



## Article

# Learning in Transit: Crossing Borders, Waiting, and Waiting to Cross

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**Abstract:** Recent U.S. policy changes have contributed to longer waiting periods for migrant families in Mexican border cities. This study centers on four Honduran families enrolled in the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) policy, also referred to as ‘Remain in Mexico,’ while undergoing prolonged waiting periods in the Mexican border town of Monterrey, Nuevo León. Centering on young people’s voices, we ask what they learn during this prolonged period of transit. Through ethnographic and digital participatory storytelling interviews, we illustrate how children learned about the politics of border crossing through fraught interactions with im/migration officials, prolonged periods of immobility, and evolving understandings of legality. Building on theories of ‘border thinking’ and ‘politicized funds of knowledge,’ we highlight ways that young people employed their evolving understandings of national borders and the legal contours of their transborder asylum process, while protecting themselves and their families from danger and discrimination. We argue that transit is not simply time that young people are forced to endure; rather, the experience of forced transit is constitutive of young people’s learning about state power and their evolving understanding of borders, rights, and belonging.

**Keywords:** im/migration; immigrant and refugee education; transit migration; Central America; youth; transborder; funds of knowledge



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## 1. Introduction

This paper builds on scholarship in anthropology, education, and migration studies, to examine migrant children’s learning during a unique political and historical moment—the confluence of border closures and restricted asylum processes associated with the Trump era, COVID-19, and beyond. Recent US policy changes have contributed to longer waiting periods for migrant families in Mexican border cities. Between January 2019 and February 2021, the Trump administration’s Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) policy, popularly known as ‘Remain in Mexico,’ returned 71,044 asylum seekers to Mexico (TRAC Immigration 2022)—including at least 16,000 children (Cooke et al. 2019)—to await US immigration proceedings. Fleeing conditions of violence, poverty, government corruption, and environmental precarity, Hondurans were the most prevalent population impacted by MPP during this initial policy time span, totaling 32% (23,059) of all MPP enrollments (TRAC Immigration 2022). Organizations advocating for migrant rights, journalists, researchers, and even the US Department of Homeland Security have confirmed that prolonged periods in Mexico exposed asylum seekers to elevated vulnerabilities, violence including kidnapping and extortion, discrimination, and homelessness (American Immigration Council 2022; Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación 2011; DHS 2021; Hernandez-Arriaga and Argenal 2023; PHR 2021). Yet despite these understandings, the policy continues to exist, albeit in new forms (American Immigration Council 2022).

To date, young people and family experiences with MPP have been largely absent from scholarship, given the methodological challenges of identifying impacted families

and gathering data during a global public health crisis, which further tightened national borders. (For some exceptions, see [Blue et al. 2021](#); [Hernandez-Arriaga and Argenal 2023](#); [Hernandez-Arriaga and Dominguez 2020](#); and [Torres et al. 2022](#).) Based on research with refugees, asylum seekers, and other displaced migrant young people, we might expect that experiences of prolonged displacement induced by the violence of national borders and border policies will be even more impactful on children, as trauma has distinct developmental consequences for young people's physical and mental health ([Estefan et al. 2017](#)). Prolonged waiting, uncertainty, chronic stress, and exposure to harm during childhood and adolescence have been associated with increased anxiety and other mental health needs amongst migrants (e.g., [Cohodes et al. 2021](#); [Vega Potler et al. 2023](#)). The material conditions where migrants are forced to wait also play a role in worsening health outcomes ([Heidbrink 2014](#); [Linton et al. 2018](#)). Feminist scholars emphasize the gendered vulnerability and resilience of migrant women and children as they embody the routine violence of immigration control and enforcement (e.g., [Torres 2018](#)), including prolonged transit associated with MPP ([Torres et al. 2022](#)).

Globally, extended periods of waiting and transit have become an increasingly normalized dimension of the migrant experience, associated with the expansion and externalization of state border enforcement practices to deter transborder movement ([Andersson 2014](#); [Stock et al. 2019](#)). This reality necessitates attention to migrants' orientation to both spatial movement across national borders and to their experiences with temporal structures and disjunctures associated with waiting ([Jacobsen et al. 2021](#)). It also serves as a reminder that the strategies of MPP are not new; rather, the policy is consistent with modern securitization approaches to migration enforcement, implemented by the US and other states.

This study centers on four Honduran families enrolled in the MPP program while undergoing prolonged waiting periods in the Mexican border town of Monterrey, Nuevo León. Through ethnographic and digital participatory storytelling interviews ([Torres and Carte 2012](#)) from January 2020 to April 2021, children and their primary caregivers—all mothers—reflected on their experiences en route as they left behind family members, friends, teachers, schools, and communities in Honduras, hired the perilous services of coyotes to escort them across Guatemala and Mexico, to the US border where they registered their claims for asylum and were subsequently redirected to “remain in Mexico”. There, they remained—waiting, or “in transit”—for 18–26 months. Through these data, we ask, how did Honduran migrant children enrolled in MPP make sense of and learn from their im/migration experiences while in transit?

In the section that follows, we locate MPP within the geopolitical context of increased securitization and externalization of US borders. We then build a theoretical framework around the spatial and temporal dimensions of transborder movement and the critical learning that young people engage in through transborder movement. From there, we describe the research methods for data collection and analysis. Our findings highlight educational interactions outside contexts of formal schooling, where Honduran migrant children learned about and enacted their agency in relation to im/migration decisions, danger, and discrimination. We illustrate how children developed “politicized funds of knowledge” ([Gallo and Link 2015](#)) and emergent “border thinking” ([Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020](#)) surrounding the politics of border crossing, largely through fraught interactions with im/migration officials, prolonged periods in transit, and evolving understandings of legality. We highlight ways that young people employed their growing understandings of national borders and the legal contours of their transborder asylum process, while protecting themselves and their families. In presenting this evidence, we argue that transit is not simply time that young people are forced to “wait out” ([Hage 2009](#), p. 74); rather, the experience of forced transit is constitutive of young people's learning about state power and their evolving understanding of borders, rights, and belonging. The study also sheds light on the ways that young people and families coped with prolonged uncertainty and vulnerability, at times teaching what they learned to other migrants.

## 2. The Spatial and Temporal Dimensions of Migration

The relationship between education, violence, and migration is complex and multidirectional (UNESCO 2018). Honduran young people and their families emigrate to flee conditions of violence and risks of forced recruitment, extortion, and criminality; poverty and lack of economic opportunities; political instability and corruption; and environmental degradation. Localized violence in Honduras permeates schools and impacts school attendance, interactions, and persistence (Luque 2020). Meanwhile, the violence of enduring systemic conditions like racism, sexism, and colonialism underlies everyday experiences with violence and exclusion; thus, girls, women, and minoritized populations such as Garifuna experience risk and marginality differently (Kleyn 2010; Menjívar and Walsh 2017).

In Honduras, young people and families are subject to educational interactions aimed at “sensitization,” in which state actors—including teachers—are tasked with curbing migration by teaching citizens about the dangers of crossing (Bellino and Gluckman 2023). Yet “being sensitized” is of little comfort while enduring physical and structural violence. Moreover, many Central Americans—including children and adolescents—are aware of the dangers of unauthorized transborder movement (Heidbrink 2020; Hiskey et al. 2018). Most Honduran migrants take clandestine paths through Guatemala and Mexico to avoid migrant officials and the risk of deportation. A large portion of families leaving Honduras register as asylum seekers at the US–Mexico border, thus seeking legal claims for entry into the US.

The Trump administration began implementing MPP in January 2019. The policy instructed migrants arriving at the US southern border to register for asylum to “remain in Mexico,” until given notice to appear in immigration court and formalize their claims. The result was thousands of individual asylum seekers enduring prolonged transit in Mexico to await processing of their asylum claims, many in dangerous conditions (Human Rights First 2021). MPP, paired with other policies of metering and Title 42, essentially halted the asylum system (Torres et al. 2022). Chapter 8, Article 89 of the Mexican Migratory policy outlines the special protocols that authorities should take to protect vulnerable communities and their rights during their transit through Mexico (Cámara de Diputados del H. Congreso de la Unión 2020). However, data presented in this paper illustrate that these protections are implemented with wavering fidelity. In fact, the same public officials who are called upon to protect migrants may be the ones perpetuating harm.

The original MPP policy was rescinded by the Biden Administration in early 2021, resulting in many families being processed into the US to await their asylum processes, including focal families in this study. This policy dismantling was accompanied by recognition of MPP’s “substantial and unjustifiable human costs” (DHS 2021, p. 2) on asylum seekers. Though relieved to be one step further into the asylum process, at the time of their entry into the US, families enrolled in this program had been waiting in Mexico for up to three years (American Immigration Council 2022).

Immigration policies like MPP are part of a global shift in bordering practices, with accelerated growth in physical infrastructure, accompanied by surveillance and technology and measures to push Global North state borders further out into the sovereign territories of the Global South (Díaz Barriga and Dorsey 2020). US border externalization has outsourced migration control to Central American and Mexican authorities. In turn, externalization shifts the spatial ontology of borders, such that territorial lines between states can be markers of intrastate collaboration to control, divert, and contain migrant bodies (Miller 2019). Exclusionary enforcement border practices also shift from an emphasis on migrants’ arrival or territorial presence within a sovereign state, to the “territorial reach of sovereign power” (Mountz 2011, p. 386), thus “moving borders violently to the bodies of asylum-seekers” (p. 394), regardless of where individuals are located. Cross-national studies show how stringent border policies reproduce patterns of marginalization and exclusion of migrant and asylum seeking young people in formal educational spaces (e.g., Bellino

and Dryden-Peterson 2018; Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020; Menjívar et al. 2016; Rodríguez Gómez 2019).

### 3. Theorizing Migrants' Funds of Knowledge, Borders, and Everyday Citizenship

In this section, we bring together work in anthropology, education, and migration to posit how critical learning is experienced and embodied by migrant young people as they endure prolonged transit. We begin by further delineating the spatial and temporal dimensions of migration that entail protracted periods of waiting, uncertainty, mobility, and immobility. We then turn to educational theorizing about how migrant young people's transnational and cross-border experiences and affiliations lend critical insights into state power, in/justice, and democratic citizenship.

Traditional conceptions of migration as unidirectional and permanent have been challenged, in part owing to greater recognition of the ways that enforcement regimes "return" migrants to countries of origin (Heidbrink 2020; Khosravi 2018). Yet little work engages with the ways that migration is experienced while young people or families are "in transit". (For some exceptions, see Coutin 2005; Vogt 2018; Frank-Vitale 2020) Increased time waiting foregrounds the significance and routineness of forced *immobility* as an integral part of the migrant experience and as a disciplinary tactic of the state, indexing state power (Blue et al. 2021; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Torres et al. 2022). This study draws our attention to what migrant young people learn about state power, borders, rights, and belonging both while *in transit*, and *through* transit. In making this distinction, we draw on anthropological studies to showcase waiting as both a social phenomenon and a useful analytic for understanding migration (Jacobsen et al. 2021), asking how prolonged transit is experienced, interpreted, and critiqued by migrant children and youth. Though waiting conjures up images of stillness, waiting is also punctuated by periods of movement. Attending to the spatial and temporal dynamics of mobility and immobility, we explore how real and symbolic acts of crossing borders, and waiting to cross borders, facilitate migrant young people's learning.

Educational studies have shown how schools tend to overlook temporal and affective connections that migrant young people have to their countries of origin, and how practices overemphasize the permanence of arrival, as if migrants are no longer mobile (Abu El-Haj 2007; Bajaj and Bartlett 2017; Kleyn 2021). However, ongoing and uncertain im/migratory dynamics can follow children for years, prolonging their state of being 'in transit,' negatively impacting their social and academic development (Vega 2023). For example, many of the Honduran unaccompanied minors who arrived at the US border in 2014 had pending immigration cases when they enrolled in US schools (Berestein Rojas 2015; Rogers 2015). Lingering legal proceedings and fears of deportation take an emotional toll on even the youngest students (Mangual Figueroa 2017). Analyzing the harsh immigration enforcement climate of the Trump era, Ee and Gándara (2019) found that young people's fears related to parents losing their jobs or potentially being deported as a result of immigration raids made it challenging for them to focus on schoolwork; moreover, authors found that the immigration climate negatively impacted all students regardless of their individual status or experience. Teachers are positioned to assuage some of these concerns by creating a welcoming school environment that fosters a sense of belonging (Hopkins et al. 2013) and supports "multidirectional futures" (Bajaj and Bartlett 2017), yet the capabilities and willingness of educators and community members to acknowledge and address these needs vary across and even within school contexts.

Too often migrant students' experiences prior to and during migration are seen as irrelevant to their current learning (Hamann and Zuñiga 2011; Oliveira et al. 2022; Panait and Zúñiga 2016; Román González and Zúñiga 2014). Meanwhile, transnational connections to countries of origin that many migrant students intentionally maintain are feared as threats to assimilation into the nation-state (Abu El-Haj 2015; Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020). Anthropologists of education have conceptualized "funds of knowledge" (González et al. 2005; Moll et al. 1992, 2013) as "historically accumulated and culturally developed



bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household and individual functioning and well-being" (Moll et al. 1992, p. 133). Intended as a framework for educators to recognize the cultural, linguistic, and relational assets that minoritized students and their families learn and practice outside of schools, the funds of knowledge framework has been adapted to various contexts (see Moll 2019; Rodriguez 2013). Recent scholarship has emphasized the need to recognize and engage with "dark" (Zipin 2009) or "difficult" funds of knowledge (Neri 2020) as opportunities to enhance connections to young people's everyday lived experiences and to complicate what we understand to be a learning asset.

Gallo and Link (2015) illustrate how im/migrant children living in the US develop "politicized funds of knowledge" as they maneuver complex migratory processes, such as navigating documentation status and the ever-present threats of deportation. These funds of knowledge are politicized because they center "knowledge and experiences that are often positioned as inappropriate or dangerous in our schools" (p. 360). Importantly, they derive primarily from young people's experiences within the US or when crossing the US southern border, overlooking an important chapter in many of these young people's migratory journeys, which involves crossing several geographic, political, and social boundaries through extended periods in transit, while subject to various states' im/migration and asylum policies.

Similarly aiming to support culturally responsive approaches for migrant and transnational youth, Bajaj, Argenal, and Canlas (Bajaj et al. 2017) call for "socio-politically relevant pedagogy," encompassing reciprocal learning between families and schools; attention, support, and care for the material conditions of students' and families' lives, and a cultivation of critical consciousness of how global inequalities shape transborder migration (p. 258). For educators to enact commitments to "socio-politically relevant pedagogy" and to draw on "politicized funds of knowledge" (Gallo and Link 2015) with migrant students, it is important to understand both what young people experience and the meaning they make of their transborder movement, including periods of prolonged transit.

In their study of the Latino diaspora, Dyrness and Sepúlveda (2020) build on Anzaldúa's ([1987] 2022) "mestiza consciousness" to demonstrate that migrant young people engage in "border thinking" (also see Mignolo [2000] 2012), which allows them to reflect on their multiple positionings within and between states. They find that young people's "multiple experiences of belonging and exclusion across multiple national contexts at once sharpens their awareness of and commitment to democratic citizenship and nurtures a border epistemology that delinks this from the nation-state" (p. 10, emphasis in original). Relatedly, Dabach and Fones (2016) recognize "transnational funds of knowledge," gained through experiences with border crossing or membership in transnational communities, as an opportunity to challenge assimilative notions of citizenship as bound to the nation-state. The liminal positioning of migrants between states is perhaps even more heightened in transit, "the time and space when migrants are most bereft of state protection and, therefore, most vulnerable to crime, exploitation, injury, and death" (Coutin 2005, p. 196). Coutin (2005) describes transit as "a liminal state that positions migrants simultaneously outside (in transition, not yet arrived), yet inside (traveling through), national spaces. . . absent yet there" (p. 196).

Children's voices offer valuable insights into migration (Vega 2023; Yarwood and Tyrrell 2012). Taking seriously migrant young people's perspectives can lead to more relevant and responsive pedagogies (Hernandez-Arriaga and Argenal 2023; Vecchio et al. 2017) and understandings of their meaning-making (Oliveira and Gallo 2021). Children's voices, however, continue to be marginalized in migration scholarship in favor of adult perspectives (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Schmidt 2017; Yeoh and Lam 2006). Understanding the scope of knowledge, skills, and capabilities that children develop while in transit is critical for educational discourse and practice, highlighting the unique insights and assets that migrant young people have, while working against deficit orientations that persist in schools (Bartlett and García 2011). It also recognizes the spaces outside of schools where

young people engage in civic learning and enact democratic citizenship to contribute to more equitable and just societies (Dyrness and Abu El-Haj 2019).

#### 4. Research Methods

This study draws from participant observation in migrant shelters and participatory storytelling methods conducted remotely, due to the COVID pandemic. From January 2020 to April 2021, we sought to document the informal learning of Honduran migrant children, while they and their families were undergoing diverse asylum seeking processes.

##### 4.1. Context

This study centers on an extended period and site of transit, prompted by the MPP policy. During data collection, focal families were located in Monterrey, Nuevo León, the second most important metropolitan city of Mexico, located in the northeast of the country. Historically a site of transit for single male adults, Monterrey has experienced a growing presence of Central American families, particularly those seeking asylum in the US or Mexico. Due to high rates of violence and kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa, many Central American families chose to await their MPP court dates in Monterrey, as it is considered a safer alternative with greater economic opportunities and more shelter capacity (Bedoya-Rangel et al. 2018; Leutert 2020). Early in their transit experience, all four families lived at the same shelter where children and mothers became friendly. By January 2021, each family had moved out of the shelter and were renting separate apartments in the outskirts of Monterrey's metropolitan area.

##### 4.2. Participants

This paper draws from a larger study with 17 Honduran children (7 males, 10 females) ages five to fifteen (average = 10.58 years old) from nine families. This article focuses on four families who met the following conditions: participants (a) were enrolled in the MPP program and pending asylum in the US, indicating connections with complex immigration processes; (b) had been in transit for at least eighteen months since first leaving Honduras and the end of the data collection period—a prolonged period that could help to visualize how their understandings evolved over time; and (c) had multiple children, which afforded an examination of the role of age and development on young people's learning. All first and family names are pseudonyms. See Table 1 for additional background information.

**Table 1.** Focal Family Demographics. Months in transit and ages reported as of April 2021.

Parent (Mother)	Children's Names and Ages	Time in Transit
Scarleth Rodriguez	Mariana (15) Eduardo (13) Steven (12)	26
Eunice Montaña	Milton (12) Elson (9) Nila (9)	22
Rosa Castellanos	Jenny (9) Lalisa (12)	24
Vanessa Gómez	Stephany (13) Camila (11) Rose (8)	18

##### 4.3. Data Collection

Following initial (in-person) meetings at the shelter, in December 2020 children were invited to participate in weekly arts-based, storytelling sessions, which included prompts such as drawings, maps, timelines, role play, and life histories (as used in Barros Nock and Ibarra Templos 2018; Hernandez-Arriaga and Dominguez 2020; Román González

et al. 2016; Schmidt 2017; Vega 2023). Sessions were designed to be participatory, offering children choice and voice, and providing them with a variety of opportunities to co-lead and redirect research interactions. This approach prioritizes the co-construction of knowledge with a population whose voices are frequently absent in research (Pain 2004; Torres and Carte 2012). The process of participatory storytelling also helped to deconstruct power dynamics between researcher and participant (Vecchio et al. 2017), attending specifically to the researchers' positionality as white, US citizen, women scholars studying US im/migratory dynamics.

Prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, most data collection was conducted virtually through WhatsApp video calls or Zoom weekly sessions, which migrant youth eventually called 'art clubs.' Virtual/digital ethnographic research has affordances and limitations, compared to traditional ethnographic approaches (Hine 2016; Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2017). In our case, digital methods allowed for continuous data collection across borders during a time of restricted mobility—a poignant moment for reflecting on cross-border movement. Researchers' digital presence enhanced participants' privacy, potentially allowing for more open exchanges. Additionally, this approach allowed insight into family home lives—including a glimpse into the routine and repetitive activities of daily living—while avoiding some of the potential discomfort and stress associated with a researchers' physical presence in a private family space (See Lareau and Rao 2022 for more discussion). Sessions were organized as group interactions (attended by 2–5 children), and were 20–90 min in duration, depending upon children's interest and internet connectivity.

While engaging in each participatory activity, initial prompts facilitated deeper dialogue that aligned with general funds of knowledge categories (Moll et al. 1992; Moll 2019). Novel categories and prompts emerged in response to participants' interests and events happening in their lives, ranging from birthdays to updates in their asylum processes. Our conversations offered insight into various experiences in transit since leaving Honduras, as well as during their time living in the migrant shelter and independently in Monterrey, as data collection progressed. Importantly, asylum, detention, deportation, and danger were not topics we asked about directly; rather, these topics emerged naturally during our conversations and visual storytelling activities.

Parents were invited to participate in activities as desired, and they were always present in the home during sessions, though not always active contributors to conversations. The intention throughout data collection and analysis has been to center children's voices, however parents contributed additional insights into family im/migration processes, which helped to contextualize some of the children's comments. For example, we discussed the dangers and discrimination faced en route more directly with parents than with children. Informal, unstructured interviews with parents complement children's perspectives, adding parents' reflections about what their children learned while in transit. Participatory sessions followed ethical recommendations for working with highly vulnerable minors by avoiding direct lines of questions that risk negative psychological effects, relying instead on children's preferences for topics and dialogical processes. Indirect questions and member checking became additional opportunities to understand and compare young people's perspectives. Throughout, we remained sensitive to the ever-present risk of (re)traumatization with all participants, and we struggled in dialogue with one another about when and how directly to inquire about experiences that were clearly causing continued harm.

#### 4.4. Data Analysis

Sessions were audio recorded, then transcribed in Spanish. Detailed fieldnotes (Emerson et al. 2011) complement these transcripts with photographs of child-created artifacts, screen captures of message exchanges, and links to multimodal texts and resources shared during our sessions. Data was initially close coded utilizing general funds of knowledge codes which surround children's political, social, emotional, cultural, and linguistic learning opportunities and experiences. During a later stage, we used open coding to identify the nuanced political experiences among the four focal families, resulting in the creation of

broad thematic subcodes such as “immigration,” “border,” “danger,” and “discrimination”. These “political” themes are detailed in the present study, while other funds of knowledge are explored elsewhere (Gluckman 2022). Across thematic codes, we accounted for discourse and practice around teaching and learning, showing when and how young people see their understandings as educative for themselves and others.

After two rounds of coding, we created narrative profiles for each family, using coded transcript data, field notes, and multimedia artifacts that emerged as particularly salient and illustrative of children’s funds of knowledge developed in-transit. Throughout our analysis, we sought opportunities for “listening realignments,” ensuring we were listening to, and learning from, young people and the knowledge, skills, and capabilities they displayed (Oliveira and Gallo 2021). We then engaged in cross-case analysis to identify similarities and contrasts across families (Miles et al. 2019). This involved generating a matrix with excerpts from narrative profiles, coding excerpts to visualize the connections across cases, and identifying the most salient themes which are detailed below.

## 5. Findings: Learning in Transit

### 5.1. *The Politics of Border Crossing*

Children from all four families reflected on gaining a better understanding of the politics of border crossing while in transit—knowledge which they employed to make sense of prolonged periods of waiting in Mexico at the US’s southern border. Understandings varied across age and within families, as siblings from the same household reflected on shared experiences. In addition, parents from each household varied in how transparent they were with their children regarding their im/migration process in relation to why they left and how long they would be gone from Honduras. Below, we describe how children’s understandings of the politics of border crossing evolved and were enacted in certain situations, particularly in relation to protection in the present and visions for the future.

Several children noted that before embarking on their migratory journey, they were unaware of what they would face while en route, particularly once they reached the US–Mexico border. Unfamiliar with the rules and policies, they expected movement would be free and loosely monitored by well-intentioned staff hoping to protect asylum seekers upon their arrival. For some, this was a result of having limited information, while for others, they were actively fed misinformation by their coyotes or guides en route. For example, in one conversation with Rose and Stephany Gómez, they described the impact that misinformation had on their original perceptions, as their coyotes had described the borders between states as “open”.

Rose: I thought that migration was just a little old person that was waiting for us and put in a few places and then let us pass./Yo pensaba que migración era sólo un viejito que nos estaba esperando, que nos metía a una par de lados y nos dejaba pasar.

Stephany: I thought that...while in transit, they [coyotes] were saying that we were going to pass and that the borders were open. So I thought, and I had gotten excited that we were going to go to the border and then they were going to let us cross./Yo pensaba que... es que como en el camino venían hablando de que íbamos a pasar, que las fronteras estaban abiertas. Entonces pensé, me había emocionado que íbamos a la frontera y que después nos iban a dejar pasar.

Researcher: How did you develop that concept?/¿Cómo construyeron ese concepto?

Stephany: When we were coming, the people that were bringing us always said that the border was open, that we were going to pass right away, that migration was going to grab us, and was going to let us pass./Es que cuando veníamos, la gente que nos traía siempre nos decía que la frontera estaba abierta, que íbamos a pasar de inmediato, que no nos iba a agarrar migración y nos iban a dejar pasar.

Researcher: Are those coyotes you came with? Why do you think they told you that?/¿Esos son los coyotes con quienes venían? ¿por qué crees que ellos dijeron eso?



Rose: To bring people and that the people would come. The more money they bring, the more money they get./Para traer gente y que la gente se viniera. Entre más gente traiga más dinero consiguen (3 March 2021).

Rose and Stephany's learning occurred as they were confronted with the reality that crossing the border would not be as easy as they were originally told. As Rose's final comment reflects, children also gained knowledge of the motivations behind their guides' misinformation, predicting that these choices were likely related to wanting to gather more business, rather than based on truth. This process of analyzing how and why misinformation was created and perpetuated, as well as their inclination to evaluate the source, reflect a politicized funds of knowledge beyond the border-crossing experience, that may help Rose and Stephany navigate social interactions and avoid being deceived in future contexts.

While Rose was the one to share her evolving view most clearly on border politics in the aforementioned narrative, the interaction below shows how her understandings were still incipient, possibly related to her young age. In this excerpt, her older sibling, Camila, took it upon herself to educate Rose, countering her belief that a passport and im/migration paperwork could be purchased. The session began by imagining an "día ideal" (ideal day, 10 February 2021). Rose began by describing her birthday celebration. As she imagined one of her presents would be 100 pesos, she projected that she would use the money to purchase "un pasaporte para toda mi familia y papeles para Estados Unidos" (a passport for my whole family and papers for the US). Laughing, Camila clarified, "Eso no se compra con dinero". (You cannot buy that with money.) That this conversation unfolded in response to their imagined ideal shows a sense of hope and possibility in relation to the dynamics of border crossing into the US, despite having lived in Mexico for more than a year, awaiting their asylum process.

On another occasion, Camila reflected, "I did not know what migration was until I got to Mexico/yo no sabía qué era migración hasta que llegué a México". Rose again personified the inhumane process. After four days in the "hielera," the colloquial term for the cold, caged-in areas where im/migrants are held when they cross the border pending their processing, she realized that the border was not staffed by a *viejito*. Rose revised her understanding based on new experiences, explaining, "I thought that a mad scientist put you in a room with air conditioning that had a bed and the next day they let you pass into the US, but it wasn't that way./Yo pensaba que un científico loco te metía a un cuarto con aire acondicionado y tenía cama y que al día siguiente ya te dejaba pasar a Estados Unidos, pero no fue así" (27 January 2021). Rose's reflection likens migration officials to a crazy scientist, reflecting a judgement that only a crazy person would place human beings in a freezer for days.

Similar to Rose, Lalisa Castellanos was hopeful that she would eventually cross the border, commenting that "someday surely we are going to visit you/algún día seguramente nos vamos a ir a visitarte," referring to visiting the researcher, who she knew lived in the US. She added, "I have hope that they are going to let us cross/tengo esperanza que nos van a dejar cruzar" (20 February 2021). These comments are reflective of the various ways that the children viewed crossing the border as a matter of patience and time, with no direct reference to the reasons for their inability to cross. Yet there is also a recognition of a regulative power exerted over the border, in that someone or something "lets us cross". Finally, this comment reflects Lalisa's growing awareness of the ways in which borders can both divide and connect people.

As focal participants grew closer to researcher Maxie, they continued to construct politicized funds of knowledge regarding the US–Mexico border, both spatially and relationally. These relationships extended to friends and family members on "the other side," to other migrant young people they befriended during their time in transit, and at times the researcher. These connections became more salient as they learned about Maxie's geographic proximity to Tijuana and discussed the ease with which US citizens could cross between Mexico and the US. In several instances, children asked if they could be "crossed"

in a suitcase, a car, or with a relative who had a child their age. These questions were always presented with a certain level of humor and implicit awareness that these were impossible requests. As Camila noted, “If it was that easy, we would already be there./Si fuera así de fácil ya estaríamos allá” (27 January 2021).

Young people revealed through these interactions an awareness of the ways that borders were undergirded by laws about who could cross and how, as well as the extreme actions taken to facilitate illicit border-crossing. Strikingly, their imagined worries were more overtly directed at the person facilitating their crossing than at their own vulnerability of being transported through illicit means. For example, Eduardo suggested they find a suitcase large enough for him and his brother to fit inside. His sister Mariana, initially annoyed at being left out of the imagined crossing, warned that whoever carried the suitcase could be charged with trafficking minors. Camila similarly understood, and shared with her siblings, “we need papers, if not you would get into trouble for taking us illegally into the U.S./necesitamos papeles, sino usted se metería en problemas por llevar ilegales a Estados Unidos”.

Young people in our study show an incipient understanding of the discourse and status around illegality, though not necessarily a critique of the differential in power and freedom connected to nationality. While US citizens could cross the US–Mexico border freely, they would only be able to cross in a hidden manner. These playful assertions about “being crossed” allude to a readiness to endure great risk to be on the other side, risks that migrants pay dearly for. While the specific origin of Eduardo and Mariana’s knowledge is unknown, we connect this interaction to their experiences being kidnapped at the border in Mexico, as well as the way in which their coyote kept them hidden during their time in transit. Drawing on these earlier experiences in transit, they enact their understandings of border crossing as something others in their relational network facilitate for them, in secrecy, in order to elude border patrol. Rather than seeking asylum through intentional interactions with officials, they emphasize the need to avoid and elude them, reinterpreting them as obstacles.

### *5.2. Migratory Decisions, Dangers, and Discrimination*

Aligned with prior research which has emphasized the agency of children in migratory journeys of adults and families (Heidbrink 2020; Orellana et al. 2001), children in this study participated in and supported migratory processes in a range of ways. Though parents were not always aware of the extent of their children’s understanding, we find that young people were actively constructing understandings of their family’s migratory decisions, often in dialogue and in relation to peers enduring similar prolonged displacement.

In the case of the Montaña family, Eunice commented, “I came here due to big problems there [in Honduras], but they [my children] did not understand/Yo me vine por los problemas de grandes de allá, pero eso no entendían” (28 January 2021). She added, “at the beginning they always blamed me that it was my fault they were here [in Mexico]/al principio ellos me echaban la culpa que por mi culpa andábamos acá”. The “big problem” she was referring to was Milton’s gang recruitment while attending school. Gang members had given Milton a phone so he could warn them if police or rival gangs arrived. When Eunice forced him to return the phone, a gang member threatened her and explained that Milton would indeed join. Initially, the family moved within Honduras, but they couldn’t escape the wide-reaching gang network. Eunice may have discounted Milton’s awareness that he was actively being recruited, however Milton reflected a fairly clear understanding of this dynamic, even situating criminality within a structural context of limited opportunities. He explained they migrated because, “the bad guys wanted to take me and because of the pressures in the country where there was no work and everything/a mi me querían tomar los malos y por la presión del país que no daban empleo y todo eso” (4 March 2021). Milton’s reflection regarding his family’s migratory decision demonstrates an understanding that migratory push factors may be multi-dimensional, as he added that the country’s economic conditions contributed to their decision to leave, in addition to “los

malos". In Honduras, many children of Milton's age are already in the workforce, primarily in informal spaces—a reality that may have contributed to his reflection.

Children also demonstrated various levels of engagement with migratory decisions. Though Eunice's three children originally vocalized a dissatisfaction with "her" decision to migrate, once they became more "used to it/acostumbrado a ello" (28 January 2021), they started contributing more actively to the process. For example, MPP required filling out online forms to expedite their transition to wait in the US. The portal to complete this paperwork suffered from numerous glitches during the first weeks when thousands of families were trying to register. The US government said that people would be processed in chronological order based on their date of entry to the program, thus many families believed that the quicker they signed up, the quicker they would get processed. Following this theory, the children were pushing Eunice—who took a more relaxed attitude towards bureaucratic steps—to prioritize this paperwork in the hopes of allowing them to move north more quickly. Milton and his younger brother and sister reminded her to fill out the forms and advised her to visit the site again and refresh the page when it was not working. Eunice admitted that her children's persistence with the process supported her efforts and worked against her own skepticism and frustration as they endured a wait with no clear end.

In many cases, parents tried to keep their children innocent of the dangers they were facing while in transit, as an intentional form of protection. However, despite this aim, the children in this study illustrated understandings of the dangers associated with migration and engaged in diverse strategies to confront and mitigate these risks. Milton understood why he and his siblings were not allowed outside their apartment in Monterrey, explaining there was a high level of armed violence in their neighborhood. Consequently, there was a strong police presence—another source of danger and discrimination. Reflecting on a drawing he made of his family home in Honduras, Milton began to compare the tranquility of Cortés, Honduras to the violence in his current neighborhood in Monterrey. He explained, "where I lived, the police never came, it was rare/donde vivía nunca había llegado la policía, era raro" (28 January 2021). Ironically, despite Milton's awareness of the dangers he faced in school, he remembered his community as calm and quiet, a place police did not need to surveil. Contrasting law enforcement across states, Milton articulated trust in Honduran police's inclination to protect citizens, whereas he understood that his status as an outsider in Mexico rendered police a potential threat.

Children in other focal families became accustomed to similar rules forbidding playing outside in Monterrey, in order to avoid street violence and the risks of discrimination. Encounters with discrimination included neighbors who stigmatized migrant families, instructing their children not to play with Central Americans or other migrants. They also extended to public officials such as police. One evening, Mariana was held up by the police and questioned while walking to a neighbor's house to bring her brother home for dinner. Mariana recalled the interaction, which involved a female officer:

They asked me why I was in the street, and I told them that I was going to find my brother, it was about 11 pm. I was already late, and it was a little late, but his friend lives around the corner, he lives just here. And from there they told us a few things and took our shoes. [My friend] had sandals, I had shoes on. I asked them why they were going to take my shoes. . . I told them they couldn't take them because they were the only ones I had and they were broken and so they told me "we are going to throw you in the house," and they told me, "We are going to throw you in the house, we know where you live"./Ellos me dijeron que por qué andaba en la calle, yo les dije que iba a buscar a mi hermano, eran como las once. Es que ya estaba tarde, ya era un poco tarde, pero el amigo de él vive aquí a la vuelta, vive aquí no más, y de ahí nos dijeron unas cosas y de ahí nos quitaron los zapatos, [mi amiga] llevaba chanquetas, yo llevaba zapatos. Yo les dije que por qué me iban a quitar los zapatos si era lo único que tenía, y ellos me dijeron que no, que me los iban a quitar, y yo dije que no me los podían

quitar porque eran los únicos que tenía, además ya estaban rotos, y entonces “. . . te vamos a tirar en la casa”. Me dijeron ellos, “te vamos a tirar en la casa, ya sabemos dónde vives” (8 March 2021).

In this interaction, Mariana pushed back against discrimination by trying to convince the police not to take her shoes, showing them that they were broken and insisting they were her only pair. Unfortunately, none of these strategies to invite the officers’ empathy worked. The police took their shoes, and the next day the girls found them in the trash. Mariana’s mother, Scarleth, told her that if she was stopped by police again, she needed to “speak like a Mexican/hablar como mexicana”. Scarleth anticipated, rightly, that this would not be an isolated incident. She instructed her children that if they could change their dialect, they might be able to convince a police officer that they were locals.

Scarleth and her children did not simply accept these situations, but instead developed strategies as a family to protect each other. Speaking openly about the reasons for, and strategies to combat, discrimination helped unify them even further while in transit. Scarleth reminded her children that:

“If someone tries to touch you or harm you, or threatens that they are going to kill me, it’s a lie and you should tell me. Do not be silent about anything, anything, anything. Any concern or anything, tell me, because apart from being your mom, I am also your friend./Si alguien intenta tocarlos o hacerles daño, o que me amenaza que me van a matar a mí, es mentira, ustedes díganme. No se callen nada, nada, nada. Alguna inquietud o algo, díganmelo a mí, porque aparte de ser su mamá, soy su amiga también” (8 March 2021).

As a result, Scarleth’s children were open with her and each other, regarding what was happening in their lives and the daily acts of discrimination they experienced. These strategies will likely build resilience for future encounters during the continuation of their migratory journeys. It is worth adding that Scarleth worried that these strategies may risk putting her children in greater danger, noting, “we don’t know if we’re protecting them or maybe we’re putting them more at risk/no sabemos si es que la estamos protegiendo o tal vez las estamos poniendo más en riesgo”. Nonetheless, they were the only strategies she could think of to teach her children about their right to protection. In turn, the emphasis on their right to safety challenged everyday bordering practices, even if it was through feigned efforts to abide by them. In the process, the children connected status to belonging, and cleverly understood that pretending to belong could change the behavior of others.

As Garifuna, the Gómez family had to develop a different strategy. They experienced repeated targeting from police officers in their community, demonstrating the ways that anti-Black racism added a dimension of marginality to migrants’ marked otherness. Their only recourse was to stay indoors indefinitely. Rose, Camila, and Stephany understood their racial identity as a “problem” in Mexico (27 January 2021), which prevented their freedom of movement and ability to interact with others. Consequently, they began to prepare for racialized treatment in the US, gaining understanding that anti-Blackness transcended borders. Stephany spoke explicitly about the need to combat racism wherever she and her sisters were located.

Jenny and Lalisa Castellanos experienced discrimination and bullying in their Mexican school, based on how they looked and talked (like Central Americans). As a result, they were relieved when they switched to virtual school during the pandemic, as they no longer had to physically interact with their peers. Though Lalisa did not use the terms nationalism or xenophobia, she understood the basis for the discrimination she and her sister experienced was twofold: migrants did not belong in Mexico, and Hondurans were labeled criminals. She appealed to a sense of shared humanity that superseded national borders, “Even though we are migrants, we are not bad people. We are all the same./Aunque nos miren migrantes no somos malas personas, todos somos los mismos” (5 March 2021).

## 6. Discussion

As the Rodríguez, Montaña, Castellanos, and Gómez families crossed borders and endured prolonged transit throughout the Central America–US nexus, children developed emergent “border thinking” (Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020) and “politicized funds of knowledge” (Gallo and Link 2015), demonstrated through their understandings of im/migration and border politics, as well as various sources of danger and discrimination that manifest within and across borders. This learning surfaced through dialogic exchanges as young people reflected on their experiences with family, peers, citizen neighbors, state officials in Honduras, Mexico, and the US, and non-state actors seeking to evade state officials. These understandings and affective orientations are poised to help them maneuver new im/migration and educational contexts. Indeed, they may prove crucial as children transition to new schools in the US, awaiting their asylum processes and confronting anti-immigrant discriminatory rhetoric and exclusionary practices along the way.

One such learning was children’s evolving understanding of who could cross the US–Mexico border and how. For example, requests for US citizens to “cross them” by whatever means necessary reflected varying levels of knowledge that Steven, Mariana, Rose, and Camila had regarding the complex underpinnings of legality, smuggling, and privilege by nationality and status. In these moments, Maxie’s citizenship, race, and geographic home along the border became central for understanding im/migration and the border that separated them and which they and their families were so desperately trying to cross. Oliveira’s (2019) work, centering on children’s perspectives on migration and family separation from both sides of the Mexico–US border, finds that “children are constantly ‘crossing the border’ with their imaginaries” (p. 542), even in the absence of spatial mobility to do so. Our study shows that these imagined crossings were taking place even for young people without family members on the other side, in hopeful anticipation that their asylum process would move forward. Imagined crossings also show how youth understandings eventually took note of temporality as an extension of the state’s bordering practices, enforced through waiting. However, it was not clear that children registered policy changes such as MPP as relevant context; rather, they attributed revised understandings to their lived experiences as they accumulated over time.

Young people’s past and pending border crossing positioned them as members of the Latino diaspora. Asserting their right to asylum as they moved through and between states delinks their claims from the nation-state, enabling transborder claims to membership and belonging (Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020). Yet they implicitly understood that “borders of nation-states are real, and they exert social, emotional and financial costs on those who cross them” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997, cited in Orellana et al. 2001, p. 573). As children endured these costs, they wrestled with what it meant to be in Mexico, on a list in the US but not yet allowed to step foot there; no longer in Honduras, but always possibly returned to Honduras while traveling through Guatemala and Mexico, and maybe even once granted entry to the US. Despite having formally registered for asylum in the US, MPP seemed to place them under the protection of no one, to render them invisible. As children experienced prolonged transit experiences in Mexico, they developed a clearer sense of the role of the state and nationalist forces that sanction these imagined crossings—forces which might, one day, “let them cross”. This evolution is most vividly illustrated through Rose, who continually revised her image of the border to become less human, as well as her eventual learning that it was not possible to purchase passage for regular entry. At the time of this study, young people had navigated three national borders (Honduras–Guatemala, Guatemala–Mexico, and Mexico–US)—some multiple times, as families endured deportation from Mexico to Honduras, and redirection from the US to Mexico. In Mexico, migrant youth encountered the state regularly through schools, police, and immigration institutions. Immigration institutions and practices represented both Mexico and US state interests. Yet mentions of the state—or more accurately, the states exerting control over their movement—were strikingly absent from our conversations with young people. Always in-between, the power of nationalism was felt, but not named.



More often, violence was expressed as linked to individual and collective anti-migrant racism, or attributed to the broad reach of criminality, which corrupted and overcame law enforcement. Milton, Stephany, and Camila demonstrated how migrant children develop and seek to better understand migratory dangers as part of an effort to enact agency while in transit. In some cases, they understood more about the forces driving their movement than parents believed they could. Recognition of drivers of migration came together with strategies for protection and prevention while in transit. Writing about unauthorized Salvadoran migrants en route to the US, Coutin (2005) conjures a concept of “clandestinity,” illustrating how migrants “have to make themselves absent from the spaces they occupy. When they become clandestine, such migrants embody illegality” (p. 195). The young people in this study were already practicing “clandestinity,” in that they were forced to stay inside to avoid danger, hide their Honduran accents to avoid discrimination, and become invisible while crossing borders to subvert enforcement regimes. Confrontations with law enforcement necessitate invisibility, in that the practices that kept children safe entailed silence and hiding, despite that everyone knew they were there—police, neighbors, teachers, and the states and global protection agencies with whom families were registered. It is distressing that those formally enrolled in US asylum processes were forced to adapt through embodied acts of “clandestinity”. As Eduardo eloquently demonstrates, these children already understood what it meant to hide. The knowledge and skills Mariana and Eduardo developed while in transit surrounding legality may prove instrumental in navigating their future experiences and interactions with im/migration officials as they pursue their asylum processes in the US. Additionally, these interactions are a reminder that politicized learning can be “dark” (Zipin 2009), not only reflecting painful experiences, but also efforts to adapt to inadequate and unjust systems of protection.

Children did not explicitly locate origins of these understandings, however media messages which position migrants as “illegal” and “criminals” are pervasive in public discourse (Catalano 2017). They were also circulating in young people’s daily experiences with discrimination within Mexican schools and on the streets of their heavily surveilled neighborhood in Monterrey, where law enforcement officers routinely harassed migrants, and where neighbors excluded them. This criminalization undermines the fact that migrating and seeking asylum are basic, inalienable rights protected under Articles 13 and 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, rights discourse that children had not yet been exposed to but which they could sense and were beginning to articulate, such as Lalisa’s insistence that Honduran migrant non-citizens were “the same” as Mexican citizens and thus deserving of the same rights and protections.

We do not intend to romanticize these children’s experiences with dangerous actors, systemic racism, and routine discrimination. Rather, we seek to complement existing scholarship that has well documented the harmful, traumatic experiences encountered en route (e.g., Vogt 2018). With so little known about the short and long-term effects of MPP on Central American children and their families, this study seeks to recognize children as actively making sense of and contributing to migratory journeys, thus countering perceptions that children are “baggage that weighs down adult migrants” (Orellana et al. 2001, p. 588). Our focus highlights how and what young people learn about their experiences with various border crossings and as they interact with diverse im/migration enforcement systems linked to the states through which they move. Children’s knowledge of im/migration has been found to assist them in maneuvering complex scenarios involving politics and power (Turner and Mangual Figueroa 2019), skills that can support them in navigating such realities engendered in educational environments. In the process, this paper contributes to a growing interest in learning outside of schools and learning in and through migration, as showcased in this special issue.

As demonstrated, young people’s understandings are evolving and, at times, embodied potential. Migrant children in this study came to understand trust and distrust, information and misinformation, power and subordination as they were inflicted on their bodies by powerful immigration policies, institutions, and the state and nonstate actors

who implemented—and at times, exploited—them. Young people did not always have access to the critical language to articulate what they were experiencing as linked to state processes, or as a consequence of flawed and unjust im/migration and asylum systems, both within the US and globally. They did not always articulate the political work that borders were doing to keep them in place, nor the ways that states were employing time as a technique of governance to delay or deny their claims. But their growing assertion that their right to seek asylum was being violated illustrates a sense of understanding that rights should follow migrants in and through transit, regardless of the physical space they occupy.

## 7. Conclusions

Research in diverse contexts shows that migrant young people are rarely invited to share their “politicized funds of knowledge” (Gallo and Link), express themselves as cultivating transnational or transborder identities and affiliations (Abu El-Haj 2015; Hamann and Zuñiga 2011; Kleyn 2021), or delink conceptions of democratic citizenship from the nation-state in school spaces (Dabach and Fones 2016; Dyrness and Abu El-Haj 2019; Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020). Yet in the absence of these opportunities, migrant youth might find themselves with “no support for developing the critical consciousness that was naturally emerging from their experiences in transnational social fields” (Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020, p. 225). Support and mentorship are needed to move from incipient awareness into critical consciousness and, eventually, towards participation and action for social change. Traversing multiple national borders, migratory movement encompasses periods of mobility and immobility, including direct experiences with state actors and indirect opportunities to learn about state power, and global hierarchies that drive and result from transborder migration. It is critical to invite these perspectives and lived realities into educational spaces as a means of supporting migrant students’ academic and social inclusion and their sense of self and community.

Each of the focal families in this study has since entered the US, where they are now encountering new spaces of belonging and exclusion during what will likely continue to be a lengthy asylum process. It is not clear whether or when transit will end for them. Our role as educators is to recognize and capitalize on what young people have learned through—and in spite of—navigating protracted liminality, recognizing them as learners and teachers with cultural resources to share.

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