The background image shows an outdoor school courtyard. In the center, there is a paved area where several people are playing basketball. To the left, a white metal fence surrounds a goalpost. In the background, there is a long, single-story building with a light blue facade and a red roofline. Large trees with green leaves are scattered throughout the courtyard, casting shadows on the ground. The sky is clear and blue.

# Systems and Idiosyncrasies: Barriers and Affordances to Educational Access and Success among Transnational Students in Oaxaca, Mexico

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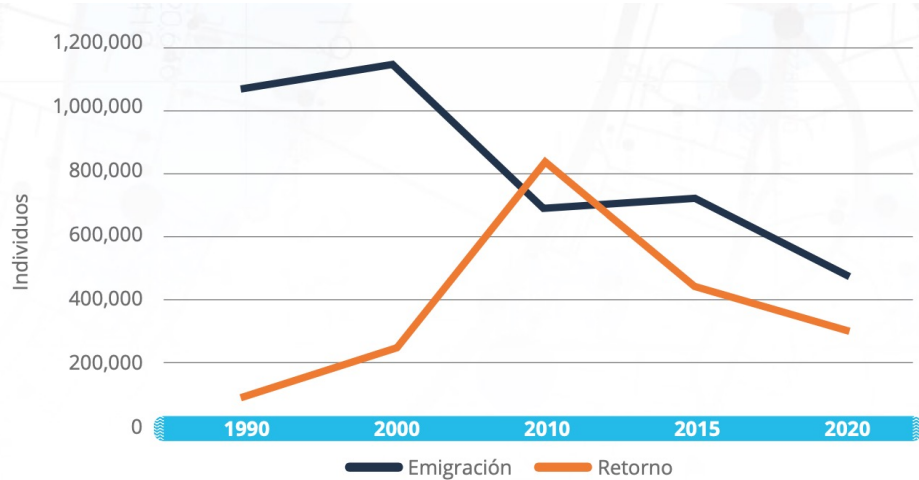
Colette Despagne , Benamérita Autonomous University of Puebla





## Context & Framing

# Return migration and transnational students



(Terán Páez, J., 2020)

- **Scale of return migration** is a relatively new phenomenon (Terán Páez, J., 2020).
  - **Primary causes:** Family reunification, economic need, deportation.
- **Distinct subgroups** of transnational students (Zúñiga & Vivas-Romero, 2014)
  - Citizenship and birth country
  - Forced v. voluntary (spectrum)
  - Age, #/freq of moves
  - Linguistic characteristics
- **~ 422,000 US born** students in ES & MS in 2014 (Jacóbo Suarez, 2017).

# Oaxacan Migration Context

- Largest destination for **Indigenous** return migration (35%) (UPMRIP, 2023)
- In 2022, **3rd highest state** for return migration.
- **Most linguistically diverse state** with 15 recognized language (families) and 34% Indigenous language speakers.
- Frequent return to **small, Indigenous communities**.





# Schooling Context for Arriving Students

- **Education – critical social policy**  
(Gluckman et al., 2022)
- **Language profiles** - Oral, literacy
- Complex other needs: **school culture, family separation, cultural adaptation**
- Compounded in **Indigenous communities**
- **Large bureaucratic and educational hurdles:** enrollment, adjustment, linguistic and curricular access, teacher preparation, progression (Hamann et al., 2010; Kleyn & Porter, 2021; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009)



# Legal & Institutional Framework

(Aguilar & Jacobo, 2019; Jacobo Suarez, 2017)

- **Centralized education** - national curriculum, teacher education
- **Federal law** - universal right to free schooling (ES, MS)
- Children of Mexican citizens eligible for **Mexican citizenship**
- National ID (**CURP**) is available to all Mexican residents
- 2014-2017 legal/policy shifts to **explicitly remove apostille & official translation**



# Theoretical framework

- **Street level bureaucrats (SLBs):** Impactful policy intermediaries (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977)
- **Global South:** Resource constraints, centralization / institutional weakness, social inequalities (Lotta et al., 2022)
  - Public service gaps (Hupe & Buffat, 2014)
- **SLBs in Global South:**
  - **Expanded role involving “improvisation”** (Campos & Peeters, 2022) in a “relational state” (Peake & Forsythe, 2021)
- **Principals as SLBs** (Oliveira et al, 2021; Taylor, 2007; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977b)



# Research Questions

- 1) How does the institutional context of policies related to transnational students shape the work of school administrators?
- 2) How do school administrators in select Indigenous communities in Oaxaca demonstrate agency in their work with transnational students and families?
- 3) What are the repercussions of institutional context and administrator agency in shaping the experiences and opportunities of transnational students?



# Data & Method





## Data

- Fieldwork in Valles Centrales, Oaxaca
- Dec-April 2023
- 7 schools (3 ES, 2 MS, 2 HS) in 3 communities
- Primary data: interviews and conceptual maps
- 60: students (12), parents (14), teachers (22), school administrators (6), and local and state education leaders/policy-makers (6)
- Focus here on **school administrators** (5 principals, 1 secretary)



# Analysis

- Theme identification
- Team coding
- Memoing
  - Foreach stakeholder
  - Joint analytic memos





# Findings

In progress





How does the institutional context of policies related to transnational students shape the work of school administrators?

## Enrollment

- Dysfunctional rules (Peeters & Campos, 2022) limit access to school.

Our constitution, in article three, mentions that education is for all, so we can't deny anyone an education. But it is conditioned, if you want to put it that way, because they need to sign a letter that they have to submit their official documentation in order to stay in school.  
- HS Principal

For example, it's always at the start [of the term]...because we work in a system, right?  
-HS principal





How does the institutional context of policies related to transnational students shape the work of school administrators?

## Instructional supports

- Policy void (Campos & Peeters, 2021) means there are no differentiated supports for teachers or students.

No, there is nothing.... It's up to us to help ourselves. No one else.  
- MS principal

## Material supports

- Public service gap (Hupe & Buffat, 2014) restricts access to critical resources and positions transnational students as inferior.

This is what the return migrant sees, and at times they ask, 'why not me?', and it's simply because he/she is not Mexican.  
- ES principal



How do school administrators in select Indigenous communities in Oaxaca demonstrate agency in their work with transnational students and families?

## Enrollment/completion

- Show policy improvisation (Campos & Peeters, 2023) to ensure access and opportunity.

With our CURP,...for them it's their last name, the first two letters of the first name – because they only have one last name – and the last [bit] they add a segment "x", and with that they make a code...and with that we identify them...and their certificate is given to them.

- MS Principal

I, on my own, look the school up on the internet and once I find them I go to the phone, call them, and luckily I think the teachers are bilingual, they speak, at least they understand Spanish, and so [I say] “please send me, please give me your email, and I will send you mine”, and this way we begin communicating.

- MS principal





How do school administrators in select Indigenous communities in Oaxaca demonstrate agency in their work with transnational students and families?

## Instructional supports

- Show policy improvisation (Campos & Peeters, 2023) to identify and provide appropriate instruction.
- Demonstrate alienative commitment (Campos & Peeters, 2023) as they pass off responsibility

‘Let’s see, write dog.’ And the child, well, he doesn’t know how to write dog. He doesn’t know how to write what we’ve enunciated “a dog ate a tamal” .... Officially, we submit his paperwork for 2nd grade, but internally, we put him in 1st.

- ES principal

For you to work with them, teacher, you must do it on your own.... We don’t have a pedagogical solution that lets us work with them.

- ES principal



The background image shows a school courtyard with large, leafy trees and a building in the distance. The scene is bright and sunny, with shadows cast on the ground.

How do school administrators in select Indigenous communities in Oaxaca demonstrate agency in their work with transnational students and families?

## Material supports

- Show policy improvisation (Campos & Peeters, 2023) to address inequalities and systemic discrimination.

Those Mexicans with a Mexican birth certificate have more benefits. Like uniforms. For example, a girl born there [U.S.]...we can't deny her. We have another boy who left [his uniform]. He left and didn't get it, so we gave it to her. We gave it to her. But it's true, the others have more benefits from the system.

- MS principal





# What are the repercussions of institutional context and administrator agency in shaping the experiences and opportunities of transnational students?

- Barriers to enrollment, especially for undocumented US citizens in Mexico and older transnational students
  - Unawarded credits, and long enrollment delays
  - Repeated elementary grades
  - Tenuous access esp to high school but also lower grades
- Positioning as inferior class of students within schools
  - Lack of financial support further jeopardized enrollment
- Psychological impacts of invisibility and lack of supports
- Complexity of Indigenous contexts
  - Language barriers
  - Network of support



Discussion



# Discussion

- Centralization paired with weak implementation influences mid-level systems, not just frontline workers
- Resource-level and community/geographic context associated with level of policy improvisation.
- Policy improvisation is rooted in both law and values but can backfire.
- Despite recent advancements, systematic barriers persist in the education of transnational students, barriers that are, at times, counteracted and at times reinforced through school administrator agency.

Yes, [the state] sends us the rules, but rules are different from the real world. When we see the child in the real world we leave rules to the side and we go with what is real.

- ES principal

Thank you CLLAS!

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