Chapter 12
Crossing Borders toward Young Transnational Lives

G. Sue Kasun
Utah State University, USA

Cinthya M. Saavedra
Utah State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Young immigrant youth often live their lives across borders, either by physically crossing them for return visits and/or by metaphorically crossing them through social media and cultural identification. The authors argue these students are better understood as transnational, shifting the focus for educators away from imagining their immigrant students on a straight, one-way path to assimilation in the U.S. to understanding these youths' abilities to cross borders. Specifically, they call for a redesignation of English Language Learners (ELLs) as Transnational English Learners (TELs). Highlighting examples of educators' successful border-crossing work, the authors call for educators to cross borders as well in their curriculum and relationships with transnational youth.

INTRODUCTION

In a non-ESL, non-bilingual education 2nd grade urban classroom in Texas, I asked the students to raise their hands if they had been to Mexico in the previous year. Well over half of the students said they had.

"Wow, you're world travelers," I said to them. Many of their faces brightened at the notion which positioned them positively, as agents of movement.

Their otherwise kind, 3rd generation Mexican American teacher laughed dismissively and moved on with her lesson where I was a visitor. My heart sank (GSK).

In this chapter, we argue that immigrant youth are not only immigrants on a one-way journey toward the U.S., but that they are transnational (Sánchez & Kasun, 2012). Transnational youth may physically cross borders to sending countries, but they may also figuratively cross them through communication with families and communities as well as through the consumption of media, from social media to music to film (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Wolf, 2002). They are the children of families whose lives straddle borders in real time and in ways that connect past, present, and future through families' hopes, fears, and dreams (Appadurai, 2008). Herein, we outline a call for educators to reframe immigrant youth as transnational. We then offer suggestions for curriculum shifts, which acknowledge and draw from young immigrants' transnationalism in an age of globalization. We draw from ethnographic examples in our own research with youth and our own lived, transnational experiences spanning national borders. Finally, we make recommendations for educators to cross epistemological borders (Mignolo, 2000) in order to work more effectively in solidarity with their transnational young students and families.

Disrupting Western Discourses of Childhood: Opening Possibilities

Before explaining what we mean by reconsidering immigrant youth as transnationals, we first examine the idea of what it means to be a child. By disrupting often taken-for-granted discourses about childhood, this allows us to open a space toward reconceptualizing the sense of immigrants as well. Our ideas of childhood have varied and changed throughout history (Aries, 1962). In fact, scholars have argued how the very term has meant different things at different times historically, culturally and politically (James, Jenks & Prout; 1998; Zelizer, 1985). Modern conceptions of childhood reflect the ideas of our times through scientific research, culture, class, religion, law, and medicine, among others (Burman 1998; Cannella, 1997). For example, we apply the same beliefs about scientific research in the natural world as we do to human change and then we generalize the "findings" to be applicable to all children. Those who do not fit the model of human change are seen as less advanced. This belief is carried over to the schools (Kessler & Swadener, 1992). That is, the sanctioned way of relating to and seeing children via learning, teaching, assessing and caring for them has been constructed from one hegemonic view, giving us a unidimensional, monocultural and linear view of childhood. Yet as Gutiérrez (2008) has discussed, children "develop" in complex polycultural/lingual and multidimensional spaces and are impacted by, as well impact their ecological communities making human change a more dynamic bidirectional process. For instance, in her research in Alaska, Delpit (2006) offers a concrete example of how views of children differ drastically and how we then construct our relationship with them based on our beliefs. Non-Natives, Delpit recounts:

tend to think of children as unformed future adults. We hear about the birth of a child and ask questions like, 'What did she have?', 'How much did it weigh?', Does it have any hair?' The Athabaskan Indians hear of a birth and ask, 'Who came?' From the beginning there is a respect for the newborn as a full person (p. 100).

Our ideas, along with our narrow scientific research, have contributed inevitably to a false notion that a universal (white male) child exists (Cannella, 1997). Within this view, children are seen as incapable of understanding their world, acting upon it or transforming it, especially if those experiences or their worlds deviate from the white middle class standard. The experiences, perspectives outside this hegemony are too often deemed deficient and in constant need of (white) intervention.

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