess time, but the Physical Education class is offered five days a week for forty-five minutes. In research on children's play and its impact on children, Jarett and Waite-Stupiansky (2009) and Ginsburg (2007) show that schools used to set aside some time for recess, where children had time to play and to engage in unstructured activities with their peers. However, times have changed and recess has been abolished in the majority of the U.S. public schools, for reasons that go from liability of accidents on the playground to increased testing that requires the use of instructional time as much as possible (Ginsburg, 2007). Nevertheless, children still look forward to unstructured times and places within the school where they can be themselves and where they can build and develop their own judgment and decision-making (Jarett and Waite-Stupiansky, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007).

### Recess in Yoliztli: free time for play and exploration

Recreational time was the most frequent topic children in this study talked about when comparing their schooling experiences in Yoliztli and Ollin. Seven of the ten participants expressed that recess was the best part of their day in Yoliztli because during that time they played games of their choice and had opportunities to make friends. Games included sports such as soccer, basketball, kickball, and hide and seek. Janeth, a first grader, also mentioned a playground in Yoliztli, with swings, slides, and monkey bars. First grader Israel said Yoliztli was "better" when compared to Ollin South because he could play outside for thirty minutes: *Alla es mejor porque allá puedes estar 30 minutos afuera jugando* (Over there it is better because you can spend 30 minutes playing outside).

To an interview request to tell the researcher anything Luna remembered about her school in Yoliztli, she immediately stated *Lo diferente es que aquí no te dan recreo y allá si* (The difference is that here they do not give you recess and back there yes) (Table 2, lines 2-4). As she was prompted to explain why recess was important (line 5) Luna explained, *Porque allá había juegos* (Because there were games, line 6).

**Table 2.** Luna about play time in Yoliztli

Line	Transcript	Translation	Context
1	<i>B: Estamos aquí con Luna, vamos a ver Luna, cuéntame cualquier cosa que te acuerdes de la escuela en Yoliztli, cualquier cosa que me quieras decir, ¿cómo era la escuela allá?</i>	<i>We are here with Luna. Let's see Luna, tell me anything that you remember about your school in Yoliztli. Anything you want to tell me. How was school there?</i>	Ollin S
2	<i>Lo diferente es que aquí</i>	<i>What is different is that here</i>	Ollin S
3	<i>L: No te dan recreo</i>	<i>they do not give you recess</i>	Ollin S
4	<i>y allá si</i>	<i>and back there they did</i>	Yoliztli
5	<i>B: ¿Y por qué es importante el recreo?</i>	<i>And why is recess important?</i>	
6	<i>Porque había juegos</i>	<i>Because there were games</i>	Yoliztli
7	<i>B: ¿Y aquí no juegas ya?</i>	<i>And you don't have games here?</i>	
8	<i>L: Aquí nada mas vamos a P.E.</i>	<i>Here we just go to P.E. (Physical Ed)</i>	Ollin S

Continued Table 2

9	B: <i>¿Y te gusta P.E.?</i>	<i>And do you like P.E.?</i>	
10	Me gusta más el recreo	I like recess more	Yoliztli
11	B: <i>¿Y qué hacían en el recreo?</i>	<i>And what is it that you used to do in recess?</i>	
12	L: Nos íbamos a jugar a los juegos	We would go to play at the playground	Yoliztli
13	B: <i>¿Y si no te alcanzabas a subir</i>	<i>And what if you could not get</i>	
14	<i>a los juegos a que jugaban?</i>	<i>to the playground on time?</i>	
15	L: Jugábamos a las escondidas	We would go and play hide and seek	Yoliztli
16	Casi siempre alcanzábamos juegos	Most of the times we were able to	
17	porque salíamos temprano	get on the playground because we	Yoliztli
18		would get out early	
19	B: <i>¿Cuánto tiempo tenías de recreo?</i>	<i>How much time did you have for recess?</i>	
20	L: Era poquito	Just a little bit	

When responding to the question if she got to play at Ollin South, Luna said, *Nada más, vamos a P.E.* (Nothing more, we just go to P.E.). Although Luna made a connection between recess in Yoliztli and physical education at Ollin South, using *nada mas* Luna marked her preference for recess over physical education and confirmed it more directly by saying *me gusta mas el recreo* (I like recess better) (lines 9 and 10). Other children compared Yoliztli and Ollin play times in similar ways, but they also demonstrated how they were able to adapt to the new school structure by substituting Physical Education for the recess time they missed.

#### **Play time at Ollin South: physical education**

Upon entering Ollin South and discovering they had no recess, children missed the play time and opportunities to socialize with their friends. However, instead of dwelling of what was not available to them in the new school, children found ways to use the existing school structures to transform their expectations for play. In the absence of recess, the children reenvisioned the Physical Education (P.E.) as a space to play, thus demonstrating how their contrastive understanding of the differences in the two school systems enabled them to address their own needs.

Like Luna, Karla made a comparison between free play time and the P.E. time, emphasizing that the games in P.E. were more structured than the opportunities she previously had to play whatever the children wished. She stated, *Que también en el gym, allá jugabas lo que tú quieras, y aquí no, lo que diga el profe* (That at the gym, over there you were able to play anything you wished, but not here, it is what the coach says). Saul's insights confirmed Karla's perspective that they could play whatever they wanted in Yoliztli: *Allá te ponían a hacer lo que sea, lo que tú querías jugar, menos jugar a pelear* (Over there they had you doing whatever, whatever you wished to play, except playing fights). However, in this statement Saul also indicated that free play also had certain rules, such as the rule of not fighting.

Despite the differences in the kinds of activities they could have during play time, participant children considered the gym as a place and time to play. Children demonstrated that they were able to transcend their expectations for free recess time and adjust to the new structures at Ollin South. Physical Education time and the gym became the space in which they could play, with the coach structuring the games for them. This transformation of expectations is visible in Gudelio's drawing of his two schools (Figures 1 & 2).





Fig. 1. Gudelio's Drawing of his School in Yoliztli

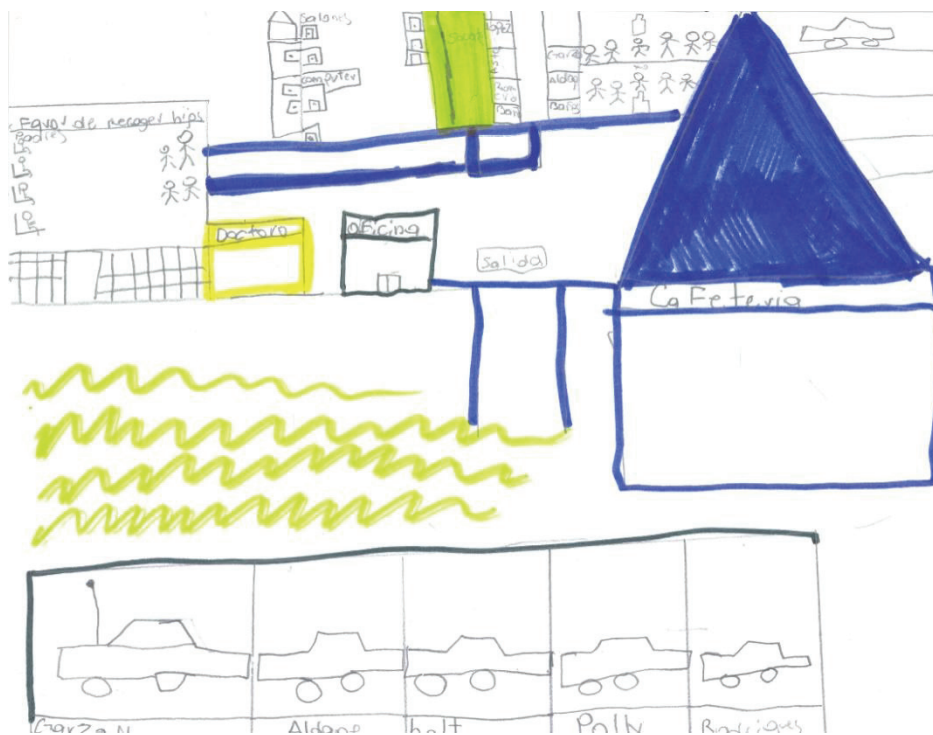


Fig. 2. Gudelio's Drawing of his School at Ollin South

One of the differences we noticed in Gudelio's representations of the two schools was that he drew many children spread out around the campus in Yoliztli, while at Ollin South he drew fewer children, concentrated in one area at the back of the school. When asked to explain these differences, Gudelio responded: *Es que los dibujé dentro del gym para jugar* (It's because I drew them inside the gym to play) (See Figure 2). With his answer, Gudelio showed that at Ollin South the gym was the play space for the children. He explained that he liked going to the gym and learning new games: *Nos enseñan juegos que no nos enseñaban allá: Guard the pin, hool-a-hoop, de toda clase de juegos que no había jugado yo* (They teach us games that they did not teach us there: Guard the pin, hool-a-hoop, all kinds of games that I had not played). Gudelios' drawings also depicted differences that included the size of people, the actions of the people, the size of the buildings, the backgrounds, the fences, as well as the cars drawn. While an in-depth analysis of Gudelio's and other children's drawings can be the basis for a separate paper, the main differences in Gudelio's drawings indicated more emphasis on people and interactions in his Yoliztli school as compared to the foregrounding of cars and buildings at Ollin South. In this way, Gudelio emphasized the social aspects of school as more visible in Yoliztli.

All children interviewed mentioned play time availability as one of the differences between their prior schooling and the current Ollin South Elementary. Seven of the children expanded on this topic, demonstrating their understandings not only of the differences between school structures but also of the ways to transform those differences to meet their own needs. Children realized that at Ollin South, the Physical Education coach offered games that allowed them to play and interact with other children. Seeing that the expectations they brought from Yoliztli did not fit the local context of Ollin South, the children adapted their views to fit within the possibilities at the new school. Even though at the beginning of their schooling experiences children emphasized the absence of recess, once they understood that play could happen in different ways and in different spaces, they, like Gudelio, took up the new opportunities for play and social interaction in the spaces of Physical Education. In this way, children became active agents in adapting to the new school, thus creating new understandings and opportunities for themselves and their peers.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Studying children's and their parents' and teachers' views on recent immigrant students' schooling experiences has made visible the challenges as well as possibilities children encounter as they transition from a Mexican to a USA elementary school. While children face multiple academic and social challenges when they enter a new school, children are not passive recipients of supports (or lack thereof) provided for them by the school. Rather, children are active participants in transforming and creating their own educational opportunities, while at the same time making visible to teachers, parents, and researchers, how their knowledge and contrastive understandings can become assets for establishing pathways for their academic and social success.

Students', parents' and teachers' active roles in communicating the differences in learning, teaching, and social interaction in Mexican and USA schools provide opportunities for understanding ways educators, families, and children themselves can use their prior experiences as assets in the new schooling environments. Learning about the differences in teaching and schooling practices on two sides of the border can inform areas beyond the border about challenges immigrant and other diverse children face and about ways to bridge

those challenges. Schools and teachers can reach out to parents and children, find ways to communicate with them, facilitate peer networks, and make visible similarities in the schooling processes and practices. Through such actions schools can build bridges between student prior and current schooling experiences and can provide access for student and family active participation in educational processes.

Interviewing children, their families, and teachers revealed academic and social aspects that shape children's education. Participants in this study demonstrated the importance language, and the social supports of recreational time as foundations for student school adaptation success. Analyses of what children, their parents and teachers said about their schooling also made visible the need to understand and bridge the differences of educational practices in different schooling systems. Such awareness of different ways of learning and how students transform the challenges into opportunities to learn can help prepare students for a fast-changing world in which bi- and multi-lingualism, lifelong learning skills, and contrastive understandings of contexts are keys to educational and life-long success (Jarvis, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson, Mohanty, & Panda, 2009; Spring, 2008).

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## MEXICAN-IMMIGRANT STUDENTS TRANSFORMING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES AT A BORDER SCHOOL IN THE UNITED STATES

### *Summary*

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International migration around the world has been steadily increasing over the past twenty-five years, with the majority of the 91 million, or 60% increase, occurring between 2000-2010. The United States of America (USA) hosted the largest numbers of international migrants, and "Mexico-to-USA was the largest bilateral migration corridor in the world, with an annual average of nearly 500 000 migrants born in Mexico being added to the population of the United States of America from 1990 to 2000" (UN Migration Report 2015, p. 5, 7). Based on Mexico's National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) 2010 Census, six out of ten families emigrating to the USA are from the Mexican state of Tamaulipas which borders with the USA state of Texas. Many of the immigrants are families with school age children who must continue their education in the USA after the immigration. Better opportunities for children and education have been among the multiple reasons for continuing immigration.

However, as children enter schools in the USA, they face multiple challenges, including the new educational system, language, relationships, and academic expectations. Much of the literature and policy has focused on helping children and their families adapt to the new system by providing supports such as English language instruction or parental education programs. While the programs have had some positive impact in immigrant student transitioning to new schools (Collier & Thomas, 1996), researchers and policy makers tend to emphasize what schools and the educational system should provide, and view children and their families as mere recipients of the interventions. To date we found limited research that examines the perspectives of recent immigrant elementary school students or their families and teachers to make visible what children themselves do to adapt to the new schools. The scholarship on recent immigrant student's experiences particularly lacks the perspectives of the main actors: children themselves.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of the recent immigrant children, showing how they take agentive roles in transforming challenges they face in a new elementary school into opportunities for learning, relationship building, and school adaptation.



An interactional ethnographic perspective guided the study in which ten recent immigrant children ages 6-11, eight parents, and six teachers were interviewed over one academic year. Observations in schools on both sides of the border, collection of documents and children's drawings were also part of the dataset used for analyses and triangulation of findings. Ethnographically guided abductive analyses of interview discourse, observation, and document data revealed that children foreground academic and social aspects as the primary challenges and opportunities in transitions to the new school. They overcame academic challenges by finding ways of using Spanish with peers and teachers and by sharing their prior schooling experiences. Children's active role in transforming challenges in the new school into opportunities for themselves and others was also visible in the way they created play and social interaction spaces.

Studying children's and their parents' and teachers' views on recent immigrant students' schooling experiences made visible the challenges as well as possibilities children encounter as they transition from a Mexican to a USA elementary school. While children face multiple academic and social challenges when they enter a new school, children are not passive recipients of supports (or lack thereof) provided for them by the school. Rather, children are active participants in transforming and creating their own educational opportunities, while at the same time making visible to teachers, parents, and researchers, how their knowledge and contrastive understandings can become assets for establishing pathways for their academic and social success.

Students', parents' and teachers' active roles in communicating the differences in learning, teaching, and social interaction in Mexican and the U.S. schools provide opportunities for understanding ways educators, families, and children themselves can use their prior experiences as assets in the new schooling environments. Learning about the differences in teaching and schooling practices on two sides of the border can inform areas beyond the border about challenges immigrant and other diverse children face and about ways to bridge those challenges. Schools and teachers can reach out to parents and children, find ways to communicate with them, facilitate peer networks, and make visible similarities in the schooling processes and practices. Through such actions schools can build bridges between student prior and current schooling experiences and can provide access for student and family active participation in educational processes.

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