Segmented Assimilation: The Greater Disadvantages of Immigrant Children from the Northern Triangle

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**Introduction**

The 2014 surge of Central American unaccompanied children crossing the Mexican-United States border led to conversations about the violence in Central American countries, in particular in countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The presence of violence in the Northern Triangle (as the three countries are known) has not been a recent phenomenon. Since experiences shape a person’s understanding and abilities, I decided to explore how experiences in the home country affect the assimilation process of the immigrant children from Northern Triangle in the United States. More specifically, I will focus on the present violence in these countries and the educational attainment received by the children of the Northern Triangle. I decide to focus only on these countries because according to the Migration Policy Institute, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras represent more than 70% of Central American immigrants in the United States (Zong and Batalova). Overall, the paper argues that violence and low levels of education in their home country plus the social context that receives them in the United States represent more disadvantages for immigrant children from the Northern Triangle affecting their assimilation process. Ultimately, this will have ramifications in their educational outcomes and future job prospects. I will begin by addressing the violence and low levels of education in Central America. This will be followed by an examination of the interaction of these children with American schools, resulting in a closer look at their assimilation process. Finally, I will discuss these children’s education experience in the United States and its impact on their job opportunities.

**Pre-Migration Conditions**
Although the 2014 unaccompanied minor brought more awareness about violence in Northern Triangle, it’s important to highlight that violence in this region has been part of their history and it has significantly increased in the last years, which has been attributed to gang violence (Zong and Batalova). According to the council of Foreign Relations, in 2000 the homicide rates in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were approximately 40, 25, and 50 per 100,000 people, respectively (Renwick). By 2015, these rates have increased to 103, 29.5, and 57 homicides per 100,000 people in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, respectively (Mucino). The increasing amount of violence is the result of the government attempting to address the issue of gangs with an iron fist, thus causing a war between the gangs and military/police. In this war, the police and the military have targeted young people assuming that all are gang members. Meanwhile, gangs are attempting to recruit kids as young as 10 years old because when they are convicted of a crime they serve less time than adults (Chandler). Children in these countries are growing up seeing violence, feeling fear about gangs’ presence, and fearing for their lives if they don’t join the gangs. They have little, if not close to zero, opportunities to steer away from it. Research has shown that children with extensive exposure to community violence, which include gang violence and constant fear, show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Fowler, Tompsett, et. al., 228). Children who experience PTSD in this context suffered psychological breakdowns, can’t sleep through the night, and they sometimes shake and tremble. Many of these children become prisoners in their own homes, only leaving home to go to school. Meanwhile, other children stop going to school altogether (Collier, 58).

For children and parents in the Northern Triangle, quitting school is a safer option due to the strong presence of gangs in school. This type of decisions (choosing safety
over education) positions the education level of children further back. In addition, these countries experience low quality education in their pre-school, primary, and secondary education. Furthermore, limited infrastructure and scant teacher training further worsen the education system (Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle, 5).

The results of this poor quality education are grade repetition and high drop out rates, in particular, at the secondary level (Ribando Seelke, CRS-2). The high unsecure school environment has further deteriorated the poor quality and the high drop out rates of schools, ensuring that these children end up in poor paying jobs or unemployed, thus, trapping them in a cycle of poverty.

The number of people emigrating from the Northern Triangle has increase in the last few years. However, it should be highlighted that even before the 2014 surge of unaccompanied immigrant minors, people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were a significant portion of the Latino immigrants in the U.S. – e.g. in 2013 there were 1,986,000 Salvadorians, 1,304,000 Guatemalans, and 791,000 Hondurans in the United States both with and without authorization (Lopez and Patten). At the beginning of the 2000s the major reasons for immigrating to the U.S. was due to poverty and family reunification, however, in recent years violence has been one of the major reasons for leaving the country of origin. Thus, the number of children immigrating to the United States was significant even before 2014. However, it should be mentioned that the surge of immigrant children in 2014 were not only cause by the reasons mentioned previously, but were rather the result of a rumor. This speculated that children that reach the United States would be given legal authorization to enter the country. However, addressing the 2014 events and origin of the rumor would cause the deviance from the main argument.
Thus, the emphasis will be on the first generation children that reside in the United States and that immigrated prior to 2014.

Post-Migration Conditions

Once the children arrive to American territory, either with their family or to reunite with family members residing in the United States, they will tend to settle in regions with a high immigrant population in order to benefit from the information this social network (immigrant population) could offer (Serrano, Cabrer, Requena, 4). The process of settling in a particular region also affects the assimilation of these children. Most of the research on social networks has emphasized on the help this provide to new immigrants to access a job and local support systems. However, the social network of the parents of these children will determine the kind of resources available to them. For this reason, its important to recognize that the degree of benefits these families can receive is limited to the sources’ personal exposure to the host country, which for most of these families are also individuals with low levels of education. Thus, the type of information the new immigrants receive will mainly give them access to low paying job for low skill workers. Meanwhile, inadequate attention will be given to the public goods the children will need. Furthermore, the clusters of immigrant populations are mainly located in low-income communities with poor resources that tend to co-exist with native-born minorities (Portes and Zhou, 83). Thus, the everyday American social context the immigrant children experience is a low-income community with poor public goods mixed with the native-born minority’s culture and other immigrants’ culture (which can sometimes includes cultures from various Latin American countries). Although, this social context has core aspects of the mainstream (like language, traditions, and holidays), the culture these children become more accustomed is not considered the mainstream American
culture. This in itself is a problem because even if the children are able to assimilate, they will do so to a hybrid culture that encompasses the cultures of the native-born minority and other immigrants and not to the mainstream culture.

This causes the new immigrant children to experience an assimilation process coined by Portes and Zhou as segmented assimilation. A concept that acknowledges the challenges (skin color, location, and absence of mobility ladders) that immigrants confront in seeking adaptation to American society, which results in diverse possible outcomes of assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 74). Beyond what Portes and Zhou mentioned, it’s important to emphasize the role of schools in this assimilation process because children spend most of their time in schools. Hence, in a school context, the segmented assimilation will have a mainstream assimilation and a downward assimilation. A mainstream assimilation is when the children are able to graduate high school and obtain higher education to gain economic upward mobility. A downward assimilation is graduating high school and maintaining the low economic status in which they live. Essentially assimilating to the social context of the low-income communities they encounter when they arrive in the United States.

The interaction between the children from the Northern Triangle and the school atmosphere will determine their type of assimilation and this will in turn affect their life outside of school. As the sections in this paper have previously noted it, there are pre- and post- migration factors in these children’s assimilation process, which come in contact with each other when they enter school in the U.S. For Salvadorian, Guatemalan, and Honduran children, the pre-migration factors are the poor quality education received and the violence they experience in their home country. Since the assimilation process takes
place in school, the post-migration factor they encounter is the poor quality schools available in their communities.

It’s important to acknowledge that the assimilation process is a dynamic and complex development due to the constant interaction between past and new experiences. Therefore, it’s important to only focus on key points of the adaptation process that will provide significant insight into the assimilation outcomes of these children. For this reason, the focus will be on the second language acquisition and the graduation rates of these children.

*The Encounter of Pre- and Post- Migration Factors*

For first generation immigrant children the first and most essential step to assimilate in the United States is to learn English. Recall that children from the Northern Triangle had low quality teachers, unsafe learning environment, and lack resources; thus, their proficiency in Spanish literacy is lower than immigrant children from other Latin American countries. According to international exams like TERCER, TIMSS, and PISA, students of the Northern Triangle perform below the Latin American average (Adelman and Szekely, 20). Moreover, a study conducted by the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras state that 30% of youth in the Northern Triangle between the ages of 14 to 25 do not study or work (Triángulo Norte: Construyendo Confianza, Creando Oportunidades, 2). In an interview with Patricia Cordova, a consular official from El Salvador, she mentioned that in fact many of the children that decide to immigrate come from poor municipalities with low levels of education\(^1\). Additionally,

\(^1\) Although her statements were primarily based on data from El Salvador, she mentioned that since 2014, after the surge of unaccompanied immigrant minor, the countries of the Northern Triangle have been working together. Thus, some of her comment could also applied to Guatemala and Honduras due to the similar immigration pattern in all three countries.
research shows that first language literacy is related to literacy development in English, including reading comprehension, reading strategies, spelling and writing (Geva and Genesee, 8-6). This implies that the pre-migration factor (low Spanish literacy proficiency) will make it more challenging for Northern Triangle children to learn English. Meanwhile, their post-migration condition have located them in low-income communities with poor schools that lack the adequate funding for programs and qualified teachers. In relation to the educational programs, “researchers disagree about whether it is more effective to teach English to non-English speakers through bilingual instruction or English immersion...[however researchers]...assert that the pedagogical strategy is less consequential than the quality of instruction”(Tienda and Haskins, 5). This emphasizes the importance of qualified teachers, which unfortunately many schools in low-income community lack. Thus, creating additional disadvantages for Northern Triangle immigrant children.

Another factor these children will bring along with them is their experience with violence. The exposure to violence tends to leave a mark that affects the children’s academic and personal development. According to the School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley, Central Americans are more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to a history of violence and exposure to trauma during the migration process. They also state that due to the ambiguity of the symptoms, they often go untreated (PTSD in Central American Immigrants in the U.S.). Along with this pre-migration factor, these children have to confront the cultural shock they encounter in school. People with PTSD report having difficulty sleeping and concentrating, which means that children with such symptoms are unable to perform to the best of their ability in their schoolwork. Their actions and behavior could be
misinterpreted by teachers, which can lead to incorrect assumptions that these immigrant children are not smart enough and/or lazy. Furthermore, insufficient research on PTSD and its impact on immigrant children from the Northern Triangle demonstrate the lack of concern and unwillingness to address this problem. It’s important to also consider that many of these children attend poorly funded schools. This suggests that even if the deserving attention was given to such issue, the schools these children attend would not be able to tackle the problem due to more pressing issues with native-born poor students and budget constraints. Hence, immigrant children are left on their own to deal with this issue while simultaneously expected to perform well academically.

When the consequences of the two pre-migration factors (low quality education and experience with violence) come together they can create a situation of frustrations and affect these children’s interactions with schools. On the one hand, is the difficulty of learning English, which can make them feel estranged with the American culture they encounter in schools. On the other, they might be facing internal problems due to PTSD, which can even make them less interested in pursuing a mainstream assimilating. Consequently, pushing aside aspirations of pursuing higher education and thereof upward economic mobility. According to the U.S Census Bureau, 24.8% of Central American foreign-born immigrants have a high school degree or equivalent (16). However, a significant portion of these immigrant students doesn’t obtain higher education. Only 9% of them have a Bachelor’s Degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 16). A very probable explanation for these statistics can be the combination of low proficiency in English and

\[2\] This does not include Mexican immigrants. Additionally, during this time a significant number of Central American immigrants were from El Salvador (39.9%), Guatemala (27.3%), and Honduras (17.2%). Essentially, the Northern Triangle immigrants accounted for 84.4% of Central American immigrants (http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states). Thus, this figure it’s a relatively good representation of the graduation rates for immigrant (foreign-born) students of the Northern Triangle.
low academic performance. For the Northern Triangle children, this academic outcome will also have its ramifications once they move to the labor force. The same report by the U.S Census Bureau show that among foreign-born Latin American immigrants, Central American\(^3\) foreign-born immigrants are the second largest group in service (36%), construction/maintenance\(^4\) (20.5%), and production\(^5\) (19.5%) jobs, which are usually low-paying jobs (18). As these immigrant children grow up and have families on their own, their families will continue to be in the same economic status as the previous generation. Hence, it’s evident that the experiences lived in their home country will create greater disadvantages for the children from the Northern Triangle relative to other immigrant children from Latin American. Ultimately, this makes them more likely to experience a downward assimilation.

**Conclusion**

For immigrant children, “the process of growing up in America oscillates between smooth acceptance and traumatic confrontation depending on the characteristics that immigrants and their children bring along and the social context that received them” (Portes and Zhou, 75). The poor quality education the Northern Triangle children were exposed to and the violence they saw and experience in their country of origin pre-positions them at a disadvantage in the United States, even before they arrived. The limits of the parent’s social networks (family members, friends, and/or acquaintances) pulls these children to low-income communities with poor public schools that are unable to tackle the pre-migration factors the children bring along with them from El Salvador,

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\(^3\) This does not include Mexican Immigrants, who is the group of foreign-born immigrants with most of it labor in service, construction, and production jobs.

\(^4\) In the same category as constructions, the U.S. census also included natural resource.

\(^5\) In the same category as production, the U.S. census also included transportation and material moving.
Guatemala, and Honduras. Thus, the difficulties they encounter in school leads them to be disenchanted by the mainstream assimilation of graduating high school, attend college, and move up in the economic ladder. Although 24.8% of these immigrant children do graduate high school, only 9% actually earned a Bachelors degree. However, its important to highlight something Patricia Cordova, the Salvadorian consulate official mentioned, “not aspiring to pursue higher education is not seen as a lost to them because regardless of their education level, in their perspectives they will be doing better economically relative to what their economic situation would have been back home”. The interaction between pre- and post- migration factors lead them to assimilate downwards, which means they maintain the low economic status of their parents and the low-income communities they live in. It’s important to notice that a significant element that makes these immigrant children more likely to assimilate downward was the experiences they brought with them. The children from the Northern Triangle share the same social context with other Latin American immigrant groups, yet these other groups have statistical indicators that show they are better off compared to immigrants from the Northern Triangle. Overall, this allows us to see the greater disadvantages that immigrant children from the Northern Triangle have to face in the United States.
Work Cited


