



Educator Brief

HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION • VOLUME 2/NUMBER 3 • APRIL 2024

Series
IMMIGRATION
INITIATIVE

Addressing the Needs of Students Affected by Return Migration

By Maricruz Vargas Ramirez, Anakaren Quintero Davalos, & Alejandra Ramos Gómez

Over the last decade, the phenomenon of return migration— individuals returning from their host to native country - has been on the rise.¹ While return migration is not a new phenomenon, its current resurgence is marked both by an increase in involuntary return migration as well as the steep rise of children and young adults caught in its wake.^{2,3} Although this is a global issue affecting the flow of migration in many countries, much of the attention and research on return migration focuses on the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico.

In this Ed Brief, we describe the new features of this phenomenon with a particular focus on the educational challenges for children and make recommendations for practice focusing on the U.S./Mexico context.



Inside

- > Educational Challenges Upon Return
- > Schools as Spaces of Opportunity
- > Resources & To Learn More



Who are Return Migrants?

Return migrants are people that live for long periods of time in the United States and then return to Mexico for diverse reasons. Unfavorable immigration policies and concurrent anti-immigrant rhetoric are forces that push immigrants to return to their countries of origin. Although there are multiple classifications of return migration, the most common classification system divides return migration into voluntary and forced.⁴ Voluntary migration implies that the migrants decide to return to their home country of their own free will. On the other hand, forced return migration is involuntary and usually involves a deportation order. However, more recently, the concept of pseudo-voluntary return migration has been introduced to address certain factors that push people to return to their native countries, including restrictions in physical and social mobility, difficulties in accessing rights due to immigration status, as well as the deportation of family members, etc.⁵

Return migration often involves family members with an array of immigration statuses (from Mexican nationals without U.S. documentation to dual nationals to U.S. citizens) that undertake the return migration to stay together. Youth are typically U.S.-born traveling to Mexico for the first time or may be Mexican-born children and adolescents that migrated to the U.S. at a young age. For these youth, the U.S. is where they have been for the majority of their lives and education; the return migration to Mexico then results in a jarring and often challenging shift in their educational contexts.

Educational Challenges Upon Return

The family units affected by return migration must go through a process of reintegration that is particularly hard for children and adolescents, especially in regard to their entry into a completely new educational system. Statistics indicate that approximately 500,000 U.S.-born children have accompanied their family back into Mexico as part of the return migration process.⁶ This is a significant number and yet it still may not capture the true number of children affected by return migration as statistics centered on U.S. citizenship overlook the populations of Mexican-born children that are return migrants themselves. Regardless, this substantial influx of U.S.-socialized children in the Mexican educational system encounter many challenges to their educational development. Research shows that some of the main obstacles children and adolescents face in their incorporation into the Mexican education system are:

- Bureaucracy

The Mexican bureaucracy is one of the first obstacles individuals face in attempting to reintegrate into the education system. Knowledge on navigating the administrative processes required to enroll in Mexican

schools is not easy to come by and without access to it youths are often denied education. Up until 2015, the Mexican Ministry of Public Education required an authenticated translated birth certificate for the enrollment of U.S. born students which created accessibility issues for many recently arrived students who were not able to obtain the document.⁷ This requirement has since been removed allowing students to enroll with any government-issued document they possess. Despite this change in requirement, institutions at different levels often ignore this information so the change in policy is not necessarily implemented. Thus, the navigation of bureaucratic systems and processes of any country is an ongoing hurdle families, children, and youth affected by return migration must face.

- Language barriers

Language is one of the largest obstacles students affected by return migration face. Although many of these children and adolescents grew up in bilingual households, their academic Spanish is often limited since schools in the United States prioritize English. When these students arrive to Mexico, they are incorporated into schools where Spanish is the language of instruction. The Spanish



relevant in this educational context can be very different from the one the students learned and practiced conversationally at home. This academic Spanish represents a challenge that often leads to negative academic outcomes. Students might have trouble understanding the lessons in the classroom, feel too inadequate to participate in class, and have particular difficulties in reading and writing, since they tend to speak Spanish at home, but may not necessarily engage with it in its written form.⁸ Unfortunately, schools in Mexico usually don't offer additional resources to support the students' learning of Spanish and their low grades are often attributed to learning disabilities or laziness.⁹

- Differences in curriculum and classroom norms

Education plays an important role in the construction of national identity and in the transmission of information that is relevant for a specific context.^{10, 11} Students whose academic trajectories take place in different countries have uneven exposure to this cultural learning, and assumptions that they share the same baseline cultural knowledge as their peers ignores this uneven exposure. In the context of return migration, students begin school in Mexico with knowledge gaps relevant to the Mexican context because in the United States they learned information relevant to the U.S. Unfortunately, these gaps are too often interpreted from a deficit perspective and labeled as ignorance.

Further, the culture in the classroom influences what is expected from students and the interpretation of the students' behaviors. In Mexico, education does not only involve academic achievement, but also manners and respect, particularly towards adults.¹² In Mexico, the relationship between the students and professors is often vertical, and students are encouraged to listen



and be passive during the learning process.¹³ This contrasts with classroom culture in the United States, where the learning process tends to be more interactive and students are expected to be active agents.¹⁴ With these differences, what is reinforced in one context is penalized in another, and students affected by return migration are often perceived as disruptive or challenging.

Existing Supports

While the population of students impacted by return migration is substantial, there are currently limited government institutionalized interventions in place to mitigate their transition. One notable exception is the Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante (PROBEM), which seeks to strengthen the connection of Mexican students in the US with their language, history, and culture, facilitate the communication and exchange of teachers between the US and Mexico,

and promote educational continuity for transnational students.¹⁵ The PROBEM has served to ease the bureaucratic process to enroll in Mexican schools after starting education in the United States; however, its impact might be limited due to differences in participation across states and its focus on students of Mexican origin in the US, not on students returning to Mexico.¹⁶ Consequently, PROBEM alone cannot adequately address the multifaceted challenges of students affected by return migration.

A more comprehensive approach is needed to support these students, and we propose paying attention to (the pivotal role of) schools where targeted interventions can make a significant difference.



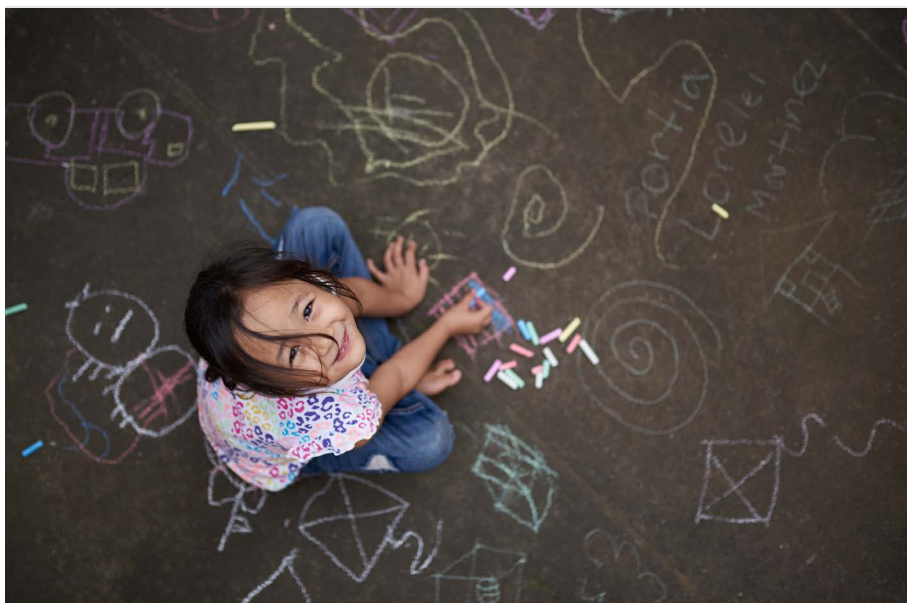
Schools as Spaces of Opportunity

Schools are crucial spaces for the healthy development of children and adolescents. They are where both academic learning and an important part of socialization happens. Positive school environments that support a sense of belonging, safety, self-esteem and a self-concept can play a key role in promoting the wellbeing of children and adolescents. However, children and adolescents affected by return migration face particular challenges that can lead to poor academic performance, symptoms of depression and anxiety, and negative self-esteem.^{17, 18, 19} As such, much care and consideration should be placed on easing the integration of youth affected by return migration into their new educational contexts. It is fundamental to acknowledge their presence in the classroom and consider their experiences and academic trajectories in order to promote their development and wellbeing.

Recommendations for Educational Practice

At the school level, several strategies can be taken to help students overcome the obstacles they face during this transition and to create welcoming learning environments. Interventions and innovations will vary according to specific educational contexts and students' sociocultural backgrounds. Schools should begin by recognizing the unique needs and experiences of students affected by return migration and provide targeted interventions that can help them succeed academically and socially. Some promising strategies include:

- **A Whole Child Approach:** Approaching interventions in schools through a whole-child approach that recognizes and seeks to address all areas of development (including academic, cognitive, physical, mental, social-emotional, identity) and provides comprehensive support for youth is key for the thriving and wellbeing of these students.²⁰ This approach is particularly crucial for youth affected by return migration as it counters a deficit perspective, recognizing instead the unique experiences and reservoirs of knowledge of their transnationalism as an asset.
- **Language Supports:** Authentic opportunities for bilingual development can communicate the value of their communities' linguistic background. Students need access to high-quality bilingual and dual language instruction programs that recognize the richness of their home languages and utilize biliteracy strategies to develop their linguistic repertoire, i.e., translanguaging that can prove an asset in whichever context.
- **Mental Health Supports:** Return migration used to be seen as the end of the migration cycle, like returning home. However, this process involves children moving to a country for the first time or returning to a place they don't remember. They also face new separations from family and friends. These are ambiguous losses that are difficult to process because of the uncertainty of reunion and because the connections still exist despite the physical distance. Counseling services should be offered to students and families in a format that fits their needs; this might include family therapy and practitioners who speak English and are familiar with migration's impact on families and individuals.
- **Social Emotional Learning:** Students should be provided with supports to develop their social-emotional self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship competencies. These tools can improve the school environment with more positive attitudes, better relationships between students and teachers, and a decrease in bullying.



Moreover, SEL can help reduce emotional distress and increase the coping skills, resilience, and sense of safety of students, easing the transition into a new country and educational system.²¹

- **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy:** Education must be responsive and relevant to student experiences in order for learning to be more meaningful and engaging. The incorporation of content that resonates with all students and the leveraging of cultural wealth centers diversity in student knowledge.²² For youth affected by return migration, a curriculum that includes stories, perspectives, and histories of migration can work to destigmatize the experiences of migrant children and their families. Furthermore, incorporating culturally sustaining pedagogy can contribute to moving away from the often nationalistic and monocultural norms prevalent in the Mexican education system.²³ This approach supports youth in maintaining the continuity and proficiency of their multiple cultural and linguistic traditions.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Peer relationships are vitally important for young people as they serve as sources of companionship, social and emotional support, and identity formation.²⁴ Youth affected by return migration lose their same-aged relationships outside of their family when they migrate.²⁵ Therefore it is important for schools in their new context to focus on developing and sustaining peer relationships by offering opportunities for students to participate in activities and develop a sense of



belonging.

- **Familial Engagement:** Involving families in schools has a positive impact on student outcomes.²⁶ For children impacted by return migration, actively including their families in their education is crucial for their transition into the new environment, as their families serve as their primary sources of support. By fostering strong partnerships with families, educators can gain valuable insights into the unique needs and experiences of these students, enabling them to provide more effective support both inside and outside the classroom.
- **Partnering with Organizations:** There are a number of organizations outside of the governmental scope dedicated to the advocacy and needs of those affected by return migration. These organizations do work close to the ground and address the issues that the government participation has traditionally been slow to acknowledge. Often led by individuals with firsthand experience of return migration, these groups possess invaluable

insights and expertise that can guide the efforts to address the needs of returned migrants.

Resources & To Learn More

- [Migración de Retorno](#)
- [Otros Dreams en Acción](#)
- [Pochas So What | Podcast on Spotify](#)
- [Stereotype and Stigma in the School \(Re\)insertion of Children of Deported Parents](#)
- [IIH Lecture Series—Marta Rodriguez](#)





References

- Jacobo Suárez, M.L., & Cárdenas Alaminos, N. (2020). "Back on your Own: Return Migration and the Federal Government Response in Mexico," *Migraciones internacionales* 11: e1731, <https://doi.org/10.33679/rmi.v1i1.1731>
- Jacobo Suárez & Cárdenas Alaminos, 2020.
- Rodríguez-Cruz, Marta. (2021). Menores, inmigrantes y retornados desde Estados Unidos a Oaxaca, México: Los nuevos "otros" y los desafíos de la (re)inserción escolar. *Latin American Research Review*, 56(4), pp. 891–905. <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1042>
- Migration Data Portal (2023). Return Migration. <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/return-migration>
- Rodríguez-Cruz, M. (2021). "Life After Deportation: The Health and Education of the Children of Mexican Migrants Expelled from the United States." *Immigration Initiative at Harvard Issue Brief Series* no. 9, Cambridge MA: Harvard University.
- Jacobo Suárez & Cárdenas Alaminos, 2020.
- Gándara, P. (2020). The students we share: falling through the cracks on both sides of the US-Mexico border. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 43(1), 38-59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1667514>
- Jacobo, M., & Jensen, B., (2018). *Schooling for US-Citizen Students in Mexico*. Los Angeles: Civil Rights Project, UCLA. <https://tinyurl.com/yxcaynrx>.
- Rodríguez-Cruz, 2021.
- Brint, S. G. (1998). *Schools and societies*. Pine Forge Press.
- Zembylas, M. (2021): Conceptualizing and studying 'affective nationalism' in education: theoretical and methodological considerations. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13613324.2021.1969904>
- Oliveira, G. (2020). Transnational Mothers and School Related Decisions. *The Urban Review*, 52(5), 805–829. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-019-00542-1>
- Rodríguez-Cruz, 2021.
- Swift, E. (2020). U.S. Classroom culture: A guide to navigating Higher Education in the United States. NAFSA.
- Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante PROBEM. Gobierno De México. <https://www.gob.mx/sep/acciones-y-programas/programa-binacional-de-educacion-migrante>
- Jacobo & Jensen, 2018.
- Gándara, 2020.
- Hamann, E. T. & Zúñiga, V. (2011). Schooling and the Everyday Ruptures Transnational Children Encounter in the United States and Mexico. In Coe, et al. (Eds.) *Everyday Ruptures* (pp. 141-160). Vanderbilt University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16f6hv3.11>
- Hirai & Sandoval, 2016. El itinerario subjetivo como herramienta de análisis: las experiencias de los jóvenes de la generación 1.5 que retornan a México. *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, 32(2), 276–301.
- Suarez-Orozco, C. (2023). *A Whole Child Approach: The Key to Immigrant Origin Student Thriving*. [Educator Brief]. Harvard Graduate School of Education. Vol. 1, Num. 1. <https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/briefs/#educator-briefs>
- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2024. What Does the Research Say? <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-does-the-research-say/>
- Herbert, C., (2024). *Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices for Immigrant-Origin Students*. [Educator Brief]. Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/briefs/#educator-briefs>
- Despagne & Jacobo Suárez, 2016.
- Wentzel, 2005.
- Rodríguez-Cruz, 2022.
- Henderson & Mapp, 2002.



About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

