

Looking for Pura Vida: Disgruntled Parents in Search of Educational Alternatives in Costa Rica

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ABSTRACT

Using a transnational theoretical framework, this study explores U.S. families expatriating to Guanacaste, Costa Rica in search of educational alternatives to U.S. schooling. In order to meet the needs of this influx of U.S. families to the region, schools such as La Paz Community School in Flamingo, Guanacaste have emerged. This qualitative inquiry explores emergent themes from 16 semi-structured interviews conducted with US parents whose children attend La Paz. Findings reveal participants' desire for a progressive educational alternative for their children that embraces a more collective vision of learning. For interviewees, frustrations with U.S. K-12 schools became symbolic of cultural criticism of US social norms and the desire to recreate a lifestyle removed from daily pressures in the United States.

Keywords: international education, transnational migration, white privilege, parental satisfaction

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

For a small but growing number of families not satisfied with educational options in the United States, the answer has been found in the small Latin American country of Costa Rica. Utilizing ongoing qualitative research on U.S. Expatriates in Costa Rica since 2005, this paper analyzes the latest wave of migration: Disgruntled Parents looking for alternatives to U.S. K-12 schooling. Through

observation of daily practices at a Costa Rican community-based school, in addition to 16 semi-structured interviews with U.S. emigrants or ‘expat’ families who have relocated to Costa Rica for schooling opportunities, consistent themes in their rationale for leaving U.S. public schools were found. These themes include: Too Much Emphasis placed on High Stakes Testing; Lack of Socio-Emotional and Creative Development; and the Need for Greater Global Awareness and Social Responsibility in U.S. K-12 curriculum. These same themes are often the focus of debate for U.S. K-12 reform and serve as the incentive for enrolling children in alternative school models such as charter and magnet schools, homeschooling or private schools. However, for the participants of this study, such alternatives were not sufficient. Instead, they chose to leave the cultural norms and daily pressures embedded in U.S. culture that often reproduced in its schools, regardless of model type. For these families, Costa Rica has become the ideal relocation destination, and La Paz Community schools reflect the ideals that parents are craving for their kids as well as themselves. Using a transnational theoretical framework, this article examines immigrants from the U.S. in Costa Rica who identify as expatriates or “expats” while highlighting the sentiments of the participants of this study as they reflect on their decision to relocate to Guanacaste, Costa Rica to find educational alternatives for their children and redefine conceptions of self, home, and community.

U.S. Emigration to Costa Rica

Costa Rica, with its lush tropical forests, vibrant culture and proximity to the United States, has been a popular destination for decades for eco-travelers needing rest, rejuvenation and a little adventure. Unique to other Central American countries, Costa Rica has a long history of political peace. Moreover, instead of depleting its natural resources for survival, it has utilized them for economic stability and growth. Because of these factors, Costa Rica has not only been an attractive vacationing spot but also a long-time relocation site for immigrants from around the world. U.S. emigrants, in particular, have been relocating to Costa Rica for centuries. In her ethnography, *Imported Spices*, anthropologist Anita Gregorio Murchie (1981) examines Anglo-American settlers who came to Costa Rica between 1821-1900. She claims there were four primary reasons for U.S. citizens emigrating to Costa Rica during this time: the search for personal gain, specific professional employment opportunities, disasters (such as shipwrecks or wars), and/or adventure (p.10). Although patterns of migration have changed for many U.S. emigrants or “expats” relocating to Costa Rica today, the reasons ironically have not.

One of the first modern-day waves of U.S. migration to Costa Rica can be seen among retirees. Since the 1980s, thousands of retired U.S. senior citizens have recognized the advantages of either seasonally or permanently relocating to Costa Rica due to its affordable costs of living, quality health care and warm climate. Beginning in the 1990s, a growing number of young, single adults from

the United States began moving to the country in search of surfing adventures and soon began forming “expat communities” along the coasts of Costa Rica (Howells, 2003; Lara, Barry, & Simonson, 1995; [author]; Van Rheenen, 2017). By the 2000s, living in Costa Rica had become a craze. The infrastructure within the country had continued to develop, resulting in roads, airports and accommodations that met the standards of even the most cautious of travelers. As a result, investment opportunities were endless, particularly along the Northwest coast of Costa Rica in the Guanacaste Province. Young adults and families began relocating to this region in droves. Everyone was in search of an adventure and economic opportunity. Many of the U.S. emigrants during this period were not coming with a lot of money or education necessarily. Nevertheless, there was a desire to create a new life (CNBC, 2005; Porter, 2009; Chacon, 2018). Often likened to the Wild West, this time in Costa Rica’s immigrant history involved booming real estate exchanges, including the rise of residential developments and immigrant-owned businesses. Everyone was rushing to find a deal and start the globalized version of the American Dream. Then, the 2008 economic collapse occurred and the frenzy to relocate to Costa Rica froze. Incoming U.S. emigrants with plans for investment ceased causing economic hardships for those already in the country with existing restaurants, shops and small businesses that catered to U.S. travelers and recent arrivals. Although many immigrants from the U.S. living in Costa Rica tried to remain, numerous returned to the United States, leaving vacant dwellings and unfinished construction projects scattered along the roadsides.

Steadily, the market began to stabilize, and the lure of Costa Rica began to attract U.S. travelers to visit Guanacaste, Costa Rica instigating them to imagine possibilities for how to remain permanently. Since 2013, this region of Costa Rica has experienced its next wave of U.S. emigrants emerging: educated, socially conscious, politically moderate to liberal, middle-upper class white parents intentionally selecting communities they wished to raise their children while maintaining transnational economic ties to the United States (Porter, 2009).

Guanacaste: The location of choice for U.S. expats

Following the urban center of San Jose, Costa Rica’s capital, the Guanacaste province has the highest number of immigrants from the U.S. in all of Costa Rica and is one of the fastest-growing areas in the country (Porter, 2009; Stevens, 2012). Three of the most popular communities for expatriates relocating to Guanacaste are Tamarindo, Flamingo, and Potrero. Spanning approximately fifteen miles in distance from one another, these communities not only offer beach living but also have coalesced into a region with strong expatriate community ties to the United States. However, despite the established networking among U.S. expatriates, a significant “gap” or stratification (social, cultural, and economic) has formulated between expatriates and Guanacastecos (individuals

from Costa Rica of Latin or indigenous descent whose families have lived in Guanacaste for multiple generations).

Formation and distinction of La Paz community school

In 2007, I had just completed an extensive critical ethnography in this region of Guanacaste that included 35 individual interviews with 21 U.S. emigrants or “expats” and 14 Guanacastecos. The focus of these interviews examined the growth of Guanacaste, the socio-cultural and economic impact that the rising number of immigrants were having on the region, and the immense socio-economic stratification between the two communities. One of the findings from this study was a desire by both immigrants from the U.S. and Guanacastecos to establish a community center or space where families could begin to understand and appreciate one another’s cultures while fostering intercultural relationships. Recognizing the growth of the region and the sentiments reflected in the study, a group of six U.S. bilingual educators living and teaching in the Guanacaste Province began to envision possibilities of an intercultural community school. They held numerous public meetings in the spring and summer of 2007 and worked collaboratively with various community members to open La Paz Community School in the fall of 2007.

Prior to the start of La Paz, an established U.S. accredited school was the choice option for most U.S. families with school-age children relocating to the beaches of Northern Guanacaste. Offering PK-12 schooling, the facility was designed with most of the amenities one would find in a typical U.S. school, including U.S. certified teachers, a library with book titles found in public K-12 school libraries in the States, and multiple after school extra-curricular activities. Although wealthy Costa Rican or “Tico” families attended this school with a token number of “beca” or scholarship kids from local towns, the school’s enrollment was predominately comprised of U.S. emigrants followed by immigrants from Canada and Western Europe who lived in the communities of Tamarindo, Flamingo or Potrero. The school provided assurances for parents that their child would have a quality U.S. educational experience in the middle of Costa Rica. It also offered transnational fluidity whereby students could seamlessly return to schooling in the United States at any point. Additionally, the school represented the familiar for U.S. families and created an insulated expatriate community.

Despite having a full-service U.S. accredited school down the road, La Paz has grown astronomically since its inception in 2007. As this next wave of U.S. emigrants looked for amenities, their motivation was to find an alternative to the familiar rather than a replication of what they had chosen to leave behind. They were looking for an experience, and La Paz reflected the lifestyle and learning environment that fueled their relocation. The school opened with 15 students and as of 2018, reached full capacity with 350 students. Most of this growth has occurred within the last five years. La Paz’s mission is to offer a

“forward thinking model of education where students from Costa Rica and all over the world join together to learn how to be creative, multilingual, compassionate and responsible global leaders while engaging in authentic learning experiences focused heavily on developing a students’ sense of place in the world.” (La Paz, 2018). Although the school’s Costa Rican student enrollment has grown dramatically and has maintained at least a 50% enrollment rate since its inception, during an in-depth interview in June of 2016, the director of La Paz explained how applicants since 2015 have predominately been U.S. families looking for a particular educational experience for their child/children. This trend has continued based on a follow-up interview with the director in June of 2018.

The question becomes, why La Paz? Why are these families not simply enrolling in private schools within the United States in lieu of its K-12 public school system and all of its shortcomings? Perhaps it is simply the perfect combination of place, time, and need coming together. However, this assumption de-emphasizes both the motive of these immigrants’ decision to relocate as well as the intentionality of La Paz’s organizational design. Participants of this study were in search of an alternative narrative that was not found in the United States because much of the impetus for relocation was about the United States itself and the dominant ideologies reproduced in the schools. Costa Rica, with its history of receiving U.S. emigrants and its proximity to the United States, provided a relatively smooth transition for relocating, purchasing property (which is allowable for foreigners with passports), and even starting a business with its enticing incentives for investors. This quest for an experience outside the daily nuances of U.S. culture may explain why the United States’ private schools were not satisfying alternatives. However, it does not address the question of how La Paz became the site of choice.

One could argue that the answer is found in its namesake: La Paz. Much like the country of Costa Rica itself, La Paz is committed to peace. The school follows personal, community and world peace practices that embody compassion, respect, communication and service. Through experiential learning and critical thinking, students are viewed as valuable contributors and problem solvers within and beyond the walls of the school. In less than a decade, La Paz has managed to receive national recognition from the Costa Rican presidency, attained Costa Rica and International Baccalaureate (IB) accreditation, and has become an academic model visited by educators from the United States and around the globe. Its mission: daily student-led meetings emphasizing mindfulness and community planning, the mixed socio-economic enrollment of Costa Ricans and foreigners, integrated multi-aged curricular activities, and learning strategies such as growth-mindset charts and problem-solving wheels observed throughout the school are just a few of the characteristics that make it enticing. In many ways, La Paz reflects the ideals of an intentionally designed community that parents not only crave for their children but also for themselves.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalization impacts every facet of daily life, from products to policies to patterns. Communication and travel between locations have become more commonplace than ever. As the number of multinational corporations grows, and technological advances continue to increase, job opportunities abroad have become more available, and interfacing from afar through telecommunications is now commonplace. Often a result of globalization that Harvey (1989) first referred to as “time-space compression,” working professionals today are now able to complete projects, participate in conference meetings and conduct financial transactions from anywhere in the world via the internet. Although employment opportunities have been a determined “pull factor” in migration studies for decades, the impact of globalization on creating more fluidity traversing home/host spaces has led to the field of inquiry known as transnational migration (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994; Glick Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc, 1995; Guarnizo, 1994; Lundstrom, 2014; Portes, Guarnzino, & Lagegan, 1999; Guarnizo & Smith, 1998).

Portes et al. (1999) were instrumental in establishing the concept of transnational migration by distinguishing much of today’s migration flows from immigrant patterns prior to the era of globalization. They argue that today’s “phenomenon” or flow of migrants involves a proportionally high number of individuals and contend that opportunities arising from globalization are unique in nature and offer ongoing possibilities. Transnational migrants or “transmigrants,” according to the foundational scholarship of anthropologists Glick Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc (1995) are

[I]mmigrants whose daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state (Basch et al., 1994). They are not sojourners because they settle and become incorporated in the economy and daily life of the country in which they reside. However, at the very same time, they are engaged elsewhere in the sense that they maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated. (p. 48)

Portes et al. (1999) furthered the distinction of transnational migration from earlier patterns by stating:

The greater the access of an immigrant group to space-and-time-compressing technology, the greater the frequency and scope of this sort of activity. Immigrant communities with greater average economic resources and human capital (education and professional skills) should

register higher levels of transnationalism because of their superior access to the infrastructure that makes these activities possible. By the same token, it follows that the more distant the nation of origin the less dense the set of transnational enterprises, other things being equal. This hypothesis is grounded on the higher cost and generally greater difficulty of regular contact imposed by longer distances. (p. 224)

These descriptions of transmigrants/transnational migration not only rely upon social and economic ties to two locations but also link high levels of transnational activities to socioeconomic class dynamics. In their attempt to distinguish the multiple “transnational morphologies,” Yeoh, Willis, & Fakhri, (2003) claim that transnational activities are often differentiated in terms of “levels” (Yeoh et al., p. 209). Wealthy, educated, professional, entrepreneurial elites are often referred to as “globetrotters,” “extraterritorials,” “cosmopolitans,” “expatriates,” “flexible citizens,” “denizens,” or “transnational bourgeoisie” (Bauman, 1998; Cohen, 1997; Ley & Waters, 2004; Ong, 1999; Smith, 2003). Privileged transmigrants have often been referred to as examples of “transnationalism from above” (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998; Jackson, Crang, & Dwyer, 2004; Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000). The phrasing of “Transnationalism from below” is often used to describe transmigrants that cross borders as “unskilled migrant workers, low-paid guest workers, refugees, and exiles” (Yeoh, Willis, & Fakhri, 2003, p. 209). The purpose for such terminology has been to draw attention to the degrees of difference between transmigrants today:

We cannot compare the fortnightly phone call and the desperately small amounts of money remitted by poor Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in the Gulf States to the transnational business deals of the cosmopolitan entrepreneurs. . . . While all of these transactions are transnational, the actors have very different points of departures or degrees of autonomy over the nature of those transnational transactions (Westwood & Phizacklea, 2000, p.117-118).

In her analysis of wealthy Chinese elites in Hong Kong, Aiwah Ong (1999) claims that flexibility, relocation, and mobility have long been a part of the migration process. However, as a result of transnationalism, they are no longer “coerced” or “resisted” but instead have become “practices to strive for rather than stability” particularly for the transnational migrant elites (p. 6). More recently, Catrin Lundstrom’s multi-sited ethnography of privileged Swedish women and migration examines whiteness as social capital that is both transnational and permeable. She decodes white migration as an “oxymoron” and focuses specifically on white Swedish expatriates in three different countries. She

illustrates how the whiteness of her participants shapes and informs their lives as transmigrants (Lundstrom, 2014).

Transnational migration is a concept that helps situate the growing number of U.S. citizens emigrating to Costa Rica. Self-identifying as expatriates or “expats” vs. immigrants, this group of middle-upper class white transmigrants has the flexibility and financial means to relocate while maintaining social, political, economic and cultural ties to the United States that affords them the ability to traverse international borders in a search of a subjectively better life. In this case, white educated parents are able to utilize their privilege in finding an educational alternative where their kids are flourishing, and their families are finding balance amidst a beautiful, safe and inviting country. This study also shows how transnational migration can be used as a mechanism for dissent that contributes to larger discussions surrounding educational criticism in the United States. Although reliant upon their national identity and economic ties in the U.S. to be able to sustain their new lifestyle, they are choosing to reject the daily customs and pressures of the United States by physically relocating to Costa Rica.

RESEARCH METHOD

To better understand perceptions of current K-12 public schooling in the US, the pull factors of La Paz Community School and this most recent wave of U.S. expatriates to Guanacaste, I spent three weeks in the summer of 2016 studying the region and returned again in the summer of 2018 for a follow-up visit to the school/region. My methodology relies on primary data gathered through 20 semi-structured interviews of 4 La Paz staff members and 16 U.S. expatriate families whose child/children attend the school, totaling 36 hours worth of interviews. This data was then coded for salient themes using grounded theory from a constructivist perspective (Charmaz, 2014). Additionally, I collected archival and statistical data on the school and its surrounding area’s real estate growth. I also observed classroom instruction, school climate, including the usage of space at La Paz Community, and interactions between expats and Ticos at the school and in the community-at-large. Although my observations and data analyses were useful in framing interview questions on the school and region, this paper focuses primarily on responses from interviews collected. Trustworthiness (referencing reliability and validity) for research reliant upon grounded theory is derived from prolonged interaction with participants, the thick description of data collected, the triangulation of data (combining interviews, observations and collected data) as well as clarifying questions on interview transcripts directed to participants during the analysis (Sikolia, Biros, Mason & Weiser, 2013). The predominant themes that emerged during my analysis of why U.S. families were leaving U.S. schools for La Paz included: *Too Much Emphasis placed on High Stakes Testing in U.S. K-12 Schools; Lack of Socio-Emotional*

and Creative Development; and the Need for Global Awareness and Social Responsibility in U.S. K-12 curriculum.

Participants

La Paz families who had emigrated to Costa Rica from the United States with school-aged children were invited to participate. U.S. families who arrived in Costa Rica with babies/toddlers or who gave birth since relocating to Costa Rica were not included in the pool since their children had no prior experience with U.S. schooling. Interviews with parents lasted approximately an hour and a half and addressed a myriad of topics, including parental educational and professional backgrounds, reasons for relocating to Costa Rica, current ties to the United States, parenting styles, experiences with schools (both public and private) in the U.S., and long-term plans. I have changed all the identifying information about my participants to maintain confidentiality. With the exception of two families, each family interviewed said that they emigrated to Guanacaste, Costa Rica with the specific intention of their child attending La Paz. The driving motivation for the study was to understand why. The following section will introduce the families interviewed in the summer of 2016 and general themes that arose regarding their reasons for pulling their children out of U.S. K-12 schools in order to relocate to Costa Rica.

RESULTS

When comparing the 16 U.S. families interviewed in the summer of 2016 to the 21 U.S. families interviewed in the 2005-2007 critical ethnography discussed earlier in this article, stark differences appeared. Although both sets of participants were predominately white (with only one exception from each pool), there were shifts in the socioeconomic backgrounds, political affiliations as well as the regions in the United States from which they emigrated. Families that have arrived since the economic collapse in 2008 are coming with advanced education degrees and more financial assets, including strong transnational employment ties in the United States while residing in Costa Rica. Families who came prior to 2008 tended to come with the intention of building financial sustainability within Costa Rica through Real Estate Development or by opening service-related businesses to expatriate clientele (restaurants, gyms, salons, etc.). Fourteen out of the 16 in the 2016 pool of participants associated with the political left compared to the previous study where both sides of the political spectrum were represented, with the majority identifying as moderate to conservative.

The biggest shift in the two pools of families was the role that schooling played in the relocation process to Costa Rica. In the earlier study, families indicated their desire to find a family adventure and build economic opportunities in the Guanacaste Region. Although school was a consideration, the U.S.

accredited school was an easy solution that offered a quality education for these families if they were able to afford it. With the second pool, the priorities had shifted. The majority of applicants indicated that K-12 schooling was one of the primary motivators for relocating, and often linked their decision to larger societal frustrations surrounding consumerism and the lack of community ties and compassion for others.

Of the families interviewed in 2016, only two of the 16 were single-child families, and one of the families was a single-parent household. Thirteen were coming directly from public school districts in the United States (one of these public schools was a charter school). Two of the families transferred to La Paz from private schools and one of the 16 families homeschooled in the States before arriving.

Areas of Discontent with U.S. Public Schools

As stated in the methodology section, parent interview responses fall into three overarching themes: *Too Much Emphasis placed on High Stakes Testing; Lack of Socio-Emotional and Creative Development; and the Need for Greater Global Awareness and Social Responsibility in U.S. K-12 curriculum.* These themes illustrate the experiences that students face within U.S. schools that mirror contemporary critiques found within the sociology of education and today's critical education research. Additionally, these themes build upon participants' discontent for the predominant values embedded within American culture.

High stakes testing

High stakes standardized testing has become a point of contention in U.S. educational policy since President G. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" legislation became law in 2002. Although formal assessment tools have existed long before NCLB, public postings that rank or "grade" school performance and correlate funding with assessment gains had not. Since 2002, the phrase "teaching to the test" has become a common coping mechanism for teachers struggling to increase their students' performance and meet the demands of administrators who want to maintain leadership of the school (without state intervention). In fact, the public at large has added to these pressures placed on educators and students by touting school districts' high scores for real estate and investment partnerships, thereby fueling a competitive and consumerist mentality surrounding education (Farkas & Duffet, 2015).

Testing plays a powerful role in developing the culture of today's schools. Pep rallies, student chants, scoreboards, and timed computer games are just some of the strategies used to raise the importance of standardized tests and the pressure to increase performance on a school-wide level. What is the consequence of such an intense focus on a formal assessment? One of the most discussed consequences of "high stakes testing" beyond the pedagogical

limitations placed on teachers has been the increase in testing anxiety leading not only to physical ailments (stomach and bowel issues) but also perceptions of self-worth for the student (Duncan & Stevens, 2011; Luther & Becker, 2002; Jehlen, 2007; Weissbourd, 2011; Wilde, 2008).

Because of the intense focus on testing in today's U.S. schools, it was no surprise to see *high stakes testing* as the most emergent theme raised by participants of the 2016 case study; significantly 15 out of the 16 families interviewed, discussed testing as one of the biggest problems facing U.S. K-12 education today. Jessica, one of the participants of this study, discussed the issue of testing anxiety and how early it begins for children:

I watched my child enter kindergarten in the U.S. with glee in her eyes for learning. After multiple worksheets, limited play-based learning and excessive seat time, I didn't think it could get any worse. That is until we entered the testing phase. By the third grade, she hated school and was always talking about testing. She became very introverted and always asked if her test scores were good enough. I couldn't stand it anymore. I felt as if I was harming my child by sending her to school. Who would have ever thought a parent would feel this way?

This particular quote reveals the incredible pressure that children endure within today's culture of testing in U.S. schools while also conveying a sense of helplessness on the part of parents toward alleviating this anxiety or helping sustain their child's love for learning. Several other parents expressed Jessica's sentiments, including Mary, who talked about how teachers are blatantly aware of the impact testing is having but feel powerless. She reflected on her son's experience:

When he entered 1st grade, the state standards changed and all first graders were required to write a story with a beginning, middle and end. We were continually told that he was at level 3 but needed to be at level 8. As a six-year-old, he suffered from serious anxiety. I knew this would kill his love of reading. During a teacher conference, his teacher actually said, "These requirements are completely developmentally inappropriate but that is what we are required to do."

Interestingly, three of the parents interviewed were trained educators with K-12 teaching experience in the States. They not only reflected on their disgruntlement as parents but also as trained professionals. They, like the teacher of Mary's son, knew the strategies in use are causing harm. One of these individuals reflected on her recent exit from U.S. school teaching:

I saw kids' love of learning get squashed more than I can count. The testing culture is a systematic toxin. As a teacher, we had eight-year-olds with stomachaches. It is why parents are coming here [Costa Rica] because it isn't working. Children's needs just aren't being met.

High stakes testing was not only criticized as an ineffective measure for assessing learning but also the impetus for establishing school climates obsessed with results, regardless of the cost. In this case, the cost was anxiety, exhaustion and feelings of inadequacy. In describing their children's experiences with high stakes testing, multiple parents empathized with pressures their children faced. One participant admitted, "Leaving the intense pressures of our life in the States was a freeing experience for all of us." Costa Rica has become an alternative or a release valve for those who no longer see the American lifestyle as the ideal.

Supporting the whole child

As testing dominates our growing schools, students can quickly become a number whose performance is monitored primarily through exam scores. Developing student creativity, communication, and collaboration skill sets have become secondary. Teachers have lost the ability to individualize instruction, conduct authentic assessment or take the time to learn about students in a more intimate way in order to support their interest and independent learning (Garcia & Weiss, 2016; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Rothstein, Wilder, & Jacobsen, 2007). The results can be detrimental. Students, as a result, can quickly "fall through the cracks." Ironically, in all of the aspirations to excel, mediocrity is what often results.

Eleven out of the 16 families interviewed discussed their sentiments about children being "simply a number" in U.S. schools and the lack of individualized attention provided. One mother talked about her frustration in watching her daughter's interests and learning capabilities neglected because she was not in need of additional test preparation. Instead, her daughter was instructed to read independently for large periods of the day while her peers received instruction. Tracy, another parent, shared her frustration about how little time teachers in the States took to understand the needs of each student. Everything was about making the grade. She felt her kids were quickly labeled as special needs because they were unable to sit in the classroom for eight hours:

We came here solely for the education. We were in a very sheltered, homogeneous bed and breakfast community. In the US, our sons faced the typical boy syndrome where they weren't as ready as the girls to sit still and needed guidance. They often skipped steps on assignments and moved around a lot. Their teachers didn't know them at all. Whenever any issue came up with the boys, the response that was always given was that they both had learning challenges. But at La Paz, teachers care

about who they are and what works for each child. Because of this, they are soaring.

Both of these participant testimonials speak to the need and desire for differentiated instruction in U.S. schools that incorporate various learning modalities and socio-emotional growth. Regardless of the experience and effectiveness of a given teacher, flexible schedules and multi-modal teaching is thwarted by growing class sizes and high-stakes testing.

Due to aging family members in the United States, Tracy's family planned on returning to the United States in the coming school year. She concluded her interview by saying, "Now my kids will go back to bells, standing in lines and sitting all day at school." Repeatedly, interviewees discussed how their relocation was a transformative experience. They shared at length how they had seen their child's demeanor shift from invisible to visible, shy to confident, anxious to calm, sad to happy after enrolling in La Paz. Beth shared her perception of this transition,

In the beginning, my kids were always asking their teachers for permission to do anything. It is great to see them relax into their role as a student. My daughter was a follower because she was so shy in the States. Here, she is a leader and feels smart.

Multiple private school models in the United States reject the usage of standardized testing and pride themselves on experiential learning and whole-child instruction. Nevertheless, the daily pressures found within broader U.S. culture minimize their viability as an option for parents seeking lasting change. Parents talked about how their long work weeks, in addition to their child's hectic school and extracurricular schedules, prevented any time for focusing on a balanced lifestyle. The cultural "pura vida" climate within Costa Rica coupled with the educational mission of La Paz school creates an alternative that feels more authentic in honoring the whole person—both child and parent.

Social responsibility

Parents who have enrolled their children at La Paz are seeking an experience that builds their child's ability to operate outside of the familiar, removed from their daily comforts and routines within the States. Specifically, parents emphasized their commitment in their child gaining a heightened global awareness that allows them to become socially engaged, accepting of differences and diversities while becoming bilingual/biliterate as a result of La Paz's Two-Way Language Immersion model. Jacob reflected on the experience of his two children in this way, "Not only are my kids bilingual, they have a worldwide awareness they'd never had if they'd remained in the States, they have amazing comfort speaking to others with confidence that they never had." This level of

comfort for difference was expressed multiple times. One set of parents echoed this sentiment stating,

They are learning purely for the love of learning and sharing that knowledge with the community in order to make a real difference in the world. They are learning that there are many different people in the world and to feel comfortable with differences. They are learning how to follow their inner voice while honoring diverse voices and ways of thinking. They are learning how to not only envision possibilities but also work together in achieving them.

Hannah reflected on this newly founded comfort from a socio-economic and cultural lens:

You are who you are and my kids have a better idea about that and their own identities through their experience at La Paz. They are more comfortable walking into anyone's home and being gracious whether it is a million-dollar home or a home with dirt floors, they are comfortable, respectful and gracious. This makes me happy.

Like Hannah, part of the global understanding that parents wanted their children to begin to develop involved a removal from the competitive materialism evident in K-12 schooling. Numerous stories were shared during interviews about kids being picked on if they did not wear name brand apparel or have the latest iPhone. Tom, one of the parents interviewed, put it simply, "When you live outside of the United States, you can really begin to see the addiction to consumerism. We wanted to teach our children that there are different ways to live." Recurrently, as parents were reflecting on hopes for their children they simultaneously articulated their rejection of U.S. cultural norms. As a result, La Paz became symbolic of an educational experience for the child that reflects the preferred values of the parents.

As stated previously, in addition to 16 family interviews conducted, I had the opportunity to interview four La Paz staff. One of the founding La Paz staff members interviewed said that the school's commitment to egalitarianism and sustainability is challenging for some. "The mindset that the world is more than one's lived experiences can cause growth pains particularly for new U.S. arrivals to La Paz." He reflected on the transitional process and said that it takes around six months for kids from the States to begin to open their minds to different ways of thinking and doing. He jokingly referred to it as the "Lapazification process." Another La Paz staff member reflected on this process in this way:

It is so interesting to see U.S. students come down and try to see different perspectives. I've watched the process of students becoming unstuck and less rigid around their own beliefs as they become more open to multiple perspectives. By the end of the year, U.S. kids are so much happier, grateful and aware of their actions. It is like a metamorphosis. They come out of their head and emerge from ethnocentrism.

The staff at La Paz talked about how this process can also be observed in their interactions with parents. As one staff member said, "In the United States, it is customary to demand certain things and think your ways are superior." Occasionally, families will relocate to Guanacaste because they have dreams of living internationally with fewer attachments to U.S. comforts and practices. However, in reality, the socio-cultural differences become too much and they soon return home. In most cases, parents too begin to feel a sense of freedom and a renewed commitment to the community and world. Gloria, one of the parents interviewed with high-school-aged children at La Paz said, "We work hard to un-entrench ourselves from the rigid mentality in the States. We like living here better, simply put." Gloria, like other parents, felt empowered that her family had left the United States and expressed how they had become more globally conscious of the world around them by doing so.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

La Paz community school as the site of this study bore a great impact on the expatriates' decision to relocate as well as remain in Costa Rica. Although the level of frustration for U.S. public schools varied greatly between participants of this study, all but one of the participants' confidence in La Paz as a place of learning far surpassed their faith in U.S. schools. The parent who differed in her response said she wanted to have more structure with a set routine in addition to a larger circle of peers for her child. Ironically, the remaining 15 found these reasons to be motivators for staying in Costa Rica. Multiple comments were made about the entrenched routines and rigid policies found in the educational system of the States. As one parent put it, "Trying to change anything within the K-12 system is like shoveling shit against the tide. From the teacher to the principal to the superintendent. It is a hopeless and maddening effort."

Drawing from their liberal political ideology, most participants of this study left the United States seeking a progressive educational alternative for their children that embraced a more collective and global vision of learning and the world. Yet, the question remains at what cost? Must one leave a school, system, and country in order to find a better educational experience? Alternatively, should a child remain in a mediocre and often troubled system in order to be a part of the change? For many of those interviewed, hope for change is no longer found

within repairing the system but abandoning it to support ideals that reflect how they would like the world to be.

As interviews continued, individual frustrations with U.S. K-12 schools became symbolic of cultural criticism on U.S. cultural norms. Schools, often a reflection of the society that created them, became the tipping point for these families in reassessing life and its priorities. Even though finding an alternative educational experience was a primary factor for relocating to Costa Rica, parents soon found themselves experiencing a sense of renewal with the opportunity to hit the reset button. By relocating, they gained the opportunity to remove themselves from the stressors found in the United States and to create a carefully designed lifestyle that not only fosters experiential and global learning for their child but also shields them from the realities and pressures associated with the daily affairs in the United States. After all, when parents are happy, kids are happy and vice versa. Endless comments were shared during interviews about the relaxed atmosphere participants experienced in Costa Rica; the additional family time they were experiencing; new hobbies that had been acquired; self-care and holistic health treatments that were now daily routines; and a renewed love of learning as a family by attending La Paz. Unfortunately, relocation in search of better schooling opportunities and a more balanced and relaxed life is a pipe dream for most families.

The decision for these families to leave their daily routines and comforts takes courage, but it is also reliant upon privilege. Much like Catrin Lundstrom's ethnographic work on the migration of privileged Swedish women mentioned earlier in this article, U.S. emigrants in this study are able to rely upon their privilege as white educated U.S. citizens to transform their lives and the lives of their children by relocating. This relocation, however, reproduces many of the cultural capitalistic assumptions they are fleeing due to their transnational ties, social capital and economic resources that allow for their recreation of home in Costa Rica. Even the self-described terminology of "expats" points out the racial privilege and power of these U.S. families. Despite the varied reasons why individuals across the globe relocate, the term "expatriate" is seldom used to describe transnational flows. It is never used, for example, to describe immigrants in the United States from Mexico, Kenyans in the United Kingdom, Filipinos in China or even Nicaraguans in Costa Rica. Rather, its usage has been given an elite status and reserved exclusively for white European and North American emigrants who migrate across the globe carrying their racial and national privilege across borders.

IMPLICATIONS

This study crosses multiple disciplinary lines and audiences. For migration scholars, this work provides an interesting example of transnational migration in today's world. Specifically, it explores push/pull factors that have inspired

families for generations to migrate across borders in search of educational opportunities and an improved quality of life. However, the focus of this study challenges common perceptions of push/pull factors and the direction of migratory flows, particularly as it relates to U.S. migration. In this case, the immigrant narrative in search of the American Dream in the United States has been replaced by educated, middle-upper class white families wishing to leave it. Through the topic of K-12 schooling, interviews revealed a desire to reject cultural norms embedded in the United States by consciously choosing to create a counter-narrative for families. Nevertheless, this counter-narrative is still reliant upon privileges derived from their lives in the United States (privileges associated with U.S. passport, ongoing employment in the U.S, financial assets in the U.S.).

For education scholars and policymakers, this study contributes to the growing critical educational research examining the state of today's U.S. public schools, including high-performing schools. Focusing on a particular school in one province of Costa Rica potentially limits the scope of this study and the myriad of possibilities why U.S. expatriates continue to relocate to Costa Rica. Additionally, comparing a small, international, private community school to suburban or urban U.S. K-12 experiences do not directly correlate. La Paz is a community model that would be difficult at best to replicate systematically. Doing so strips away the meaning of a community-based project. Despite these differences, examining school choice as a reason for relocating to Costa Rica is a compelling case study when analyzing the limitations of today's public schools and the lengths that parents will take to seek alternatives when resources permit. As one parent stated, "We are probably screwing ourselves professionally by relocating to Costa Rica but our kids are doing great and learning things that we could only hope to find in the States."

The 16 families who were interviewed from La Paz all left high performing districts. If parents from the most sought after schools within the U.S. are looking for alternatives, it is no longer solely an issue of educational access when critically examining U.S. K-12 schooling; it is about a broken system.

It would be in my home country's interest to make a change in the U.S. education system. I have never met a parent who is happy with it. Students are adaptable, and they will accept what they feel they cannot change. Parents are busy, and they will continue to go with the flow. The citizens will continue to fund it through their taxes. The PTA will continue to try, and hopefully make a difference. I realized that my children didn't have time for that. They needed a better system now. A significantly better system. We opted to leave our country for it. We realize that most Americans won't be able to exercise this option. If this study could be a catalyst for change, I am so happy to be a part.

Parents are expressing dissatisfaction and even helplessness while kids are feeling invisible and overly stressed. The industrious and productive fervor embedded within the U.S. cultural psyche is emblematic of what has been described as the faults of today's schools. In today's global economy, the ability to hear and understand one another demonstrates a "soft skill" that, at least for now, has not been valued nor implemented within U.S. public schooling. This suggests that the students who attend La Paz will be advantaged individually from their participation in it, but this phenomenon also reproduces inequality. Those who are able to attend a school like this reproduce class structures in the U.S. and globally. Further studies on the socio-economic impact of immigrants in Costa Rica from the U.S., as well as the impact of international community-based schools on Costa Rican's public schools, would provide additional insights to this topic.

One of the greatest contributions the United States has offered its citizens and the world is the idea of free public education. It has been an evolving process with multiple flaws throughout its history, but one like no other of its kind. Yet, if parents today are desperately trying to seek alternatives through lotteries, homeschooling, private education in the States or in this case, relocating to Costa Rica, the system and society which created it is in jeopardy. Steps toward repair will not be found in labeling students "at-risk" or schools as "failing" but in re-envisioning education for the 21st century that reflects a commitment to relationships and a love of learning for our future generations within and across borders. La Paz is an ideal that families across the U.S. are yearning to create and be a part of, and the challenge becomes in shifting the school as a site that reflects the social breakdowns of society to the model or catalyst that drives change.

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