Juan and Isabel: U.S.-born children of Mexican Returnees

In this case study we explore one immigrant family’s circumstances upon their return to Mexico. Children’s cultural adaptation and their bilingual development will be discussed. Children's social, linguistic, and academic responses to moving to Mexico might be heavily influenced by many allied factors. Socioeconomic status of the family, age of the children, their understanding of the reasons for the move to Mexico, the family's ties to Mexican culture while living in the U.S., the students' academic Spanish proficiency, along with a host of other factors impact how transnational children adapt to their current situation. These factors will directly influence the extent to which they become bilingual and bicultural. Over a period of three months we used phenomenological interviews, home visits, observations, and tutoring sessions in order to obtain in-depth, first person description of children’s experiences. Children presented in this case study are participants of a larger study that began in 2013 and is currently underway in Mexico and is jointly conducted by U.S. and Mexican researchers.

Background Information

Juan is five years old and is currently living in Mexico. He moved to San Martin (pseudonym) with his parents and his 11-year old half sister Isabel. Juan was born in Illinois and Isabel was born in Arizona. Juan's father, Roberto, is 33 years old and his mother, Susana, is 38.

The family moved to San Martin because Roberto’s mother was ill and he decided to return to Mexico in order to see his ailing mother. Roberto’s family in Mexico was not very accepting of Susana. Therefore, the children have not had much contact with their relatives in Mexico. This rejection was partially due to the couple’s age difference as well as the fact that Susana has seven children from multiple relationships.

Immigration Context

Susana moved to the U.S. when she was 17 years old. She had family in Chicago and crossed the border with one of her young children using false identification. She remained undocumented for 21 years. Her sixth child, Isabel, was born when Susana was 27. Four years later she met Roberto, who had recently moved to the U.S. and was also undocumented. Their child Juan was born a year later.

Four of the children’s siblings are currently living in the United States. The mother’s two oldest daughters are married with children. The middle two children are working and studying in the U.S. One 19-year old sister lives in San Martin with her husband.

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Economic Perspective

Mexico

The family’s economic situation changed drastically when they moved to Mexico. The parents did not seem to be holding regular jobs and they did not receive much support from their families. However, signs of relative prosperity were still apparent. Roberto recently bought a new motorcycle.

The family was building a home but at the duration of this study they were living quite minimally and were renting a small two-room house located in an unsafe part of the town. Their bathroom did not have a door and a curtain was used instead. Their kitchen appliances were kept outside in their patio and they had very basic furniture. When they arrived in San Martin from the U.S. the children had fancy electronics such as tablets, cameras, and video games with which they spent a lot of time playing, but after a few months of living in Mexico Roberto sold these items. However, the children switched to watching hours of television and movies (primarily in English) on a large television set the family still owned. In San Martin, they have a dog that Juan loves very much.

United States

In the U.S., the family lived in a nice neighborhood where the children could safely walk to school. Susana was economically independent as her oldest daughters worked and contributed to the family income. She was taking care of her neighbors’ children along with her own young children and her grandchild. She was happy living in the U.S. in spite of her undocumented status. She liked her job as a caregiver and felt that she was paid well and was able to contribute to her family’s economic vitality. Roberto was also employed and provided sufficient income to support his family.

Educational Perspective

After four months of living in Mexico, Isabel had not yet been enrolled in a school. She is a mature young lady with high educational aspirations. She discussed her future plans and explained that she did not want to have a boyfriend when she grew up because she did not want to get pregnant and have children at a young age as her older sisters did. She was clear about pursuing a professional career no matter how long it might take her to complete her education. She expressed her strong desire to study medicine or law.

Isabel was in her last year of elementary school in the U.S. and was going to start middle school in the following school year. She explained that in the U.S. she told her mother that she wanted to stay with her older siblings in order to continue her education. She
wanted her mother to send her back as soon as possible and was angry that her mother forced her to move to Mexico.

Isabel enjoyed reading and was eager to read in both English and Spanish. There seemed to be a lack of communication between the children and their parents. When two researchers came to their house to offer help for Juan, his parents showed enthusiasm and his mother requested academic support for Isabel.

Juan was accepted in a Kindergarten in San Martin late in the school year but he attended school infrequently. From day one, he rejected his new school. He stated that he did not like his school in San Martin. His parents gave multiple explanations regarding Juan’s limited attendance at school including: “…he slept in, had stomach pain, was sick, did not want to go”, etc. Juan and Isabel were not encouraged to attend school because the family did not have much faith and trust in the Mexican educational system. Susana explained that in his Mexican kindergarten classroom, Juan was in a room with 40 children, that his teacher often yelled, and that her child did not get proper attention. She mentioned that in the U.S. her son was in a class of ten children with two teachers supervising their activities.

Juan expressed his dislike for his new school. He complained that in school other children hit him, something that never happened in the U.S. He criticized his new school and stated that they did not provide meals, the teacher got angry and yelled, his clothes was frequently getting dirty from sitting on the floor, and their were no toys in the classroom. He further explained that his teachers did not teach him how to read, or read books aloud as teachers did in the U.S.

Susana has kept a box of school items and photos from Juan's pre-school in the U.S. It contained schoolwork that Juan did in the U.S., photos of Juan's first day at school, him being embraced by the school principal, being recognized for his academic achievements, letters and newsletters received from his school, etc. In theory, Juan was supposed to enter first grade in August.

Juan’s school offered English for two hours a week to all children. However, in his English classes it did not appear that Juan’s, or any other children of returnees attending the school, bilingualism was of importance to teachers. Teachers introduced the children to basic vocabulary in English. In his music class, at times, they sang songs in English, such as "All You Need is Love" by the Beatles. No mention was made of the benefits of bilingualism although some teachers in Juan's school expressed the need to take English classes themselves in order to better understand children who had arrived from the U.S. Since he missed so many days of school, when present, Juan sat in the back of the class.

His teacher did not pay much attention when Juan did not understand instructions in Spanish or when she did not understand him. Yet she expressed that he is smart and curious. In one occasion in the physical education class, Juan did not understand the
word "gatear" which means "to crawl on your knees". Juan turned to the researchers who were there that day to ask them what it meant. Once he understood he was able to take part in the activity.

Developmental and Social-Cultural Perspectives

The cultural frame of reference for the children seemed more American than Mexican. Juan and Isabel like “American” food; they used English to communicate with each other, and the types of games and activities they engaged in were learned in the U.S. For example, during an activity with the researchers Juan associated the legend of the "Llorona" with Halloween.

They did not feel at ease in their present Mexican context. Their social life was limited in Mexico. Isabel usually took care of her little brother when he was at home. Susana did not display typical Mexican cultural practices. Her cooking was not Mexican per se; neither was it completely American. Juan went to bed quite late, which is a common Mexican trend, but he did not appear to be "agringado" ("Americanized") either.

In spite of his complaints, Juan generally got along well with his classmates who seemed to accept him but bonds of friendship were difficult to maintain. Subsequently, Juan and Isabel did not have many friends to interact with in Mexico. The children mostly watched television and at times Roberto drove them around town on his motorcycle. They were able to visit their older sister from time to time but did not mention visiting Juan’s grandmother or his paternal family.

When they were living in the U.S., they used to participate in extracurricular activities from school. On many occasions the children went to a nearby park. Isabel had opportunities to take Spanish classes, practice in sports, play music and attend summer camps. In the U.S., the children were in close contact with their older siblings and their neighbors. They spoke fondly of those experiences.

Cognitive Perspective

Juan is a hard working student and showed much effort in his schoolwork. His writing was legible and clear. He knowledge of the alphabet was stronger in English. Juan was playful and had a great ability to concentrate. He was disciplined, well organized and interested in learning. He wanted to perform well and incorporated detailed information in his drawings and completed assigned work well. In his new class, he was focused and applied himself and usually finished his work before the other children. However, once he had completed his work, he lost interest and did not know what to do next. Juan had

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limited academic opportunities at home, unless his sister or the researchers were working with him.

Watching television and playing with their tablets and video games at home was the main activity for the children until these items were sold. Isabel expressed that she did not have much to do in the house or in the neighborhood since she had read all the books she had brought with her from the U.S. Both children expressed frustration with the lack of academic stimulation and opportunities in their current circumstances.

Isabel preferred to read in English. She had been reading 500 page novels in English but ran out of books to read in English some time after arriving in Mexico. She had been asking her older sister to take her to a public library in San Martin to get more books but her sister did not know where the library was located.

**Linguistics Perspective**

In the U.S., both Juan and Isabel attended bilingual schools and used English frequently in their daily interactions with peers and older siblings. However, at home they had to use Spanish to communicate with their parents. In their home in San Martin, Juan's parents spoke Spanish together and to their children, but the language of communication for Juan and Isabel was English.

Juan and Isabel switched from English to Spanish and vice versa quite naturally. Susana who lived in the U.S. for about 21 years understood English but was not a proficient speaker. Roberto spoke Spanish and did not understand English very well. Therefore, Isabel at times was the translator between her little half brother and her stepfather.

Isabel was quite aware of the concept of language loss and insisted that her brother communicate with her in English so that he would not lose his ability to speak this language. English was the natural and preferred mode of communication between the siblings and therefore at home both languages were spoken. Isabel was aware that if they did not practice English they might lose it, especially for Juan who was only five and had not yet learned to read.

As a result, Isabel and Juan watched a lot of movies in English at home. He usually preferred English in referring to "movies" not "películas". He expressed: "Quiero ver movies." (I want to watch movies.). When two researchers arrived at their home to help Juan with his schoolwork, the children were initially quiet and Juan did not want to talk. He then slowly opened up when he realized that the researchers were bilingual.

**Mental Health Perspective**

Susana had immediate family members in Guadalajara, Nayarit and Jalisco. While they were visiting in April, during the Easter Holiday, Roberto and Susana decided to leave
Isabel, Juan’s best friend and protector, in Guadalajara with one of her maternal aunts. After returning to San Martin, they sent Isabel's personal belongings to Guadalajara. Juan was convinced that his sister did not want to stay in Guadalajara. The parents called her regularly, but for unknown reasons, Isabel and Juan were not allowed to talk to each other on the phone.

Juan thought that his sister was angry with him and felt responsible for this separation. Juan was expressing sadness and felt lonely and frustrated. He felt guilty that his sister had to stay in Guadalajara. His world had turned upside down. The last time the researchers visited him at his house (since he was not at school), Juan was sad and did not want to speak at all. After Isabel moved Spanish became the language of communication at home.

Susana stated that she understood the consequences of bringing the children to Mexico and noted that she was aware that her daughter and her son would have a much better life in the U.S. She expressed regret for bringing her children to Mexico. She insisted that their plan was to be in Mexico for only two years. Since the cost of crossing the border without documentation is extremely high, it is not clear when the family will be able to return to the U.S.

**Response and Recommendations:**

Please discuss your response to this case study and provide your recommendations for supporting social/emotional as well as academic development of children like Juan and Isabel.