

# **BINATIONAL STUDENTS: A GLOBAL RESOURCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*A look at students on the US/Mexico Border who are being shuffled from one country to another, generally because of heavy-handed immigration enforcement and difficult economic situations. Rather than developing and encouraging these children as a language and cultural resource we seem to be harming and devaluing them in multiple ways. The goal of this work is to inform teachers and others in the hope of raising the possibilities of Bi-National Youth. Currently, many Bi-National Children are being pushed out of our schools both in Mexico and the United States because of a variety of factors including provincial language policies, lack of information about the Bi-National situation, difficult economic considerations, anti-immigrant emotions and heavy-handed immigration enforcement. The hope is that with more awareness of the Bi-National Students, programs can be developed that will encourage them to stay in our schools as well as develop their bilingual and bicultural strengths.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

There is a new and growing population of students; generally of Latin heritage, sometimes born in the United States and sometimes in other countries; spending different parts of their school history in schools on both sides of the US/Mexico border. For example, many families moved from Mexico to the United States with the hope of providing more opportunity for their children. The children came to the US schools speaking Spanish and were required to speak only English. This resulted in stigma, loss of the first language and culture to the point where the children could not communicate with family members in Mexico. And yet, the children did adjust and were doing well in school and had many friends and were learning English. And then tragedy struck. The father was deported and so the entire family returned to Mexico. The children attended a school where the dominant language was Spanish, the language they had been taught to devalue. Once again, the children were outcasts. They felt alone and isolated once again. They were not aware of other students in their same situation. They were quiet and sullen in the schools, trying to cover their lack of language and cultural skills. They saw no point in attending school and began to drop out. They were embarrassed not to be fluent in Spanish. They did not understand how the Mexican school system operated. They missed their schools and friends in the United States.

I stopped one day to have some work done on my motor scooter – in Mexico. The man, who owned the small shop, did a great job and as he worked we talked. His two sons were there helping him as well. The father spoke fluent English and Spanish. The family had lived in

California for many years. Then the dad got a DUI and was deported. His family soon followed him and they live together in this border town. The father cannot cross but the mother takes the children across the border each day so that they will continue to attend school in the United States. They get up very early in the morning to make this two-hour trek each day and an hour returning at night. Most of the time is spent at the border, waiting to cross. The actual drive would be less than an hour. The family does this to give the children some continuity in their schooling experience. This particular family is somewhat privileged and can afford to drive the children back and forth each day. Many others cannot.

Some of these children are getting some help. These particular parents learned of a special program for students like their children who had learned to speak English in the States and had attended schools in the States. The program worked to bring awareness of the situation of bi-national students. It began at the school sites, bringing together students with similar experiences. Just learning they were not alone gave the students strength and encouragement.

This work will share information about this Bi-National Program that works on both sides of the border to develop more equitable learning situations for bi-national children and which is having success in helping students remain in school. The program involves university professors, public school teachers and parents. One important part of the work involves developing figures on the numbers of students involved in this situation. It appears to be a number that is growing daily.

The objective is to raise the level of awareness in society of children who are being forced to attend schools in more than one country and being forced to communicate in first one language and then another and discouraged from developing mastery in one or both languages. We need to make changes that will benefit the children who would make wonderful multilingual, multicultural resources, particularly along the border where there is so much need for their services.

I learned of the situation while working in Tijuana as a Rotary Ambassador with the Universidad Ibero Americana. My background in the United States was as a second language teacher in the public schools in New Mexico.

### **THE BORDER—LA LINEA—LA FRONTERA**

Morning walks on the beach Playas de Tijuana where you can touch the fence that separates two countries. On each side of the border, each government is hard at work, adding to this border area. The project on the Mexican side is about people and creating a bit of beauty. Break waters and board walks and picnic areas are being created and financed by the Mexican government. The work is done by simple workers on the Mexican side, much of the work is done by hand. There are lots of plants, art work, benches and tables for sitting. Looking across to the United States side, is a barren area, devoid of people and plants. It is used instead for large machinery to build roads used by a few vehicles. The very clear message is "KEEP OUT." The United States side has huge and seemingly endless piles of money to invest even though the economy is supposedly hurting. The work is massive, the fence and road built for the U.S. Border Patrol looks more expensive than the highway on the Mexican side that carries huge numbers of people each day to the largest border crossing in the world. On the United States side is an amazing road and fence that is almost untraveled. On the Mexico side a very busy highway in constant need of

repairs because of the huge numbers of vehicles using it each day. The traffic is almost constant while the other side sits quiet and ominous, almost a physical reminder of the power over those of us on the other side of the border.

### **TWO VISIONS—TWO CULTURES—TWO RESPONSES**

It is said that the wife of the President of Mexico is from Tijuana and it is also said that is why the work is being done on the wonderful new boardwalk in Playas de Tijuana. Great wire cages were constructed by hand and then filled with rock to build a wall of protection against the waves of the ocean. On top of this structure they poured concrete and placed the wooden boardwalk with lovely design elements and views of the ocean. For years people talked of the boardwalk project that was going to add so much to this very lovely though not well-taken care of beach area. Then it was said—through the rumor mill—that the money was gone and the project would not happen. And then one day the work began. It continues today. And most of the work is being done by large groups of laborers with minimal large equipment. It is bringing work to this area that has been badly hurt economically by the violence, by the tightening of the border and by the fear of terrorism, and by the media coverage of the area. While violence is certainly a problem in Tijuana, the rates of violence in Gary, Indiana, are similarly high (David Shirk, USD Border Institute, addressing *Estudios Fronterizos*, Universidad Ibero Americana, June 2009), though without all the attendant media attention.

### **WHAT IS A BORDER AND WHY?**

The Universidad Ibero Americana in Tijuana holds each year a course titled Estudios Fronterizos/Border Studies. The course is done in Spanish and English and looks at the border from a variety of different angles. One class deals with the money sent by private individuals to Mexico from the United States and the effect that money has had in the past and what is happening in conjunction with the difficult economic situation in the United States. Another class is a trip to visit the United States Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) offices and learn about their experience of the border. Another visit is with officials on the Mexican side. Another visit is to a bilingual school – bilingual Spanish and Nahuatl. Speakers discussed environmental concerns, abuse of women occurring on the Mexico/Guatemala border and health issues. But the overarching theme is “The Other” and in the case of the US/Mexico border, what happens when we have “The Other” so close to “Us.” How does this border define each of us? What does it mean to have such a porous border? Immigration is constructing us with a moral language-what does it mean to be constructed by someone else’s moral language? In the case of undocumented women, they are the most different possible and thus those most open to abuse from everyone else.

A border is a division; it is an opening to new ideas and possibilities; it can be excitement; it can be fear; it can be POLICE; it can be cultural exchanges and exchanges of new ideas; it can be new languages and new ideas; it can be an artificial division; it can be a political division; it can be a line drawn in the sand and it can change; it can be the edge of what is known; it can be challenges; it can be an end; it can be a beginning; it can be new stories; it can be old stories; it can be stereotypes and breaking of stereotypes, and finally it can be militarized.

A border may have some geographic markers; it is rarely made a clear and simple division; it is difficult to tell is someone is from here or there; the border is diverse along its length from “San

Diego/Tijuana to Brownsville; it is not permanent; it is diverse within the border region; it has amazing social complexity; tremendous mobility – 1,000,000 floating population enters each year; it is a central flashpoint for social and cultural conflict; it is far from the center regions; it suffers negative stereotypes; it is a concentration of authorities and thus of more violence.

### **BORDER PEDAGOGY**

The first Binational Border Pedagogy Conference took place May 18, 2002. At the invitation of the two founding universities—La Universidad Iberoamericana (UIA), Tijuana and California State university (CSU), San Marcos—the event gathered teachers, academicians, and education administrators from both sides of the border. Participants left as members of a binational family with a shared commitment to better understand both educational systems and forge alliances to benefit education along the US/Mexico border. From past years, there has been sufficient material developed to build curriculum, including a doctoral program in Border Pedagogy housed in the UIS, Mexicali campus, as well as research programs and a research center at the Tijuana campus. The conferences has begun a process of collaborative reflection and analysis, sharing information and striving for educational programs that reflect the reality and the needs of students and teachers along the US/Mexico border. It is necessary to continue this dialogue and build models that impact life and learning along this border. (ICET World Assembly Border Pedagogy Conference, San Diego, July 2007.)

One development of these conferences has been the creation of the Office of Binational Programs housed in Tijuana's education buildings. Yaro Amparo Lopez is the coordinator of the Program for Migrant Children. The project began on a small scale working with students who were born in Mexico, later schooled in the United States and then returned to Mexico. Typically these students were lost in terms of the academic Spanish required in the schools, they had no idea how the school systems functioned, their English experiences were not valued and they were often at risk for dropping out of the schools, a process similar to what occurs when students from Mexico move to the United States and move from Spanish to English. As Ms. Lopez worked with the schools in the area, she heard of more and more students in this new situation and the numbers continue to rise. As binational programs developed at the different schools, these new binational students began to meet others in their situation. The school began encouraging these meetings of students and began to work with them to continue their English development and to share their experiences. City-wide fun days are held regularly for the students and their families. Workshops are held for teachers to learn how to appreciate and value the resources these binational students bring. Programs and workshops for parents are also planned. And then, the project leaders will meet at the different school sites and facilitate program development with administrators who may be unaware of this student population, originally thought to be insignificant.

Thus, what began as a program to help students at risk of dropping out has turned into a project to build a new idea of binational students and the benefits they bring to themselves and the border area. These students who can move between two cultures are beginning to see a place for themselves. While they entered very angry at their parents for dragging them back and across borders, they begin to see the value of their experience and find positive ways of integrating into their new communities and schools.

## CONCLUSION

Looking more closely at the situation of students on the US/Mexico Border who are being shuffled from one country to another, generally because of heavy-handed immigration enforcement and difficult economic situations, reveals a complicated situation. This education situation is being affected by politics on both sides of the border. Only now is the situation being looked at from an education view and in terms of the positives rather than the negatives. New programs are developing and encouraging these children as a language and cultural resource. The goal of this work is to inform teachers and others in the hope of raising the possibilities of Bi-National Youth on both sides of the border. Currently, many Bi-National Children are being pushed out of our schools both in Mexico and the United States because of a variety of factors including provincial language policies, lack of information about the Bi-National situation, difficult economic considerations, anti-immigrant emotions and heavy-handed immigration enforcement. The hope is that with more awareness of the Bi-National Students, programs can be developed that will encourage them to stay in our schools as well as develop their bilingual and bicultural strengths.

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