



Exploring the Discourse of Children “Left Behind” By Migration

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Introduction

The Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice (CHRIJ) sponsors an interdisciplinary transnational project involving legal and social science researchers and practitioners who have traveled to Guatemala during the summers of 2007 through 2010. These trips are part of an ongoing project to collaborate with local communities in the U.S. and Guatemala to better understand and respond to experiences of transnational families, some of whose members have migrated to, been detained in, or deported from the U.S. The work discussed here focuses on the assumed beneficiaries of many of these migratory processes: children “left behind”.

Currently, there are no reliable counts for the number of children left behind when parents migrate overseas. From the countries that have collected data, it is known that 3-6 million children (10-20% of all children) have been left behind by Filipino parents working overseas (Bryant, 2005), and 1 million children (2-3% of all children) have been left behind by their parents in Indonesia (Cortes, 2007). In 2005, 218,000 girls and boys in Ecuador had been left behind by at least one parent who had migrated (UNICEF Ecuador, 2007) Although the exact number of Guatemalan children who have a parent living abroad is not known, it is known that nearly 700,000 Guatemalans in the U.S. in 2008 were foreign born, and nearly 70% of them arrived in 1990 or later (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010).

What we Know About Children Left Behind

Some sending countries have begun to study this population of children: Moldova, Albania, Sri Lanka, China, select Latin American countries. Research to date suggests:

Academic Consequences

- The findings are mixed, but generally - academic performance deteriorates (Moran-Taylor, 2008; Save the Children, 2006; Batistella & Conaco, 1998)
- Higher rates of school dropout for children left behind (Gianelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010)

Social and Emotional Consequences

- Living conditions improve, but youth become more vulnerable to drug abuse, promiscuous sexual behaviors, loneliness, insecurity, and sadness (Moran-Taylor, 2008; UNICEF, 2006)

Relationships with Caregivers & Migrant Parents

- Relationships between youth and migrant parent becomes colder with time (UNICEF, 2006)
- Emotional gap develops between migrant fathers and children (Salazar Parreñas, 2005)
- Feelings of abandonment experienced by youth in mother-away families (Salazar Parreñas, 2005)
- Children and adolescents defer to caretaker rather than parent's authority, resent parent's absence (Dreby, 2007; Schmalzbauer, 2004)

Methods

Study 1: Detained Screening & Discussion

We were invited by a teachers in Zacualpa to share information on the U.S. with youth who attended the school. The workshop began with a screening of Jenny Alexander's *Detained*, a documentary on the 2007 ICE raid of the Bianco Factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Youth were 12-15 years old. There were four workshops with approximately 200 youth in attendance at each.

Questions before the film screening to assess general knowledge of issues included:

- Who knows someone who has migrated to the United States?
- Who knows someone who has been deported?

Questions asked after the film screening included:

- What changes have you noticed in your communities since people started migrating to the United States?
- What do you know about the United States?

Data was recorded and transcribed by two PDHRP team members in the fall of 2010. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes.

Study 2: Invented Stories

Members of the PDHRP team were invited by teachers in Zacualpa to run workshops for students who had family members in the United States. Youths aged 13 and 14 (N=33) were asked to generate stories using a technique by Gianni Rodari (2006). The thematic focus they were given by facilitators was “feelings about having family members in the U.S.” The stories were transcribed by a PDHRP team member.

Findings: Study 1

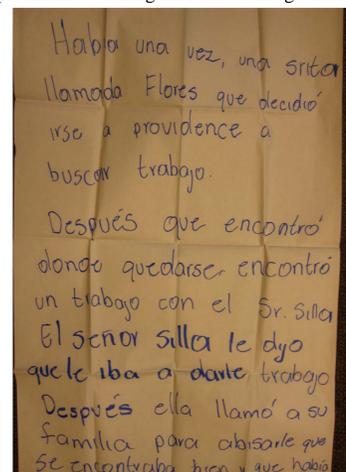
The youth in these workshops received information about the U.S. from many sources, including phone calls with family members who had migrated, television, radio, conversations with family members or friends who had returned to Guatemala from the United States. Overall, youth expressed great interest in going to the United States, despite their knowledge about racism towards immigrants.

Major themes in the youths' responses:

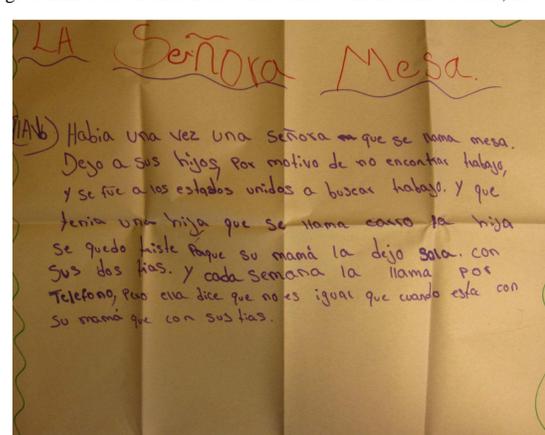
- Awareness that immigrants' rights are being violated:** “Están violando los derechos, les trataron como perro.” (They are violating their rights, they treat them like dogs.)
- Belief that America is discriminatory toward immigrants:** “Por ejemplo, Guatemaltecos que van para allá y buscan trabajo en una fábrica, y también los que están nacionalizados les dan más a ellos, en cambio los Guatemaltecos los explotan y trabajan demasiado y les pagan poco. Así es la vida allá.” (For example, Guatemalans go there and look for work in a factory, and they give more work to those who are nationalized, and in exchange they exploit the Guatemalans and they work too much and are paid too little. That's how life is there.)
- Difficulty of the journey to the U.S. and life as an immigrant there:** “Que uno no puede salir, siempre tiene miedo... porque a veces llega la migra y la policía.” (One cannot leave, he always is afraid... because sometimes Migration and the police arrive.)
- Threat of deportation:** “Las personas de aquí hacen un esfuerzo grande en los Estados Unidos pero La Inmigración los detienen y los regresan a sus países. Las personas que van allá quieren superarse pero el gobierno no quiere que los latinoamericanos estén allá.” (People from here make a great effort in the U.S., but Immigration detains them and returns them to their countries. People that go there want to overcome, but the government does not want Latin Americans there.)
- People migrate for economic reasons, and they are honest people who work hard to make a living:** “Criminales no son, porque ellos van a buscar una mejor vida para sus familiares.” (They are not criminals, because they go to search for a better life for their family members.)

Findings: Study 2

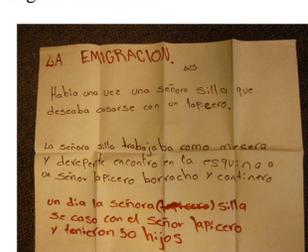
The invented stories were translated into English from Spanish, which is a second language for most of the children whose first language is K'iche'. The stories revealed that youth miss their mothers, and communication is helpful, but cannot emotionally replace a parent who has migrated. Furthermore, it is clear that youth are receiving the message that their parents are working hard and making sacrifices to give them a better life. Below are some of the invented stories, as well as their English translations.



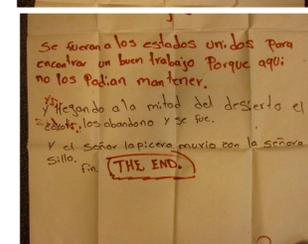
There once was a woman named Flowers who decided to go to Providence to look for work. After she found where she would stay she found a job with a Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair told her that he could give her a job. After she called her family to tell them that she was well and she had found a humble job. Her daughters became happy. After some years she got her papers and one by one brought her daughters. They were happy to see her again, they cried of happiness.



There once was a woman that they called table. She left her children because she couldn't find a job. She had a daughter that she called “car.” The daughter was sad because her mother left her alone with her two aunts. And every week her mother called her on the telephone, but she said that it is not the same when she is with her mom as when she is with her aunts.



There once was a Mrs. Chair that wanted to get married to a pen. Mrs. Chair worked as a waitress and suddenly found on the corner Mr. Pen, a drunk barman. One day Mrs. Chair married Mr. Pen and they had 50 children. They went to the United States to find a good job because they couldn't maintain themselves here. And arriving in the middle of the desert, the coyote abandoned them and left. And Mr. Pen died with Mrs. Chair. The End.



Summary of Findings

- Existing research suggests youth “left behind,” especially by parents, face negative academic consequences, negative social and emotional consequences and negative changes in their relationships with their parents, including the often complicated task of dealing with biological parents (who have migrated) and caregivers.
- The literature glosses over the child's emotional experience while emphasizing the parent's sacrifice.
- The invented stories demonstrate that communication is helpful but cannot emotionally replace a parent who has migrated. Children are receiving the message that their parents in the U.S. are making sacrifices on their behalf.
- Guatemalan youth have a lot of information about the United States and the suffering and sacrifices of their family members here
- Youth receive mixed messages about migration from the church and their teachers
- Youth are aware of the challenges of being a migrant and life in the U.S, but the vast majority in this community still overwhelmingly want to go; some who want to go seem to be “following a dream”, many others to find work
- The small number who talk about staying in Guatemala focus on their studies and becoming gainfully employed

Acknowledgments

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