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Abstract

Immigration policies in North America define and regulate the desirability of individuals in the labour market. In this paper, I introduce the concept of *credentialized mobility* to describe how individuals strategically convert educational and social capital into future-oriented mobility projects. Drawing on 30 life history interviews with highly skilled Mexican migrants in Vancouver, Canada, and Seattle, United States, alongside 14 interviews with parents in Mexico, I examine how upper-middle-class Mexican families use elite international education as a strategy for transnational social reproduction. These investments help cultivate a *cosmopolitan habitus*—a set of dispositions, aspirations, and cultural competencies shaped by early exposure to international schooling, English-language education, and an identification with a global middle class identity. Through an interpretive, multi-scalar analysis, I show how these forms of embodied capital enable participants to navigate migration infrastructures and assemble flexible mobility trajectories. In doing so, I highlight the critical role of familial strategies in shaping individuals' migratory agency and in enabling migrants to not only engage with, but also move beyond, the narrow logics of 'highly skilled' migration.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that familial strategies of social reproduction facilitate the construction of skills and the accumulation of credentials. These strategies, in turn, shape the ability of upper-middle-class Mexican individuals to successfully navigate skilled migration policies in North America. Focusing on the concept of 'cosmopolitan habitus', I examine how families cultivate mobility as a form of potentiality that is later converted into strategic migration practices. This analysis is situated within a multi-scalar framework that moves between individual aspirations, household strategies, educational institutions, state policies, and transnational infrastructures. By focusing on how these different scales intersect, I show how globalized forms of capital become legible and valuable within specific migration regimes. This paper is derived from a doctoral dissertation studying the mobility journeys of Mexican professionals living in Vancouver and Seattle. In this paper, I primarily ask: *In what ways do highly mobile Mexican professionals create strategies for transnational social capital, as they interact with different migration infrastructures throughout their lifetimes?*

The paper proceeds in five sections. First, I outline the theoretical and conceptual framework, drawing on the literature on migration infrastructures, transnational social reproduction, and Bourdieusian theory. I introduce my contribution to this literature by the use of the concept *credentialized mobility*—a flexible and iterative approach to migration shaped by class-based access to cultural and institutional capital. Second, I describe the methodology and case selection, situating the research in Monterrey, a city considered the industrial capital of Mexico. 63% of the participants were born and raised in Monterrey. Third, I present three key empirical findings: (1) the role of international education in shaping aspirations for international mobility, (2) the cultivation of a cosmopolitan habitus in early childhood, and (3) the implications of these strategies for transnational social reproduction. Fourth, I analyze how this habitus interacts with migration infrastructures (Lin et al., 2017) and facilitates the conversion of what Kim (2018) calls 'migration-facilitating capital' into measurable credentials. Finally, I discuss how these strategies reflect broader dynamics of class reproduction and flexibility within skilled migration systems in North America.

In this paper, I define *cosmopolitan habitus* as a shared disposition shaped by international schooling, English language education, and an identification with a global middle class "cosmopolitan" identity. While these dispositions are embodied individually, they emerge from collective and long-term familial efforts of social reproduction. This shared disposition allows highly skilled migrants to understand their social position vis-à-vis other migrants (Stock, 2023). The cosmopolitan habitus operates in tandem with migration infrastructures (Lin et al., 2017), enabling the conversion of social and cultural capital (Kim, 2018) into credentials recognized by migration regimes. These include undergraduate or postgraduate degrees, standardized language test scores, professional experience, and age—forms of criteria used to define "skill" within immigration selection systems.

Upper-middle class families in Mexico cultivate what I call *mobility-as-potentiality*—an orientation toward future mobility— as part of their long-term strategies of social reproduction. When young adults deploy this potentiality, it transforms into *mobility-as-strategy* — the active pursuit of credentialized forms of migration. Producing "highly skilled" migrants therefore involves the creation of strategies that assemble the right combination of migration-facilitating capital. These systems regulate individuals' desirability within global labour markets — particularly through the highly skilled migration policy systems that operate in the United States and Canada. A multi-

scalar lens allows me to trace how individual strategies intersect with national and transnational policy frameworks and the everyday aspirations of youth and their families.

My approach also reframes assumptions embedded in "highly skilled migration." Rather than treating settlement or citizenship acquisition as the end goal of international mobility, I show how participants pursue *credentialized mobility,* prioritizing flexibility over permanence. Individuals with proof of convertible capital use credentials and international work experiences to increase their future mobility options, whether that involves remaining in North America, returning to Mexico, or relocating elsewhere.

This paper contributes to debates on the impact of social class in international mobility and migration by expanding beyond traditional framings of migrant integration or deskilling, building on the work of migration scholars who have "shed light on the intricate, non-linear temporal qualities inherent in the migration experience" (Axelsson and Hedberg, 2024, p.6). Rather than focusing on challenges faced upon arrival to the host country, I examine how migrant decision-making is shaped by shared challenges within native-born populations—including high costs of living, aging parents, limited access to childcare, and the pressures of homeownership—alongside experiences of racialization and exclusion in the North American context. These factors make onward mobility both appealing and feasible for those with the resources to pursue it, underscoring the importance of flexible, transnational strategies in understanding skilled migration today.

Literature Review

The habitus and social reproduction

Bourdieu (1990) defines *habitus* as "a socially constructed system of dispositions that makes possible the production of thoughts, perceptions, and actions in the social field" (p. 55). In other words, *habitus* refers to a set of embodied practices and attitudes shaped by one's social environment, which structure how individuals perceive, think, and act. It produces what Kuus (2014) calls a repertoire of "sensible" practices—those that make sense within a given social field—and shapes individuals' senses of what is possible (Reed-Danahay, 2019).

For members of the global middle class, particularly in the so-called 'Global South', highly skilled migration is often a strategy for maintaining or reproducing class status transnationally (Bardwick, 2022; Turcatti, 2024). In this context, elite international private schools become central institutions in transnational social reproduction. They help cultivate what I call a 'cosmopolitan habitus' and provide access to credentials perceived as valuable under the 'regimes of skill' (Shan & Fejes, 2015) and the 'skill bias' (Challen, 2014) that is embedded in North American immigration policy.

Cultivating "a feel for the game"

The school system — especially international private schools in the Global South — functions as the earliest and most formative institution in shaping potential highly skilled migrants. These schools not only contribute academic skills; they also inculcate a "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990; Kuus, 2014), naturalizing the logics of competitiveness, self-optimization, entrepreneurship and global mobility.

Simultaneously, such schools conceal the mechanisms of class reproduction, by acting as spaces where upper-middle-class "status groups" (Weber, 1968) form social networks and cultural practices aligned and enclosing elite aspirations. Understanding these schools as local institutions embedded in broader global processes enables what Ramos-Zayas (2020) calls "social mapping". In her research on Latin American elite parenting, she shows that schools do more than educate: they generate lasting social capital among families and their communities. Similarly, Lareau (2018) emphasizes how elite families strategically engage institutions that mirror and reinforce their class position. Scholars such as Kenway and Prosser (2015) and Rivera (2015) highlight how such institutions maintain unequal access to opportunities. These practices intersect with cultural norms at home, producing advantages that create long-lasting "competitive kid capital" (Friedman, 2013)—a set of familial investments aimed at ensuring children's future success.

Through these investments, families cultivate dispositions and forms of capital that align with North American immigration systems which place an outsized value on skills and credentials. In contrast to transnational family migration strategies such as those encountered in the Asian context (Ley, 2011, Huang and Yeoh, 2011; Jordan et al., 2018), I show how families in Mexico start the preparation for skilled migration in Mexico, rather than engaging in family migration or sending children to study abroad, leveraging international schools in the country to prepare children for future global mobility.

The education-migration nexus

Papademetriou and Hooper (2019) identify two primary models: a skills-based model and an employer-demand model used in the North American immigration policy context. These policy regimes create uncertainty and competition for entry, increasing the strategic importance of what Robertson (2013) and Schinnerl & Ellermann (2023) call the "education-migration nexus." This nexus illustrates how higher education and migration policies intersect, enabling international students to gain host-country credentials, access to social networks, and work experience. International education is therefore transformed into a migration pathway, as skills (language proficiency, years of work experience, job offers) and credentials (university and graduate degrees, professional certifications) become enshrined in migration policies.

The "globalization-migration nexus" (Sanderson, 2014) has also radically transformed the contemporary relationship of the nation-state to labor, placing more value on human capital. This

has created greater competition for those considered the “best and the brightest” of migrants in the global race for talent. As states operationalize these “regimes of skill” (Shan and Fejes, 2015) into their migration infrastructures (Feldman, 2011; Lin et al., 2017), families respond — knowingly and unknowingly — by cultivating a cosmopolitan habitus and generating convertible forms of capital (Kim, 2018) which retain cross-border value in the North American context. Staying in the region increases individuals’ migratory agency over their mobility journeys (Crawley and Jones, 2021) as they can tap into institutional networks that allows them to navigate the place-based structural factors (Bridgen and Mainwairing, 2016).

Currid-Halkett’s (2017) notion of the “aspirational middle class” helps frame these strategies. This group is bound not only by income but also by shared cultural capital and values, particularly a commitment to investing in education for social mobility. While much research on international education as a class strategy focuses on Asia (Brooks & Waters, 2010; Waters, 2007; Findlay et al., 2012; Wells, 2014; Bahna, 2017), my work geographically extends this analysis to Mexico. I argue that the Mexican upper-middle class occupies a dual position: as elites within their national context and as members of the global middle class.

Cultivating a cosmopolitan habitus

Since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, cross-border linkages in education, research, and entrepreneurship have expanded (Selee, 2018), reducing the costs of cultivating migration-facilitating capital for upper-middle class Mexican families. Since the 1990s, international schools with an American curriculum have been founded in upper middle class neighborhoods in Mexico, broadening the reach of international schools usually reserved for the most exclusive circles of Mexican elites. One of the oldest operating international schools, the American School Foundation of Mexico City was founded in 1888, while participants attended schools

Despite being classified as an upper-middle-income country by the World Bank (2023), Mexico remains a deeply unequal country. Inequality and recurring economic crises continue to shape class mobility in the country (De Rosa, Flores, and Morgan, 2024), particularly as Mexico experienced a rapid expansion of middle-class prosperity in the 1980s, followed by its collapse in the 1990s (Gilbert, 2007). These economic cycles have informed participants’ aspirations for class stability and upward mobility.

Drawing on De Haas’s (2021) framework of aspirations and capabilities, I argue that participants in this study develop mobility strategies informed by their perceived status group, and their available economic and social resources. These strategies are embedded in what De Haas calls “perceived geographical opportunity structures” (p.14), wherein Mexico’s middle classes move between elite status at home and “middling migrant” positions globally (Ho, 2011; Luthra & Platt, 2016). Their strategies for social reproduction therefore operate across spatial scales, national contexts, and class identities.

Methodology and context

Raised as North American: "middling" elites from Monterrey, Mexico

While this research was primarily conducted in Seattle, United States and Vancouver, Canada, the social and geographical context of the city of Monterrey, in northeast Mexico, is central to the dynamics explored in this paper. This project has been informed by my personal experience as a Mexican citizen navigating life in North America after the implementation of NAFTA. Growing up in an upper-middle class household in Monterrey, two hours away from the United States-Mexico border, I had access to private, bilingual education and international mobility from a young age. The vast majority of participants in this study had a similar experience with 63% born and raised in Monterrey, 96% attending private international schools from kindergarten to high school. In addition to the place of birth of participants, 80% of participants obtained their undergraduate at Tecnológico de Monterrey, either in the main campus in Monterrey or one of the 31 satellite campuses around the country, including in Mexico City and Guadalajara.

Monterrey is the industrial capital of Mexico. Close to 5.5 million people live in its metropolitan area. Its proximity to the United States is central to the identities and attitudes of its residents, with regional identity in Mexico shapes the values and opinions of elites and ordinary citizens alike (Camp, 2002). Regional elites help form mass attitudes and mass attitudes, in turn, reinforce these values.

In her study of Mexican regionalisms, Gauss (2015), finds that the business elite of Monterrey, called the *Monterrey Group,* used regionalism as a strategy to challenge the central government by promoting a "*regiomontano* identity" contesting corporatism and statist industrialism. In 1943, the Monterrey Group created the Tecnológico de Monterrey, a private research university that has been described as a "staunch supporter of laissez-faire economics and the MIT of Mexico" (Camp, 2001). In addition to the educational impact of Tec de Monterrey as an institution that both serves and educates the elites and the professional managerial classes of the city, the geographical location of Monterrey is critical when considering the role of international education and international migration in the construction of regional elites. While not all participants were born and raised in Monterrey, many were exposed to the ethos of the city, particularly as Tec de Monterrey expanded its presence nationwide.

Monterrey is distinctive from the rest of Mexico because the historical, social, and political context of the city has transformed it into the center of a specific type of regionalism. This region has been responsive to economic liberalization shifts observed since the implementation of NAFTA in 1994. Camp (2001, p.268) argues that "global household linkages wrought by technology were fortified in the private sector by structural linkages cemented through NAFTA", also altering the behaviors of young Mexican capitalists. In this paper, I explore the thirty years after Camp (2001) completed his study. This timescale has allowed me to observe how the behaviour of those who grew up in Monterrey, and the parents who were making decisions from them, were transformed by the formal economic integration of North America. I also specifically focus on the role of elite education in the creation of "networks of privilege" (Brooks and Waters, 2009) that facilitate international mobility in the region.

Originally I had no original aim to focus on the city of Monterrey. However, the interview process demonstrated that the capitalist power elites and the geographical location of the city have an

outsized impact in shaping the identities of participants. Acknowledging the spatial context experienced by most of the participants in their early life has allowed me to identify how the impact of power elites such as the Monterrey Group influence the values and identities of members of the Mexican upper-middle classes, who in turn replicate and promote these values both at home and abroad.

Moreso, focusing on Vancouver and Seattle, cities with considerable geographic and cultural distances to Monterrey, allows me to explore the emergence of new actors that facilitate transnational circulation. Some of these are technology companies like Microsoft or Canadian universities, not deemed not as relevant as Ivy League schools (Camp, 2002) or Texas based corporations (Hernández-Leon, 2008) until the mid-2010s. This work builds upon a trend identified by Hernández-León (2008): the “ease of the Monterrey elite and middle class in straddling the border, moving back and forth between countries”. My work provides a new spatial perspective, expanding the study of North American transnational circuits to the linkages between Monterrey and the Pacific Northwest.

In addition to expanding the knowledge on the impact of regional differences in Mexican mobility flows, I also aim to firmly situate Mexico, and specifically Monterrey, in North America. The debates about whether Mexico is a North American country due to its geopolitical position, or a Latin American country due to its historical and cultural differences, is ongoing (Bilbao and Schiavon, 2018). When a survey carried out by Maldonado et al (2015) asked the general Mexican public about their primary identification, 61% identified primarily as Mexicans, 44% as Latin American, 35% by their state of origin, 33% as cosmopolitans and only 7% as North American. The survey finds that the regional differences vary considerably for North American identification. In Northern Mexico, identification with a North American identity is 18% compared with only 2% in Southern Mexico. By acknowledging the context in which participants are constructing their identities, and how international mobility transforms these identities, I am able to situate my participants and this research in North America. While not all participants would identify as North American, acknowledging that participants hold simultaneous identities that go beyond the binaries of Global North/South that stems from “methodological Westernism” (Wang, 2013, in Kenway et al, 2018).

Methodology

The project has 45 participants. 30 participants are Mexican professionals living in Vancouver and Seattle, 14 are parents of highly skilled Mexican migrants and 1 is a high ranking member of the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City. The method of recruitment is snowball sampling, which provided me with access to highly skilled migrants from Monterrey. Focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on migrants from Monterrey, provides a unique perspective of the life course of highly skilled migrants who grew up in a city widely transformed by NAFTA, close to the U.S.-Mexico border, and home to Mexico's highest per capita concentration of schools, institutes, universities, technical, and higher education centers (University of San Diego, 2021). I also recruited participants through the Tec de Monterrey and University of British Columbia alumni networks. Having access to these networks allowed me to examine the importance of access to social capital and institutional networks.

The majority of interviews were conducted in-person in Vancouver, Canada and Seattle, United States from November 2021 to the summer of 2022. When requested by participants, to accommodate their schedule or for COVID-19 precautions, I conducted online interviews via Zoom. I also conducted in-person and Zoom interviews with parents of highly skilled migrants in Monterrey as well as Mexico City, Guadalajara and Irapuato during the summer of 2022.

Table 1 Participant demographics

	Vancouver (highly skilled migrants)	**Seattle** (highly skilled migrants)	**Mexico** (parents of highly skilled migrants)
Gender	**3** male, **10** female	**7** male, **10** female	**5** male, **9** female
Age	**1** 20-25 years old **7** 25-30 years old **4** 30-35 years old **1** 35-40 years old	**16** 25-30 years old **1** 30-35 years old	**10** 50-60 years old **4** 60-70 years old
Immigration Status	**8** temporary residence **4** permanent residence **1** Canadian citizenship	**12** temporary residence **5** permanent residence	**14** Mexican Citizenship

The interviews were conducted in Spanish or Spanglish[1] and lasted an average of 90 minutes. Taking an inductive approach, these life history interviews included questions under three broad themes: early life and education, cosmopolitan identity, and lastly, migration and transnationalism. After analyzing the first set of interviews — and realizing the central role of parents in the cultivation of a cosmopolitan habitus— I conducted an additional fourteen interviews with parents of highly skilled Mexican migrants living in the United States and Canada. To ensure the confidentiality of the data, pseudonyms have been assigned to all participants.

[1] A hybrid language combining words and expressions from both Spanish and English. All participants are bilingual and speak English and Spanish sometimes interchangeably.

After transcription, I used NVivo to do thematic analysis. This process involved doing a focused reading of the interviews and coding the emerging themes. Open coding was used to identify themes and patterns across the interviews and was informed by a literature review on migration policies, cosmopolitan identity and transnationalism. I used these main themes as the initial codes and added sub-codes as I further analyzed the interviews, after this process, I arranged the codes in nine main themes: Cosmopolitanism, Drivers of Migration, Household Impact, Integration Challenges, Migration Infrastructures, Digital Platforms, Mobilities, Sense of Belonging and Transnational Ties.

In these interviews, I asked participants to recount their lives, starting with what they could remember from their kindergarten education to the start of their mobility journeys to Vancouver and Seattle. I paid particular attention to the impact of their educational experiences in shaping their ability to obtain a job in the United States and Canada. During these interviews, participants generally referred to the impact of their families' choices, and particularly their parents, in shaping their aspirations for international mobility. This trend prompted me to organize an additional set of interviews with the parents of Mexican professionals living and working in the United States and Canada; all parents quoted participated in the interviews.

Findings

Cultivating a cosmopolitan habitus

When I interviewed parents, many expressed that they felt more anxious in the first few years of their children's education. This was in part due to their perceived ever-shifting belonging to the Mexican middle-class. While I did not directly inquire about income in interviews, I estimate that participants fall within the 80th to 95th percentiles of income distribution in Mexico (De Rosa, Flores and Morgan, 2024), using proxies such as average salaries in occupation, educational attainment, and cost of living with monthly salaries ranging from 20,000 to 65,000 MXN or around 1,000 USD to 3,200 USD per month.

Parents identified that they could mobilize their social, cultural, and economic capital to transfer *in-vivo* wealth into the educational system, hoping to use education (rather than inheritances) as a tool for social mobility. Ofelia and Sergio, a couple with two adult children studying and working in the United States, discussed the conflicts they had with Sergio's coworkers in his high ranking executive corporate job who did not see the value of investing in private education:

> Ofelia "(We perceived our coworkers as) being selfish in terms of not wanting to pay for private school, and they would say: 'private school's basically the same as a public school', or 'we'd rather save and pay for their undergraduate degree or a postgraduate degree'. But I thought that all the deficiencies they have from the start cannot be made up later".
>
> Sergio: "Yes, and in any case, they ended up helping their children set up a business as adults. So you could see these upper level managers were trying to get work for their children".

> Ofelia: “In the end, they had to use the money that they didn’t invest in private education and without the self-esteem that comes from it (attending these private schools)”.

Parents identify that investments in education had to start early as said by Ofelia, “that all the deficiencies they have from the start cannot be made up later”. This made initial investments in international education a priority for participants. Some families were able to mobilize their social and cultural capital to assert their belonging to the upper-middle class “status group” (Weber, 1958) while others did not necessarily have the economic means to do so.

For example, Javier, a professor at a university in Mexico, anticipated his kids would attend the university where he was teaching, as his salary package included tuition credits for high school and university. However, before his three children started high school, he and his wife invested heavily in private international education to ensure their children would succeed in obtaining access to the university system where he taught. He recalls the pressure that paying for primary and secondary school had on his family:

> “For me, the concern about money was until ninth grade, I told myself, the day they reach high school we are saved, otherwise we would not have been able to pay for it ourselves. We did not have a savings or investment plan, but for that, you cut back on expenses: this year there are no vacations, we did not paint the house, and we did not change the car, because their elementary school literally cost me more money than their university. And this is for one child, imagine with three. Even though we were financially strapped, I was never in a position to even think about taking my children out of school, I would rather stop eating than take them out of school.”

While it is an exaggeration that Javier would ever stop eating to pay for his children’s education, he articulates the importance he placed upon his children’s belonging. Similarly, most parents were deeply invested in providing access to these spaces for their children, as they assumed it would be difficult to catch up without growing up in a bilingual environment from an early age. Blanca, a mother of a participant living in Vancouver, expressed this clearly:

> “I focused a lot on my daughters having quality education and learning English. I fought for them to be in good private schools. We thought, as long as we can get them through the third grade we’ll be fine, because we had a neighbor that grew up in Chicago and came back in the third grade and her English was perfect. Even with a scholarship, it was difficult, and we were not even thinking long term about high school or university or anything. But thank God after some time we were earning better salaries and I was also started working again, that helped a lot.”

This emphasis on early bilingual education often translated into significant financial sacrifices for families, particularly for mothers who frequently took on the role of educational strategists within the family. In some cases, families, and particularly mothers, were able to use their cultural and social capital to convince school administrators to provide scholarships for their kids, as was the case with two other mothers interviewed. When Ana María and her family returned from France, where her husband obtained a Ph.D., she took a job as French teacher in the Anglo-French Lyceum of Monterrey, which provided full tuition scholarships for her two children. Even in cases where the mothers did not directly work at the school, cultural capital could be exchanged for acceptance into schools and reduced tuition payments. This was the case of Aurora, a stay-at-home mom whose husband obtained a PhD in Germany:

> "When we returned from Germany (after my husband's Ph.D.), I knew that the kids would not do well in public school, so I went to look for private schools. I went with the directors of the schools, and they would ask: why do you want the scholarship? And I told them that I wanted them to study for a better education, and it was a school where they had English as their first language and German as their second language. The director agreed to give us the scholarship, and I found a job to be able to make up the difference".

Both Ana María and Aurora were able to mobilize their families' cultural capital as recent returnees from Germany and France, to ensure that they would have access to private education in Mexico, despite not having the resources to pay for full tuition. Intangible and tangible skills that are obtained in early life, such as language proficiency, leadership, and communication skills are perceived by parents to be obtained in certain educational institutions. Accessing and successfully navigating these social spaces is thus essential in the facilitation of *credentialized mobility* in early adulthood.

Rather than focusing on long-term strategies of economic capital accumulation, such as property or trust inheritances, the global middle classes perform in-vivo transfers of wealth in the form of investments in private education. These parents use their social, cultural and economic capital to give their children social advantages in early life, by engaging in child rearing practices that Laureau (2018) calls "concerted cultivation". Beatriz, the mother of a banker working for Goldman Sachs, says this explicitly:

> "We chose a bilingual school because times had definitely changed [from when we were in school].If we wanted the children to be competitive, English was a priority, the times required it. Even if we didn't think they were going to study abroad, even here in Monterrey, they were going to need English for their jobs. It was really an investment, not for us as parents, but an investment for our children. We thought it was going to generate better jobs, a better income, a better quality of life [...]".

These investments create "competitive kid capital" (Friedman, 2013) which facilitates the ability to "navigate and perform within the formal education system, which has become a primary vehicle of economic stratification in the twenty-first century" (Rivera, 2016, p. 13). While this body of research focuses on a United States context, by expanding its application to Mexico, I show that international schools serve a central role in exposing their students to the imagined worlds (Appadurai, 1996) of the global middle classes and more specifically the "images of the good life in North America" (Ong, 2005, p.261) which have shaped the aspirations of people who are "convinced that their destinies must unfold in the transnational conditions of possibility". Parents recognize the role that international schools play in their children's future, echoing Hayden (2011, p.218) who argued that "the choice of international school for their children will most often relate not just to the prestige of the school per se, but also to an aspiration for their child".

The cultivation of a cosmopolitan habitus creates the potential for mobility in the years between kindergarten and high school, rather than concrete strategies of mobility which start once individuals grow into early adulthood. Instead of having to envision the "images of a good life in North America", participants are directly exposed and cultivate their "aspirations and capabilities" (De Haas, 2021) in a North American context. However, given that North America is only integrated economically and not socially or politically, becoming an "ideal migrant" — through the construction of desirable skills and credentials — facilitates transnational mobility by following the scripts of the "regimes of skill" (Shan and Fejes, 2015) embedded in the highly skilled migration policies of the region.

International private schools and the global race for talent

As individuals grow, they are able to mobilize the cultural and social capital obtained in elite spaces such as international private schools, where they not only interact with other members of the upper-middle classes, but also with the members of the Mexican elites with whom they share aspirations. These class-segregated educational spaces provided participants with acculturation into the global middle class without having to leave Mexico.

In contrast to Ley's (2004) discovery that education ranked as the second reason for emigration among ninety business entrepreneurs in Greater Vancouver (originating from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea), Mexican parents did not feel the need to send their children abroad to obtain "Western education" before they come of age. Contrary to Ley's analysis (2010), Chiang's (2008) and Water's (2003) study of transnational families whose kids are raised in Canada — while parents work in Taiwan or Hong Kong — shows that participant Mexican families never had plans for family migration or explicit plans for the migration of children, even as adults. The accumulation of capital(s) is a result of aspirations for social mobility, and parents had different ways of imagining where social mobility would be better utilized.

For example, Rafael and Aurora have different answers to my question about where they envisioned their children living, both of their children lived in Texas at the time of the interview:

> Aurora: "I never imagined that my children would not live in the same city as me, and it has changed me a lot that they live abroad. At first it was difficult and then I realized it was for the better, but I never imagined that they would live far away from me. Now, they are there and I like it because I see them developing very well. It makes me sad that they don't live in the same city, but I like to see them doing well".
>
> Rafael: "I never imagined them setting roots in Monterrey. For the same reasons I made similar choices when I was younger, I finished undergrad then I went to the United States and then to Germany, that's how I saw it with them".

Cultivating a cosmopolitan habitus since childhood allows for the creation of mobility-as-potentiality that facilitates the construction of mobility-as-strategy when participants enter early adulthood, rather than expecting individuals to develop a "feel for the game" (Kuus, 2014) as adults. These individual strategies will respond to the political and economic context of both Mexico and the host country, as well as the networks that are built across their lifetimes.

Parents aim, although not always explicitly, to reduce the cost of converting embodied capital to symbolic capital by acculturating in place. They do so by choosing international schools that provide symbolic and cultural capital—legitimized as skills—easing access to the credentials necessary to engage in professional mobility in Mexico or elsewhere.

The investments that these parents made in their children's education became central to the ways in which participants understood their socioeconomic position and their "aspirations and capabilities" (De Haas, 2021). Their aspirations align with the international education they receive in prestigious private schools, which reproduce meritocratic ideals of the "aspirational middle

classes", as Currid-Halkett (2017) describes. While her work focuses on the U.S. context, international private schools in Mexico facilitate the embodiment of these values by engaging with standardized international school curricula, integrating cosmopolitan values in globally oriented curricular material (Yemini and Maxwell, 2020). These aspirations and experiences align with the "shared values of the aspirational class" (Chen, 2020, p.1270). These cultural values and social practices are closely related to what Appadurai terms "the capacity to aspire", and these aspirations are unevenly distributed. While Mexico's proximity to both the United States and Canada reduces the aspirational gap, as children do not have to leave the country to become familiar with the desirable "Western" values, a considerable number of resources *are* needed to obtain access to these systems in the country. For example Santiago, a software engineer living in Seattle, told me in high school he did briefly consider applying for a university abroad, specifically in the Ivy League system.

> It was never really a possibility (to go abroad for university). It was never an option, it never even crossed my mind, this is just what it is. There was a moment when I said, 'What if I take the SAT and go to Yale?', and I had to tell myself: 'Stop that, there is no way."

While his aspirations were similar to many other international school students around the world, who believed themselves capable of obtaining entrance into prestigious universities in the United States, he had to contend with the reality that obtaining his undergraduate education in Mexico made more financial and practical sense. His capacity to aspire is shaped by his North American upbringing, while his capabilities are constrained by the financial reality of belonging to the Mexican upper-middle class.

Uneven access to credentialized aspirations

Early investments in international education aim to facilitate access to national "networks of privilege" (Brooks and Waters, 2009) by providing access to elite universities, and transnational corporations, in early adulthood. By formalizing belonging to these elite institutions, the future costs of international mobility in the future are reduced as membership elite institutions provide access to social networks (colleagues and alumni associations), work opportunities (internships, referrals) and prestige (international agreements and global academic networks).

While Mexico has only two universities in the 2025 QS World University Rankings — the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in 94th place and Monterrey Institute of Technology (Tec de Monterrey) in the 185th place — this is not dissimilar from other highly skilled migrant-sending countries like India, which has three and other Latin American countries in the top 200 universities of the QS World University Ranking.[2] However, both UNAM and Tec de Monterrey have access to a wide range of internationalization programs, facilitating the international mobility of participants. The prestige associated with elite universities in Latin America and elsewhere allows them to access the global "networks of privilege" (Brooks and Waters, 2012) that facilitate their international mobility in the future without having to engage in the "edugration" strategies

[2] Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina (71); Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil (92); Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (93), Universidad de Chile, Chile (139)

(Brunner, 2022) — pursuing education abroad to engage in migration projects — which reduces the overall costs of their credentialization.

The majority of highly skilled migrants I interviewed experienced short mobility programs such as semesters abroad before moving for work or graduate school to the United States or Canada. These proved to be essential in facilitating the creation of professional and personal networks to be sustained over time. All participants had at least one international mobility experience, including high school exchange programs (10%), international internships (37%), university exchange programs (47%) and a combination of international internships and exchange programs (63%). The sums are higher than 100% as many participants had more than one international mobility experience.

When discussing if she ever thought of completing her undergraduate education abroad, Sofia, a software engineer in Seattle, told me the following:

> "In high school, I wanted to go to either a school in New York (New York Film School) or in California (CalArts) because I wanted to work for Pixar and I saw graduates from those schools. I did not go because we couldn't afford it, I was studying for the SATs but did not take them at the end. When I was in undergrad, I realized that it was going to be very difficult to work in animation in the US, I would need to be a super expert. When I was at Tec, I saw all the software developers doing summer internships in big tech companies, so I ended [up] doing that too".

Despite their aspirations to study abroad, participants never questioned that they would obtain a university degree in Mexico, contrary to the 77% (OECD, 2018) of the Mexican population that does not attend college or university. Although delayed compared to international students from other parts of the world (Ayling and Wallace, 2025; Yeoh et al., 2014), their access to universities with internationalization options gave them alternative pathways to international mobility, such as summer internships or exchange programs. Cardwell (2020) finds that exchange programs are often undertaken by a highly selective group of students who were already achieving good grades and self-select into the programs, meaning that those who are academically stronger independently decide to go abroad (King and Findlay, 2010). International opportunities such as summer internships showcase the links between transnational corporations, prestigious universities and their alumni, with processes of (intra)elite recruitment, orientation and training (Ho, 2005) that center the importance of belonging to the right social networks to obtain access into these transnational spaces.

These processes of (intra)elite recruitment (Ho, 2005) were noticed by participants who commented on how crucial their social networks were in providing access to their international internships. Those belonging to the friend group of someone who had previously done a summer internship were more likely to get recruited as well, because they could access referrals from friends. In a friend group from the Computer Science major at Tec de Monterrey, one member secured an internship before their friends often opened the door for the rest of the group. Most notably, besides providing referrals, they also created study groups for the interview process, sharing networks and knowledge among those in each group. Participants commented that these groups study together for months for the interview process, using Leetcode[3] to conduct mock

[3] LeetCode is a platform used to prepare for technical interviews. While not extensively documented, the tech interview process is time consuming and requires many hours of effort for the interview process, to

interviews with each other and practice for hours on end independently. While an initial referral by a friend would help them get an interview, they also shared their knowledge and cultivated specific prowess in performing tech interviews to successfully obtain the job.

The dynamics of access to relatively closed networks managed by higher education institutions with high degrees of internationalization facilitated international mobility for most participants. Mexican professionals are part of transnational "brain chains" (Friesen and Collins, 2017) which they mobilize at different stages of their academic and professional careers to facilitate future mobility projects. Rather than pursuing studying abroad during university, participants took advantage of their position as upper-middle class people in Mexico to obtain access to elite schools which facilitated their access to global employers in need of international talent. However, some universities are more likely to offer a large number of international mobility opportunities, particularly private research universities, reflecting the social stratification of the country.

When universities did not offer internationalization opportunities, participants looked for these opportunities elsewhere. Private research organizations or public nation-wide mobility competitions were alternatives to exchange programs offered by participant's universities. For example, Ana, who went to UNAM, said:

> "In UNAM, to go on exchange, you had to wait until your fifth semester to apply, to be able to go on exchange. I applied and they didn't give me the opportunity at the time and it was very sad because I really wanted to go on exchange and I could keep applying semester after semester. But UNAM has so many people, they can't give it to everyone."

While the UNAM has historically been the leading university in the country, contributing to the education of many Mexican elites, it has a small number of resources dedicated to internationalization — particularly for exchange programs — in turn significantly limiting democratic access to study abroad. Ana was not able to obtain entrance into the exchange programs in her fifth semester, and she found a summer research internship in Montreal organized by the Canadian research organization Mitacs. She reapplied to the exchange program after Mitacs and was matched with Berkeley, where she spent a term of the last year of her undergraduate degree.

Fernanda, who studied at a small university run by the Bank of Mexico (Escuela Bancaria y Comercial), discovered exchange programs funded by private organizations by attending alumni nights hosted by her university:

> "That's when I learned about the existence of research summers. When I was in third semester, I saw that a COMEXUS (Mexico-United States Commission for Educational and Cultural Exchange) call was open and they did not ask for a certain number of credits so I applied (…) I think my GPA helped me. And it was super easy, I mean, literally, just my grades, if you speak English and they would send you to the university they wanted in the United States! And I went to UC Davis for I think 2 months or a month and a half to do research".

In the face of a lack of funding for public institutions, individuals rely on private institutions and international organizations that can provide resources that allow them to set research priorities based on organizational goals. Mariana, a doctor living in Vancouver, told me she applied to the

provide insights into the recruiting process in the tech industry Cui et al (2024) conducted a quantitative analysis using over 300,000 user profiles from LeetCode.

exchange program in the Faculty of Medicine of the Autonomous University of Nuevo León (UANL) but got matched to El Salvador, which did not match her mobility aspirations:

> "I got matched to El Salvador and I said: No way. Then I started to send applications on my own and I went to Berlin for a month. I always wanted to practice in another country and Germany was always my first choice. But the UANL really questioned my decision as they said: why Germany if we offer you El Salvador? But if I could go somewhere else and get something else on my own, why am I going to limit myself?"

Participants like Mariana knowingly reproduced the meritocratic scripts legitimized by the complex network of migration infrastructures (Lin et al, 2017), including commercial, educational and regulatory agents. Mariana's refusal to go to El Salvador illustrates how mobility preferences are also influenced by the neoliberal logics guiding the "aspirational middle classes", reinforced by preconceived notions of what Rivza & and Teichler (2007) call "vertical" and "horizontal" mobility. The transformation of the mobility-as-potentiality into mobility-as-strategy requires individuals to follow these meritocratic scripts, creating strategies to access and maintain transnational "networks of privilege" (Brooks and Waters, 2012) through the accumulation of internationally legible credentials.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper has examined how upper-middle-class Mexican families mobilize educational investments and social networks to facilitate transnational mobility, especially within North America's skilled migration regimes. While human capital is often treated as a quantifiable factor — such as credential recognition, language skills, and pre-existing social networks — this paper demonstrates how capital that enables successful migration strategies is cultivated across lifetimes and embedded in familial strategies of social reproduction. In particular, participants' access to international private schools and globally recognized credentials enabled them to develop a *cosmopolitan habitus*—embodied and convertible forms of capital that align with the logics of *credentialized mobility*. Meritocratic scripts embedded in the "regimes of skill" (Shan and Fejes, 2015) of immigration systems create an effectively class-based selection of immigrants in countries like Canada. This paper foregrounds the role of families as key actors in producing migratory capacity, going beyond the analysis of individual strategies of mobility. As uneven development expands globally, elites in the Global South mobilize their resources to facilitate their social reproduction through education and mobility projects.

Participants' educational trajectories were supported by institutional networks that connected them to transnational opportunity structures—what Brooks and Waters (2012) describe as "networks of privilege." These networks not only facilitated access to elite education and employment but also allowed families to strategically navigate the differentiated skilled migration policies of Canada and the United States. Through this lens, cosmopolitan habitus is not simply an outcome of elite schooling, but a product of relational, institutional, and transnational scaffolding that renders certain individuals more mobile than others.

By tracing how different kinds of capital are transferred across socio-spatial contexts, this study echoes Katz's (2001) notion of "variable capital"—typically applied to the study of working-class

migrants—as a way to understand the transnational reproduction of skilled labour. Middle- and upper-middle-class migrants also manage the simultaneity of social reproduction across borders, leveraging resources produced in one national context to unlock opportunities in another. These strategies reflect not only economic rationalities but also shifting affective and aspirational geographies, shaped by broader political-economic transformations such as regional economic integration.

Most participants are convinced that staying in North America is the best choice for their professional and personal development. When asked about their envisioned futures, participants spoke of living in Canada or the United States for professional development and Mexico in their retirement. Their orientation towards "perceived geographical opportunity structures" (De Haas, 2021) underscores how regional integration shapes and reconfigures migratory aspirations and capabilities. However, as Gabriel and MacDonald (2004) argue, the economic integration of the region also entrenches patterns of inequality, facilitating hypermobility for some while constraining others. Participants' ability to convert educational and cultural capital into recognized expertise reveals the uneven geographies of migration infrastructures, where policies reward those who align with prevailing regimes of skill.

Rather than positioning obtaining citizenship as the primary object of a migrant's desire, participants viewed mobility itself as a form of security and opportunity. Building on Ong's (2005) concept of "technologies of governing," this paper shows how state power is redistributed through systems that value flexible, entrepreneurial subjects. This flexibility also contributes to participants increasingly relying on "transnational social protections" (Levitt, Mueller, and Lloyd, 2017)—networks of support, knowledge, and opportunity that go beyond national boundaries.

This study contributes to emerging literatures on elite and skilled migration by theorizing *credentialized mobility* as a multi-scalar process, rooted in familial investments and obtained through the strategic use of institutional affiliations. This allows individuals to construct new capabilities and discover new transnational aspirations, highlighting the role of class, geography, and education in shaping who can move, how, and with what consequences. While focused on a particular group of upper-middle-class Mexicans, the findings speak to broader dynamics within contemporary migration systems, where access to mobility depends not only on individual merit or skill, but on the capacity to align personal trajectories with globalized infrastructures of recognition. Future research might explore how these dynamics play out in other regional contexts or among migrant groups with differing relationships to state power and institutional capital.

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