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Where Should My Child Go to School?

Parent and Child Considerations in Binational Families

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Many chapters in this volume are dedicated to inquiry about the extant reality that many parents around the world now parent their minor (i.e., under age 18) children from afar, but the tack of this chapter is a little different. We ask whether parents *should* parent from afar. We don’t pose that as a question about ideals—what would be best if parents had economic security and unambiguous legal residential status—but rather as a more pragmatic one. Given some parents’ and children’s limited agency in real-world circumstances, what is their best path forward?

Answers to this kind of question vary by context—different children and different parents negotiate different hazards and opportunity horizons—and there is not a “one size fits all” best answer. Furthermore, many parenting decisions are necessarily speculative: “I am doing this now because I hope or anticipate that it will help my child in the future, but I can’t know for sure that it will,” or “We are selecting to do this because of a prospective hazard that may or may not ever come to pass but that we need to be ready for.” So “best answers,” even if they are sometimes clear in hindsight, cannot be fully determined in situ. Parenting decisions happen in a messy real world with intriguing possibilities and harrowing pitfalls and dangers.

The three examples presented here come from an ongoing, multiyear, mixed-method study of students in Mexican schools with prior experience in US schools. We have written extensively about that inquiry elsewhere in both English and Spanish (e.g., Hamann, 2001; Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011; Hamann, Zúñiga, & Sánchez García, 2006; 2017; Sánchez García & Hamann, 2016; Zúñiga & Hamann, 2009; Zúñiga, Hamann, & Sánchez García, 2008), but the focus here is a bit different from our other work. Here, we look at the decisions faced by parents (who were not the primary focus of the larger inquiry) rather than children's and teachers' school experiences.

For the larger study, we visited 805 Mexican schools from a stratified sample in four Mexican states, with the stratification being to assure that we had sufficient representation of the range of participation, *municipio* by *municipio* (county by county), in international migration. (Among other things, this strategy showed that schools in areas with higher migration participation in turn enrolled more students with prior experience in the United States.) In those 805 schools, all visited between 2004 and 2011, we surveyed just over 56,000 students and from those surveys identified 1,322 with prior experience in the United States. More recently, in an ongoing inquiry, a fifth Mexican state (Morelos) used our survey to conduct a census of all its *primarias* (elementary schools) and *secundarias* (grades 7–9) to identify students with prior experience in the United States. In both phases of this study, we sometimes followed-up our surveys with return, in-person visits to the surveyed schools. During these visits, we interviewed students, teachers, administrators, and, less frequently, parents.

Our long-term inquiry has yielded a number of significant findings and illuminated some changing patterns over its nearly two-decade span. Several of these are important to keep in mind. It is worth emphasizing that the migration between Mexico and the United States, the largest between any two countries in the world (United Nations, 2016), includes children (Súarez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2002). This was not always the case (at least not in large number) as the Bracero program, for example, which ran from 1942 to 1964, primarily recruited male workers to come temporarily to the United States to engage in agricultural work but then return to Mexico (Cohen, 2011). But more recently, with the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) passed during the Reagan Administration allowing more than 2 million Mexican-born migrants to seek permanent residency and citizenship and then to petition for citizenship rights for family members, that pattern began to change; families could reassemble in a single location in the United States. While this new pattern was triggered in part by IRCA's amnesty, the new migration to the United States was not only of Mexicans with documentation to stay in the United States. Often families reunited with some members "legal" and others awaiting the regularization of their status. Still others came without an easy prospect for gaining documentation but pushed

by economic changes in the Mexican countryside and pulled by the prospect of social connections to someone with residency rights.

We remember the poignant case in the late 1990s of a student in an Atlanta-area adult English as Second Language (ESL) class (where Hamann volunteered) who needed to miss 2 weeks of classes to return to rural Mexico with the tiny body of a stillborn baby. The baby was from an undocumented couple who were from the same village as the ESL student. The ESL student (a married father in his late 40s) could return to Mexico because, having begun his migration to the United States earlier than the couple, he had gained permanent residency through IRCA and thus could legally cross and recross the border. We recount this story here because it illuminates both how knowing someone with documentation status was a key form of social capital for the sad couple and also how social ties originating in Mexico facilitated the large-scale migration from Mexico to the United States that occurred particularly after Mexico's peso devaluation in 1982, accelerated with IRCA, and then began to stall with the heightened Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) that characterized the second term of President George W. Bush (Hamann & Reeves, 2012), continued under President Obama, and was exacerbated by the onset of the Great Recession in 2008.

From the 1980s through most of the first decade of the new century, the major migration between the United States and Mexico was South to North (from Mexico to the United States), although even at its height it was not exclusively unidirectional, as our discovery of transnationally experienced students in the schools of Nuevo León, Mexico in 2004 and Zacatecas, Mexico in 2005 both illuminated. This migration clearly included many who were headed North to seek work, but it also included children, spouses, and sometimes other extended family whose mobility was better characterized as a product of the desire to reunify families. The militarization of the US-Mexico border that was one ironic response to 9-11 (ironic because none of the terrorists in that attack crossed into the United States from Mexico) further propelled this dynamic of family reunification in the United States because it made unauthorized border crossing more difficult, more dangerous, and more expensive (Heyman & Campbell, 2012). Rather than undocumented fathers (and increasingly mothers—see Dreby, 2010) being able to return to Mexico to see family and maintain familial ties, the greater hazard of border crossing made it preferable to cross once and then try to stay in the United States. This in turn helps explain why the number of Mexican-born living in the United States grew from 9 million to 12 million between 2000 and 2015 (United Nations, 2016), and, more aptly for a volume about family life across distance, explains how mixed-status households (with some having legal residency, some having birthplace US citizenship rights, and some lacking legal documentation) have become increasingly common in the United States in the previous decade.

However, obscured in the UN's figure comparing 2000 to 2015 are the facts that nearly all that growth preceded the Great Recession that began in 2008 and that, starting in 2009, the balance of migration South-to-North versus North-to-South tipped. Gonzalez-Barrera (2015) estimated that, between 2009 and 2014, the number of people leaving the United States for Mexico was just over 1 million, exceeding those who came to the United States from Mexico by a net of 140,000. Based on our continued work in Morelos, Mexico, accounts shared by researchers at the University of California's "The Students We Share/*Los Alumnos Que Compartimos*" international symposium in Mexico City in September 2016, and new explanations from a number of Mexican education administrators whom we have collaborated with at various stages of this longitudinal study, if anything, the migration from the United States to Mexico has only grown since 2014 and may well be accelerating because of the US election of Donald Trump.

But it may not be whole families who are returning to Mexico. The United Nations' (2016) *International Migration Report 2015* reported that almost 1.2 million people lived in Mexico that year who had been born in another country. Their median age was 15. With 98% of Mexican emigration going to the United States, the UN figure is likely capturing the sizable migration of children born in the United States moving to Mexico, perhaps often accompanied by their Mexico-born parents (who would be invisible in Mexican immigration statistics because they were born in Mexico), but clearly not always accompanied, as one of our three cases makes clear.

From our own research, we have estimated that, as of 2010, there were 420,000 children enrolled in *educación básica* (grades 1-9) in Mexican schools who had prior school experience in US schools and an only partially overlapping tally of 330,000 students who had been born in the United States and thus had US citizenship status because of birthplace (Zúñiga & Hamann, 2014).¹

To reconcile the two numbers, it is worth noting that some children with prior US school experience were born in Mexico, moved to the US, and moved back, while, related to the second figure, some children born in the United States moved with their parents to Mexico (in their parents' case, moved back to Mexico) without ever attending US schools. These figures, however they combine, are smaller than the 2013 estimate by Zong and Batalova (2014) that the Mexican-born under-18 population in the United States was 700,000, but they are not much smaller.

To summarize then, before moving on to the three cases: migration between Mexico and the United States is voluminous, it is increasingly bidirectional, it often involves children (and thus parent decision-making), and it is in flux. A Mexican parent living without documentation in the United States might choose to live unified as a whole mixed-status family unit in

the United States. But another parent in the same circumstances might instead decide that dangers in US neighborhoods (Reese, 2002), fear of their own prospective detention by ICE, the chance to gain extended family support in childrearing, and/or the wish to have their children know and love Mexico instead support the child living in Mexico apart from his or her parent or parents. In contrast, Mexican parents living in Mexico with prior experience in the United States (and with experience of sending their children to US schools) might decide that educational and economic opportunities in the United States are better than in Mexico and that it is wiser or more in their child's interest to have their child live in the United States (with extended family) and to parent from afar.

Under The Mango Tree: An Ideal or a Tragedy?

We have previously described the cases of Noelia and Manuel in a chapter (Sánchez García, Hamann, & Zúñiga, 2012) published in *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* that focused on the cosmologies of the youngest students we encountered who had previously lived in the United States. We posited there that the reflections of a 7-year-old were almost automatically different from that of an older child because of the particular and sometimes even magical ways that younger children describe their worlds. Manuel was a 7-year-old at the time we met him, enrolled in second grade. His older sister Noelia was a sixth grader when we met her. Perhaps being overly lyrical in our description, in *Diaspora* we wrote, "Manuel later became almost effervescent as he described a favorite mango tree in his new town that he liked to nap beneath" (p. 158).

Idyllic descriptions aside, however, both Noelia and Manuel were US-born children being raised by their grandparents in a small village in Puebla's Sierra Mixteca mountains, southeast of Mexico City. Their village included mango trees and a small river, but was part of a semi-arid region in which a variety of organ cactus and mesquite seemed to be the dominant plant species. Their village had a road, a *primaria* (elementary school), and electricity. The main sources of income, however, were remittances from the United States and subsistence agriculture.

Both Noelia and Manuel had been born in Chicago to hardworking undocumented Mexican parents. At least we assume they were undocumented; Noelia and Manuel are our sources for that information, not their parents. We never met their parents, who were continuing to live in Chicago at the time our study took to us to Noelia and Manuel's village. By staying in Chicago, the parents continued to be able to earn money and send remittances. Dreby (2010), whose research was also in Puebla as well as Oaxaca, has

documented how grandparents relied on remittances (sent for them to care for their grandchildren) as an economic survival strategy in the region. That seems to have been the case in Noelia and Manuel's case. Clearly, they were loved and cared for in their village, and, clearly, they remained connected to their parents and the world they had left behind in the United States.

Noelia told us, in English, that she and her brother had come to their community 18 months earlier, which would have been the summer or fall of 2008. At that time, ICE raids on workplaces in the United States were rising in number (Hamann & Reeves, 2012) and the US economy was beginning to falter. Noelia explained that her parents thought it would be safer for her and her brother to be in Mexico. We inferred that this related to her parents' calculation/ fear regarding what might happen to the children if they (the parents) were detained. At the same time that the United States was declaring many parts of Mexico unsafe because of the Drug War (as various cartels viciously competed for territory), Noelia and Manuel's parents were deciding that their US-born, US citizen children were safer in Mexico.

That decision may well have been specifically accurate (we have no idea whether Noelia and Manuel's parents were ever detained or deported after our 2010 interview), but it had some near-term consequences. While Noelia, who had attended 5 years of public school in Illinois, was happy to chat with us in English, her younger brother, who had only attended kindergarten in the States admitted, in Spanish, that his English was slipping. Noelia explained that she and Manuel tried to continue practicing English with some cousins—apparently these cousins also had some US experience—and clearly her proficiency was intact.

Manuel told us in wide-eyed fashion how well-resourced his Illinois school had been, with a library and lots of computers. Although we cannot vouch that Noelia and Manuel's school in Mexico had no computers (perhaps there were some in the director's office), clearly, in Mexico, they attended a materially more Spartan school. Indeed, the siblings described to us how they had a series of English-language textbooks that their aunt had sent them. Apparently, the aunt was a janitor at an elementary school in the United States and had rescued the books from the trash.

Of course, parenting is about much more than where your children go to school (although our interview skewed in that direction, given the primary focus of our multiyear study), but there were schooling consequences of Noelia and Manuel's parents' decision to parent from afar and have extended family (particularly Noelia and Manuel's grandparents) become primary caregivers. Noelia and Manuel had access to less-well-resourced schools in Mexico. They were living in a part of the rural countryside that had limited continued education infrastructure. In Mexico in 2010, *secundaria* (grades 7–9) was obligatory, and it was probable that Noelia moved to a *telesecundaria* in the academic year after we met her. *Telesecundarias* are

relatively common in rural Mexico and mainly date from the 1992 change in educational law that extended Mexico's constitutional promise of primary education to include grades 7 to 9. Because Mexico did not have an adequate supply of trained content specialists willing to work in rural communities for the available wage, *telesecundarias* were set up literally to have centralized content instruction from a television (with VHS tapes or sometimes now DVDs and the internet,) with the onsite teachers acting more as facilitators. It is fair to say that it is difficult to receive a high-quality education at a *telesecundaria*.

In 2014 (assuming she had successfully progressed through *telesecundaria*), Noelia would have become eligible for *preparatoria*, or high school (grades 10–12). There was a *preparatoria* about 30 kilometers away from her community, but it is unclear whether she would have been eligible to attend or had a means to regularly get there. If she did attend, her parents' remittances were likely crucial for buying books, school uniforms, and covering the other costs associated with going to school in Mexico.

Presumably, the educational pathways available to Noelia would also be available to Manuel, 4 years behind her. During our interview, perhaps because it often code-switched over to English and surely because she was older, Noelia often spoke for Manuel, and it appeared that Noelia played an important role in Manuel's successful adjustment to his new community. We can speculate about whether the fact that the siblings could advocate for each other played any role in their parents' decision to send them to Mexico, but likely the presence of someone familiar with the starkly different contexts of Chicago and rural Mexico meant they were a comfort to each other. It may have also meant that Noelia played an occasional loosely parentlike, or at least more advocatelike than peerlike, role in supporting her brother. We will return to consideration of Noelia and Manuel's parents in the conclusion.

Family Unity Versus Educational Opportunity

In December 2013, at a *vespertino secundaria* about 45 minutes from the capital of Morelos, Cuernavaca, we met Javier. (*Vespertino* refers to afternoon school; often two schools share the same educational plant, with one school meeting in the morning—the *matutino* shift—and the other in the *vespertino*.) The visit was one of the least comfortable that we have made at any point in the 20 years of work in the United States and Mexico. Javier told us that a thing he liked about US schools was the lack of drugs and a thing he disliked about school in Mexico was the presence of drugs (which was not a dynamic we were told about in interviews at any other school). He said to us in English that he had learned at this new school that “I have to stand up for

myself.” He told us that he was subject to negative teacher and peer attention, and one of the school leaders told our visit coordinator that Javier had been disciplined related to drugs (presumably something minor like talking about them or bragging about them, as he was still attending the school).

It was Javier’s first year at this *secundaria*, but it was his fourth year in school back in Mexico. Javier had been born in Indiana and had attended school in Hammond (a city of 80,000 on the state line with Illinois that forms part of the tri-state Chicago metropolitan area). When he was in fourth grade, his father was detained at his workplace and then deported for lacking documentation to live and work in the United States. His mother decided that, for family unity, she and Javier would move back to Mexico to reconnect with his father. However, Javier had a 19-year-old brother who was out of school and working in Indiana. The brother stayed in the United States. Javier was clearly interested in leaving Mexico to go live with his brother, an option he claimed he had discussed with his parents and that they were open to. (With Javier, our only data source on the topic, we have no take as to whether the brother was interested in hosting Javier or whether this idea was in any way viable.)

Attending to the theme of parenting from afar, we know that, faced with that prospect, Javier’s mother had opted not to have Javier grow up away from his father. When his father’s deportation took away the option of living together in the United States, she opted to return to Mexico. In other words, Javier’s parents decided not to parent him from afar, at least not initially, when Javier was only 9 or 10 at the time of his father’s deportation. Whether this is the decision they *should* have made or should continue to make projecting forward is less clear. (As noted in the introduction, we use the term “should” polemically—we clearly do not know enough about Javier or his family to make a defensible recommendation about what was best for him, but we do know enough about his case to use it to raise various topics that parents negotiating the Mexico–US binational migration domain have to take on.)

Javier was clearly unhappy in Morelos and struggling in school. He struck us as particularly bright—he was particularly inquisitive about the nature of our study and asked for ideas regarding which of Mexico’s various *secundaria* formats might work best for him—but his academic future on his current trajectory did not seem promising. He told us he was interested in becoming an engineer, but also reported that his math grades in Mexico were weak (inhibiting the likelihood of his being able to enter that field). In turn, the talk about drugs was concerning. Whether Javier was a (prospective) dealer of drugs, consumer of drugs, or just a big talker about drugs, each of those was highly dangerous in contemporary Mexico, where more than 160,000 civilians were killed between 2007 and 2014 as part of the drug wars there (Breslow, 2015).

Because of his US birthplace (and the 14th Amendment’s promise of citizenship to anyone born in the United States), Javier could aspire to a US

adulthood. He had protections in the United States that his father (and perhaps his mother, too) lacked. Yet for him to convert these rights into opportunities would require either greater success in school in Mexico than he was currently experiencing (and then later transferring his Mexico-learned skills back to a US context) or the prospect of living with an economically independent older brother, whose rights to stay in the United States were not clear and whose skills as a surrogate parent were equally unclear.

Having lived in both the United States and Mexico, Javier clearly felt that he had been more successful in one (the United States) than the other, but it is unclear how much of that preference came from comparing American elementary school (where one has the same teacher all day long and there is not the peer posturing of early adolescence) to Mexican *secundaria*. Nor is it clear whether his father's deportation was the key disorienting variable. An event like that clearly is traumatic, and it is possible that, had Javier and his mother stayed in Indiana (with Javier's father in Mexico)—the path untaken and untested—Javier's academic trajectory would have suffered there, too. Although writing about the disorientation of parent unemployment rather than deportation, Tapia (1998) did find that the trauma of parent unemployment had a negative effect on Latino children's academic achievement. It stands to reason that a deportation-related household breakup would be even more consequential. At the time we met him, Javier's parents' decisions as to whether he should stay in Mexico or return to the United States were intertwined with issues of where he would be safest, where he would be academically most successful, and how adequate the infrastructure was to surround him with love and nurturance in either country.

A Vexing Question

Also in Morelos, but as part of a much more pleasant 2013 visit, we met John and Daisy, plus their mother, at a rural *primaria* relatively near Cuernavaca. Like Noelia, Manuel, and Javier, John and Daisy had also been born in the United States near Chicago and so, like them, had US citizenship rights by birthplace. However, unlike these first three, John and Daisy were back in Mexico (as third and fourth graders respectively) because their mother felt it was important for them to know Mexico and learn Spanish. They intended to return to the United States at the end of the year to reconnect with their father (who continued to work there) and re-enroll at the elementary school they had attended prior to coming to Mexico. The year we met them their father was parenting them from afar, but they were living with their mother who was clearly involved in their schooling (as her presence at the school when we came for interviews illuminated—our inclusion of her in the interview was serendipitous, not planned).

Both John and Daisy told us that they liked school in the United States better. Fondly remembering Ms. Potter, his second-grade teacher, John told us that he liked “*los dulces cuando se portaban bien* [the candy rewards for good behavior].” He also liked the “*ojas de dibujar* [the sheets to draw on].” Daisy also referred to behaviorist conditioning with rewards for good behavior—“*premios para buen compartamiento*”—and then code-switched to English, describing her former third-grade teacher, Ms. Martinez, as “funny.” When asked, both John and Daisy said they had never been given candy or other little prizes for good behavior or good grades in Mexico. It seemed like none of their Mexican classmates received awards like that either; that was not the way of Mexican schooling.

John and Daisy were clearly happy, loved, and academically successful kids, so their mother’s question at the end caught us off guard. She asked whether we felt the US or the Mexican education system was better. She reasoned that we knew a lot about schooling in both countries, and, in essence, she wanted to know where she should parent. While clearly US schools were generally better resourced, we did not offer a specific answer, pointing out that the question was contingent. Where were John and Daisy going to live as adults (they had citizenship rights in both countries)? Where did economic responsibilities and opportunities aid or impede how much she or her husband could engage in direct parenting? What orientations, language skills, and affinities did she hope John and Daisy would develop? In the near term, she faced the question of raising John and Daisy near their father (in the United States) or their grandparents (in Mexico), or in some hybrid of the two. Which mattered most?

Choosing to Parent from Afar

The parents we occasionally met, or more often heard of from the students and teachers we interviewed, faced complicated and vexing issues as they considered where to parent as they and their families negotiated the changing dynamics of US–Mexico relations, politics, and economic conditions. Among the core considerations was whether to parent sharing a household with their children or whether to parent from afar, whether that meant continuing to live and work in the United States while children came of age in Mexico, or, vice versa, whether to stay in Mexico as children connected with older siblings or extended family members to live in the United States. Although little illuminated here (because our dataset did not shed much light on it), clearly the decision to parent from afar was intertwined with calculations about how loving and supportive the “near” adults in their children’s lives would or could be. Noelia and Manuel’s parents would not have sent

them to “safer” Mexico if they did not have a sense that grandparent caretakers could offer security and support.

Attending to safety was clearly a priority, but what constituted safety was not singularly definable. Noelia and Manuel’s parents wanted them safe from the trauma and vulnerability that would arise if they (the parents) were detained in an ICE action. By that calculation, rural Puebla, at least in 2010, was safer. Yet, in Morelos, in 2013, at a *secundaria*, Javier was possibly in more jeopardy than had he stayed in the United States, even as his father was safer in Mexico. That may not have been a concern of John and Daisy’s parents, who gave no indication that (absence of) legal status was a factor in their decision-making about where they or their children should be. John and Daisy’s safety was more psychological, safeguarding their right to a sense of where they were *of* or *from*, although the goal was possibly not being as realized as intended, given both children’s articulation that they preferred the United States.

Yet, as with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, children’s safety was only one of the factors considered in the “where to parent (from)” decision. Describing John and Daisy’s mother’s (and likely their father’s) goal for them to know Mexico and to be familiar with that identity component of who they were was perhaps primarily not an issue of safety. In their calculation, perhaps this was citizenship work larger than either country’s school system could support unilaterally. In this sense, it was OK for John and Daisy to spend a year (at least) apart from their father living in Mexico to attend to this goal. Maybe knowing Mexico was also a factor for Noelia and Manuel’s parents and Javier’s mother, although not likely the dominant one.

Javier’s case reminds us that the decision to parent from afar (or not) is not just made once and then put to rest. His mother had decided that his parenting (and/or her marriage) would be hampered by living apart from his deported father, but that calculation, made when Javier was 9, was not necessarily unalterable. As challenges, dangers, and frustrations loomed in Javier’s Mexican school experience (and perhaps in other domains of his life in Mexico), the calculation about whether he should remain there (and whether it still made sense *not* to parent him from afar) was perhaps shifting.

Ultimately, parenting from afar is one of the contingencies available in the childrearing of the early 21st century. As other chapters in this volume indicate, it is likely more frequent in circumstances of international migration and extended family displacement in two or more countries, but a key assertion here is that it would be simplistic to assert that it is intrinsically good or bad or circumstantially avoidable. Defensible parenting strategies can include parenting from afar, although even then that strategy is not without consequences, linguistic, cultural, legal, and, most importantly and obviously, familial.

Note

1. In 2012, Mexico decided to expand the number of years of obligatory education. So, by 2022, *preparatoria* (grades 10–12) will also be included in *educación básica*, but those more advanced grades were not required in the year of our estimate, and our sample did not include any students more advanced than ninth grade.

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