



**Transnational Messages: Experiences of Chinese and Mexican Immigrants in American Schools.** Carmina Brittain. The New Americans Series. Carola Suarez-Orozco and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, eds. New York: LBF Scholarly Publishing, 2002. 284 pp.

**LESLIE REESE**, *California State University, Long Beach*

*lreese@csulb.edu*

*Transnational Messages* provides a timely analysis of ways in which transnational social spaces are created and utilized by immigrant students in American schools. Using open-ended interviews with Mexican and Chinese students, Brittain focuses on the information, or messages, that students receive from conationals both in their home countries prior to immigration as well as in American schools after coming to the United States. These messages provide students with information that can serve as a resource, or in some cases as a limitation, as students navigate unfamiliar academic settings and expectations. One of the author's stated goals is to examine the ways in which the transnational experiences of immigrant students influence their participation in U.S. schools.

As Brittain concludes in her solid overview of transnationalism in chapter 1, although research has documented the existence of immigrant groups in American schools, the literature addressing the impact of transnational ties for immigrant children living in the United States is limited. In this volume, the extension of the transnational perspective to focus on children and schooling represents a necessary contribution to the field. Brittain builds on Portes's (1995) ideas of segmented assimilation, suggesting that transnational social spaces are formed by human collectivities consisting of individuals in the sending as well as in the receiving of community.

This study was carried out as part of the Longitudinal Immigration Student Adaptation study (LISA) directed by Drs. Carola and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco from the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. Brittain analyzed data on approximately one hundred-fifty Mexican and Chinese students between the ages of 12 and 17 who were part of the larger sample. Thus, access to the larger longitudinal database provided survey data to supplement and support the data from open-ended questions. Chapters 5 through 7 present students' prior, welcoming, and current messages from conationals, organized around the themes of academics, English, general, peers, school, teachers, and social messages. In each chapter and for each theme, the findings are summarized by national origin group and then compared.



In the area of social messages, particularly interesting findings include the communication of messages about peers in school that promoted and reinforced negative racial views of some groups in the United States. For example, some Chinese students cautioned their conational peers about how the "ghosts" were disruptive in class, and both groups counseled their friends about avoiding interaction with African American students. Both groups referred to media sources of perceptions prior to immigration, which reflected "the 'exportation of prejudice' that the U.S. media may be promoting once their productions reach international audiences" (p. 124). Thus, immigrant children were not only themselves targets of discrimination, but they continued to transmit to others negative perceptions of other ethnic and minority groups in the school. Brittain concludes, "these students participated in the reproduction of negative racial attitudes and stereotypes within transnational social space" (p. 241).

The author successfully achieves her goal of establishing that immigrant students do operate in transnational spaces and that messages from conationals can be of instrumental value to the students. However, some methodological issues pose limitations. It is not clear in the text how the sampling of schools and students was carried out; however, in the resulting sample close to 60 percent of the Mexican students are from the same low-income district in Northern California that is ranked in the top ten in the state on an index of violent crime, whereas a significant percentage of the Chinese sample is drawn from suburban schools in the Boston area, with few English-language learners and few students receiving free or reduced lunch. Differences in parental level of education between the two groups are great, with approximately ten percent of the Chinese sample made up of professionals (vs. 0 percent of the Mexican sample), whereas 40 percent of the Mexican sample (vs. approximately 16-17 percent of the Chinese sample) had only primary-level schooling. Notwithstanding the lack of comparability in the sample, the author often makes generalizations about messages based on presumed cultural differences between the two groups, such as greater emphasis on social issues rather than academics for Mexican children.

The author's persistent contrast of students by nation-of-origin risks prioritizing differences in presumed home-country cultural dispositions over factors such as social class or contextual features of school and community. Thus, although the role played by the school context in which conationals interact and provide information emerges as critical in the comparisons, the author resists following the lead of these emerging findings to examine similarities across national origin groups by gender, class, and by the types of school and community settings into which students are being assimilated. The study would have benefited from a more nuanced analysis of the interaction of



context and messages. Likewise, because of importance of school setting, the work would be strengthened by a more systematic and in-depth description of these settings, beyond some anecdotal experiences of the author in one of the school districts. At the same time, persistent use of the nation of origin or message theme analysis results in conclusions being drawn about "Chinese children" as compared to "Mexican children" based on very limited numbers of responses. Nonetheless, this work is a welcome extension of the transnational perspective to include issues of youth and schooling and provides insights for educators on the transnational spaces that help shape the experiences of many immigrant students in American schools.

## References Cited

Portes, Alejandro

1995 Segmented Assimilation among New Immigrant Youth: A Conceptual Framework. *In* California's Immigrant Children: Theory, Research, and Implications for Educational Policy. R. G. Rumbaut and W. A. Cornelius, eds. Pp. 71-76. San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California.

©2002 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the December 2002 issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (33:4). It is also indexed in the December 2002 issue (33:4).