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SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

Educare alle frontiere.
Saperi, Pratiche e Memorie dai “Margini”

HIGHER EDUCATION AND MEXICAN MIGRATION: UNIVERSITIES AS AGENTS OF INCLUSION AND EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION*

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This article examines the key role universities play in shaping the educational frontiers shaped by Mexican immigration. As institutions at the crossroads of cultural diversity and academic research, universities are uniquely positioned to take on the challenge of redefining and redrawing the boundaries that, all too often, lead to the marginalisation of immigrant students. Through teaching methods grounded in critical pedagogy and culturally responsive learning, universities can create inclusive educational environments that value students' cultural identities. It illustrates the concept of counterstories and how immigrant stories in the curriculum can facilitate dialogue. The challenges universities face within the system present opportunities to change and advocate for equity and social justice, as well as other improvements. This work advocates a fresh push for inclusivity, positioning universities as agents of change capable of breaking down educational barriers and building new ways of citizenship and belonging in a more connected world.

Il contributo analizza il ruolo delle università nel ridefinire le frontiere educative generate dai processi migratori messicani. In quanto luoghi privilegiati di incontro tra diversità culturale, produzione di conoscenza e innovazione pedagogica, le istituzioni universitarie sono chiamate a contrastare i meccanismi di esclusione che spesso riguardano gli studenti con un background migratorio. Attraverso il riferimento alla pedagogia critica e agli approcci culturalmente responsivi, l'articolo evidenzia come le università possano promuovere ambienti di apprendimento inclusivi, capaci di valorizzare le identità culturali degli studenti e di favorire il senso di appartenenza. Particolare attenzione è dedicata al valore delle narrazioni migranti e delle contro-narrazioni (*counterstories*) come strumenti pedagogici in grado di sostenere il dialogo interculturale, la partecipazione e il riconoscimento reciproco. Le sfide poste dai fenomeni migratori vengono interpretate come opportunità per ripensare le pratiche educative e rafforzare l'impegno delle università verso l'equità, la giustizia sociale e la cittadinanza inclusiva. Il contributo propone, infine, una riflessione sul potenziale trasformativo dell'istruzione superiore nel promuovere nuove forme di appartenenza e di coesione sociale in contesti caratterizzati da una crescente interdipendenza globale.

Keywords: Mexican immigration, inclusive education, transformative pedagogy, universities, intercultural citizenship.

Parole chiave: migrazione messicana, educazione inclusive, pedagogia trasformativa, università, cittadinanza interculturale.

Introduction

Mexican migration represents one of the most significant contemporary migration phenomena, shaped by intertwined social, economic, and cultural factors. While migration has long been associated with the search for improved living conditions and educational opportunities, it also produces profound transformations in both countries of origin and destination, particularly within higher education systems. In the specific context of migration between Mexico and the United States, universities increasingly find themselves responding to the educational, cultural, and social challenges associated with increasingly diverse student populations. Previous studies have highlighted the potential of universities to act as transformative institutions capable of addressing educational inequalities that have historically contributed to the exclusion of students with migrant backgrounds¹.

The term “educational boundaries” refers not only to geographical boundaries, but also to a host of social, cultural, economic and system-based obstacles which prevent underprivileged as well as migrant students from entering higher education. Breaking down these boundaries clearly goes beyond how inclusion is traditionally taught and practised. As argued by Cervantes-Soon and Carrillo (2016), universities face a critical choice: they may either reproduce mechanisms of exclusion and alienation or actively

* The article is the result of a shared scientific reflection by all the authors. Specifically, Antonio Ragusa contributed to the conceptual framework, the overall scientific supervision of the manuscript, and the revision of the final version. Vincenzo Galatro coordinated the development of the manuscript, contributed to the literature analysis and drafting process, and was responsible for the final editing and correspondence with the journal. Iker Omar Belsaguy contributed to the analysis of the Mexican context and to the discussion of migration dynamics. For attribution purposes, the sections may be assigned as follows: Antonio Ragusa Introduction and Conclusions; Iker Omar Belsaguy: Sections 1 and 2; Vincenzo Galatro: Sections 3, 4, 5 and final revision of the manuscript.

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¹ M. Baas (2019), *The education-migration industry: International students, migration policy and the question of skills*, in «International Migration», vol. 57, n. 3, pp. 222-234; C.P. Finatto - A.R. Aguiar Dutra - C. Gomes da Silva - N.A. Nunes - J.B.S.O.D.A. Guerra (2023), *The role of universities in the inclusion of refugees in higher education and society from the perspective of the SDGs*, in «International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education», vol. 24, n. 3, pp. 742-761.

engage with diversity by creating educational pathways that recognise students' different cultural and social experiences².

Against this background, this paper examines the role of universities as transformative spaces that foster the inclusion of Mexican migrant students in higher education. Drawing upon the existing literature, the article develops a theoretical and pedagogical reflection rather than presenting empirical findings.

Although the analysis is grounded in the Mexican migration experience, particularly within the U.S.-Mexico migratory context, the proposed pedagogical reflections may also offer insights into broader discussions of inclusive higher education in increasingly multicultural societies. The paper argues that universities can promote more equitable educational environments by recognising the multiple identities and lived experiences of migrant students and adopting inclusive curricula alongside culturally responsive pedagogies that validate students' cultural backgrounds. Such approaches help strengthen students' sense of belonging and improve their educational outcomes³. At the same time, they reaffirm the principles of critical pedagogy by encouraging dialogue, critical reflection, and educational practices oriented towards equity and social justice⁴.

Particular attention is devoted to female migrant students because gender intersects with migration status, socioeconomic vulnerability, and educational participation, generating specific educational challenges within higher education. As migration patterns evolve, the proportion of women pursuing higher education across borders continues to increase, reflecting a broader global trend in which women are increasingly recognised not only as economic actors but also as key decision-makers within their families⁵. Understanding the specific experiences of female migrant students enables universities to design more effective institutional support systems that foster academic success, social integration, and personal development.

This article argues that universities should be understood not merely as educational institutions but also as social agencies capable of fostering inclusion, belonging, and active citizenship. By removing structural barriers and adopting culturally responsive pedagogies, higher education institutions can create more inclusive academic communities while supporting the educational trajectories of Mexican female migrant students.

² C.G. Cervantes-Soon - J.F. Carrillo (2016), *Toward a pedagogy of border thinking: Building on Latin@ students' subaltern knowledge*, in «The High School Journal», vol. 99, n. 4, pp. 282-301.

³ M.E. Franquiz - M. del Carmen Salazar (2004), *The transformative potential of humanising pedagogy: Addressing the diverse needs of Chicano/Mexicano students*, in «The High School Journal», vol. 87, n. 4, pp. 36-53; S. Vossoughi - K.D. Gutiérrez (2016), *Critical pedagogy and sociocultural theory*, in *Power and Privilege in the Learning Sciences*, Routledge, New York, pp. 157-179.

⁴ C. Madge - P. Raghuram - P. Noxolo (2009), *Engaged pedagogy and responsibility: A postcolonial analysis of international students*, in «Geoforum», vol. 40, n. 1, pp. 34-45; O. Swartz - L.W. McGuffey (2018), *Migrating pedagogy in American universities: Cultivating moral imagination and social justice*, in «Communication Education», vol. 67, n. 1, pp. 102-109.

⁵ M. McAuliffe - L.A. Oucho (a cura di) (2024), *World Migration Report 2024*, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Geneva.

1. Mexican Migration and Its Impact on Education

The International Organisation for Migration has evaluated the US-Mexico border as the world's deadliest overland migration route. Since 2014, a total of 5,405 individuals have been registered as dead or missing along this border, a figure that underlines the dimensions of the humanitarian crisis that transit migrants continue to face⁶.

These figures illustrate the persistence of a humanitarian crisis despite decades of border control measures, public awareness campaigns, and humanitarian interventions aimed at protecting migrants. Unfortunately, crises like these are fuelled by norms and structural obstacles, as well as the genuine dangers posed by border control methods that tend to prioritise deterrence over humanitarian concerns⁷.

Mexican migration has seen shifts in recent years, especially in the demographics of female migrants. In the past, most migrants from Mexico to the United States were men; however, new data indicate that this trend is slowly changing, with an increasing number of women now joining these migration groups.

This trend reflects broader transformations in international migration, with women increasingly participating in labour markets and assuming more active decision-making roles within their households.

A special focus will be placed on the reasons, challenges, and opportunities for college students moving abroad to study. These demographic transformations are not only reshaping migration patterns but are also redefining the mission of higher education institutions. As the number of Mexican students with migrant backgrounds increases, universities are increasingly required to develop educational responses capable of addressing cultural diversity, educational inequalities, and students' multiple identities.

2. Mexican Female University Students

The life stories of Mexican female university students who migrate to the United States to attend college constitute a crucial domain within the broader field of migration. These female learners arrive in the host country with ambitions for scholastic success and career advancement; They encounter multiple educational, social, and institutional challenges that differ from those experienced by their male counterparts.

Gender and migration intersect in the lives of these women, highlighting the complexity of their ordeal as they battle not only the academic rigour imposed by the world but also societal expectations and cultural norms, and, at times, the shadow of their

⁶ International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2024), *Missing Migrants Project: Mexico–United States Border*, International Organisation for Migration, Geneva.

⁷ C.B. López (2016), *Lessons from the educational borderlands: Documenting the pedagogies of migration of Chicana/o, Latina/o undocumented immigrant students and households*, in «Association of Mexican American Educators Journal», vol. 10, n. 1; C. Mendoza - B. Staniscia - A. Ortiz (2020), «Knowledge migrants» or «economic migrants»? Patterns of academic mobility and migration from Southern Europe to Mexico, in «Population, Space and Place», vol. 26, n. 2, art. e2282.

immigration status. The share of female labour emigrants in Mexico was 25% in 2000, rising to 33% by 2020⁸.

Female migrants face unique obstacles that may hinder their path to academic achievement. Cultural expectations, financial constraints, and limited institutional support often lead female migrants to prioritise household responsibilities over educational opportunities. According to Pessar and Mahler (2003), when women decide to move to a new place, they must navigate social structures that significantly affect their schooling experience⁹. Additionally, being part of groups in the US allows these women to engage with academic circles¹⁰.

Despite these challenges, female migrant students demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency, leading efforts to positively change society within academic settings. It is their narratives that form a fundamental basis for a deep comprehension of migration and education due to emerging gender ideologies impeding the process and bringing about gendered roles while ushering in diversity in the academic landscape. The curricula bring experiences to the forefront, thereby breaking the silence on gender and migration, enabling universities to assume a transformative role in the lives of such students¹¹.

This is achieved through the adoption of culturally responsive teaching methodologies, strong counselling and support services, and inclusive environments that embrace diversity. By removing the structural barriers that hinder women's educational advancement, universities can actively promote equity, inclusion, and academic success.

3. Economic Conditions and Access to Higher Education

Mexican migration also presents significant economic implications for both migrants and their countries of origin. Recent data indicate the presence of Mexican immigrants across various sectors of the American workforce, such as agriculture, construction, and other industries.

⁸ M. Cerrutti - D.S. Massey (2001), *On the auspices of female migration from Mexico to the United States*, in «Demography», vol. 38, n. 2, pp. 187-200; S.R. Curran - E. Rivero-Fuentes (2003), *Engendering migrant networks: The case of Mexican migration*, in «Demography», vol. 40, n. 2, pp. 289-307.

⁹ P.R. Pessar - S.J. Mahler (2003), *Transnational migration: Bringing gender in*, in «International Migration Review», vol. 37, n. 3, pp. 812-846.

¹⁰ J. Waters - R. Brooks (2021), *Student migrants and contemporary educational mobilities*, in *Student Migrants and Contemporary Educational Mobilities*, Springer International Publishing, Cham, pp. 1-19.

¹¹ K. Nairn (2005), *The problems of utilising direct experience geography education*, in «Journal of Geography in Higher Education», vol. 29, n. 2, pp. 293-309; A.L. Riitaoja - A. Virtanen - N. Reiman - T. Lehtonen - M. Yli-Jokipii - T. Udd - L. Peniche-Ferreira (2022), *Migrants at the university doorstep: How we unfairly deny access and what we could (should) do now*, in «Apples - Journal of Applied Language Studies», vol. 16, n. 2, pp. 121-145.

Remittances exceeded USD 40 billion in 2023, directly supporting millions of households in Mexico¹². In most cases, women immigrants find it more challenging to secure a place in the labour market because of the pre-employment labour market discrimination against them, relatively low wages for them, and the low incidence of available jobs corresponding to their qualifications. Such economic inequity is compounded by labour immigration policies that, in most instances, leave out these women and families who want to advance their economic status.

The above inequalities can be reduced by actively engaging the government to support female migrants. Factors of success at work and in society at large for females can inform policy on equitable access to employment and education. Such approaches can involve an investment in programs that empower female migrants. Such programs can take the form of skills training, language acquisition, and general mentorship for women. These economic inequalities directly influence access to higher education. Financial insecurity, unstable employment, and family responsibilities often limit female migrants' educational opportunities, increasing the risk of interrupted academic pathways and reducing participation in university life¹³.

The reasons for migration from Mexico are similar to those seen in Europe and around the world. When factors such as job prospects and family reunions come into play, migrants' diverse experiences are significantly influenced by policies and societal beliefs. While Europe has typically had more formalised immigrant support systems that better support integration and reduce educational and economic barriers, the United States has typically emphasised enforcement and deterrence, increasing the vulnerabilities migrants face.

By creating an environment that values diversity and empowers female students, universities can play a significant role in reshaping the migration narrative and broadening the outlook for future generations of migrants.

4. Universities as Spaces of Educational Inclusion

One of the most vital contributions that universities can make in the context of Mexican immigration is to bridge local knowledge and academic practices. This is important because culturally relevant pedagogy can substantially enhance the educational experiences of immigrant students. Local traditions, cultural practices, and experiences of immigrant populations living around university spaces should be integrated into the curriculum, creating an environment in which students' identities are validated and academic success is fostered. To achieve this objective, universities should recognise and value the diverse cultural backgrounds that students bring into higher education. To truly grasp this approach, educators and staff members alike must engage in training to

¹² World Bank (2023), *Remittances Remain Resilient, but Growth Slows. Migration and Development Brief*, World Bank, Washington, DC.

¹³ S.S. Amsler - J.E. Canaan (2008), *Whither critical pedagogy in the neo-liberal university today? Two UK practitioners' reflections on constraints and possibilities*, in «Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences», vol. 1, n. 2, pp. 1-31.

properly recognise and value the varied, sometimes contrasting backgrounds that immigrant students bring to the educational setting. The cultural teaching strategies provide an account of diverse personal backgrounds, which can create space for immigrants to connect their narratives to the academic content being delivered¹⁴. Universities can translate these principles into concrete institutional practices through structured mentoring programmes for migrant students, faculty development initiatives on culturally responsive teaching, interdisciplinary seminars addressing migration and diversity, peer-support networks, academic advising services, and extracurricular activities designed to foster intercultural dialogue. Such initiatives strengthen students' sense of belonging while simultaneously enhancing institutional inclusiveness and educational equity. Integrating local knowledge into university curricula should not be regarded as a supplementary activity but as an essential component of inclusive teaching and learning. This is the view encouraged in critical pedagogy, which holds that the actual word is praxis. Students should be encouraged to share their local knowledge and practical life experiences so that, through collaborative dialogue, a learning environment is co-created in which every voice is respected and considered¹⁵. This will enrich the educational discourse on immigrants by fostering their intellectual engagement in the process. By incorporating the voices of immigrants into research, universities can articulate and clarify the issues of migration and its effects, leading to better-informed and more humane responses to these pressing issues¹⁶.

5. Transformative Pedagogies in Higher Education

Transformative pedagogies offer powerful opportunities to engage migrant students, particularly those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. From the perspective of Mexican migrants, these pedagogies should be grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy, which emphasise teaching dialogue, reflection, and social justice in education. With this, universities will be able to make immigrant students not only learners but also advocates who can push for social change by developing the students' ability to critically evaluate experiences through meaningful discourse. Central to transformative teaching is incorporating students' lived experiences into the curriculum. Jiménez (2022) emphasises that narratives of resilience and agency often emerge in the stories

¹⁴ J. Hannah (2008), *The role of education and training in the empowerment and inclusion of migrants and refugees*, in *Comparative and Global Pedagogies: Equity, Access and Democracy in Education*, Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht, pp. 33-48.

¹⁵ B. Bönisch-Brednich (2016), *Migrants on Campus: Becoming a Local Foreign Academic*, in *Local Lives*, Routledge, London-New York, pp. 181-196.

¹⁶ D. Borozan - I.B. Bojanic (2015), *Migration motives of university students: An empirical research*, in «International Migration», vol. 53, n. 1, pp. 66-82.

of immigrant students, making these counter-stories powerful pedagogical tools¹⁷. Integrating these narratives into university curricula encourages students to critically reflect on identity, belonging, and social participation. Additionally, the use of group-work study strategies significantly enhances the learning experiences of immigrant students. Moreover, group projects and the opening up of peer learning facilitate drawing on diverse backgrounds to solve real-world problems. These initiatives foster student engagement by providing opportunities for students to share perspectives, collaborate, and build a stronger sense of community.

Transformative pedagogies must involve changes in the institution's praxis and in faculty training. Professional development programs on cultural responsiveness and inclusive teaching strategies can help teachers make lessons take root in classrooms that respect and value diversity. This training should emphasise understanding students' socio-cultural backgrounds and providing them with equivalent learning opportunities. In addition to the pedagogical change, a critical self-appraisal of universities' assessment methods is warranted.

The traditional assessment may not bring out the best in immigrant students with their varied backgrounds; it may perpetuate lagging academic performance among certain groups. The use of alternative assessment strategies that emphasise student development and comprehension, such as portfolio assessment, reflective essays, and projects, can help create a more inclusive system for considering the different ways students demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Colleges can provide opportunities for students to engage with their communities through projects that combine learning with practical work and align with their academic studies. By linking what they learn to how they help, they gain real-world practice while doing something good for their neighbourhoods. This not only enhances their education but also gives them a sense of having a voice and a role, enabling them to effect changes at home and around the world.

In this perspective, universities operate not only as educational institutions but also as social agencies capable of supporting students' academic success, social integration, psychological wellbeing, and active citizenship.

The internet and online applications can easily support student cooperation and interaction across barriers of background and culture. Through technology, colleges can offer flexible learning environments designed to meet the needs of immigrant students and use methods that transform teaching to better engage immigrant students, especially those from Mexico.

6. Universities Supporting Female Migrant Students

The ongoing phenomenon of Mexican migration presents universities with a critical opportunity to address the unique needs of female migrants, particularly those seeking

¹⁷ R. M. Jiménez (2022), *Migration counterstories: Pedagogies of possibilities*, in *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Colour and Indigenous Teachers*, Routledge, New York.

higher education. As these women pursue their academic goals, they face challenges that affect multiple aspects of their lives. A key priority for higher education institutions is to create supportive environments that recognise the specific needs of female migrant students.

These challenges result from greater cultural expectations and family and financial obligations placed more heavily on women. In addition to helping them perform better academically, such programs help them feel more at home at host institutions and become involved in communities that appreciate the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences. Such support should include mentoring, academic guidance, counselling services, and targeted financial assistance designed to facilitate educational success. Next, therefore, it needs to validate the experiences of female migrants by promoting culturally responsive curricula. The narratives and experiences of these women should be integrated into the curriculum, thereby providing more opportunities for them to feel represented within their studies. Pedagogical practices that entail the participation of varied voices would help break the separation and alienation obstacles that face many immigrant students.

This falls within the ambit of critical pedagogy, which fosters a learning environment that encourages discussion, reflection, and consideration of social justice, creating a setting in which female migrants feel welcome to participate meaningfully in their learning.

Universities can engage in advocacy collaborations to inform policy changes that support female migrants both within academic settings and beyond. The university community can spearhead awareness among other local communities to address systemic institutional practices that thwart the academic and social success of female migrants. In addition, this awareness can lead to more proactive and, ultimately, more effective immigration policies regarding resource provision and general awareness of the issues affecting the population.

Studies highlight challenges in balancing academic responsibilities with family demands, as well as obstacles to their educational advancement. These specific problems require not only institutional resources but also a change in the culture of learning spaces that consciously welcome and appreciate the contributions of female migrants. Additionally, females who move to study and later prove capable of transforming their societies should also be considered.

During their studies, many of these women later emerge as advocates for social justice and equity, whether within their families or communities. Nurturing this advocacy, which takes many forms, will create a trickle-down effect and sustain more generations willing to take on the same pursuits.

Beyond providing academic support, universities should adopt comprehensive institutional strategies that integrate mentoring, counselling, financial assistance, career guidance, and community engagement. Such an integrated approach enables female migrant students not only to access higher education but also to participate fully in university life and contribute actively to their communities.

Conclusion

This study highlights the strategic role of universities in promoting educational inclusion among Mexican migrant students. As places of knowledge creation and dissemination, universities have the potential to shift the semantics of boundaries and foster an inviting scholarly environment in which students, including immigrant students, feel invigorated.

By embracing pedagogies that foster change and supporting just teaching methods, the university will help remove barriers to accessing education. In the future, as the need for heightened vigilance in promoting inclusivity and equity grows, further research will be necessary to test the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches to engaging immigrant students.

To fully embrace the policies that welcome immigrant students into higher education and ensure their academic success, the right policies need to be developed, which will also be equally valuable in fostering equity in the educational landscape. By embracing cultural diversity as an educational resource rather than a challenge, universities can help build more inclusive forms of citizenship, belonging, and social justice in increasingly multicultural societies.

Ultimately, the experience of Mexican migration demonstrates that higher education institutions are not merely places where diversity is accommodated but spaces where more inclusive forms of citizenship, belonging, and social justice can be actively constructed. Although this analysis focuses on the U.S.-Mexico context, the pedagogical principles discussed may inform inclusive policies and practices across different higher education systems facing increasing cultural diversity. Although higher education systems differ in governance, institutional structures, and national policies, the pedagogical principles discussed in this article remain adaptable across university contexts characterised by increasing cultural diversity.

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