

Social Adjustment Challenges of Saudi Children Returning After Parental Study Abroad

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Abstract: This study explored the lived experiences of Saudi children who accompanied their parents abroad during scholarship programs and examines their social and cultural adjustment upon returning to Saudi Arabia. Using a qualitative narrative design, data were collected through interviews with parents and participatory visual activities with children. Findings indicate that although children initially adapted well to the host country, re-entry to Saudi society posed significant challenges. Difficulties were primarily related to limited proficiency in Arabic, loss of familiar peer networks, and feelings of cultural dissonance and alienation. Parents played a critical role in maintaining cultural continuity by reinforcing family communication and religious identity during and after relocation. Academically, this study extends the understanding of re-entry adjustment by highlighting the dual identity reconstruction process experienced by returning children, as they negotiate between memories of their lives abroad and expectations within their home culture. The findings underscore the need for targeted educational and social programs that facilitate smoother reintegration and strengthen belonging among returnee children, contributing to national efforts aligned with Saudi Vision 2030 to promote social cohesion and quality of life.

Keywords: Re-entry Adjustment, Third Culture Kids, Social Reintegration, Cultural Identity, Parental Support.

تحديات التكيف الاجتماعي للأطفال السعوديين العائدين من دراسة والديهم في الخارج

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مستخلص البحث: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف التجارب الحياتية للأطفال السعوديين الذين رافقوا والديهم أثناء فترة الابتعاث إلى الخارج، والتعرف على مدى تكيفهم الاجتماعي والثقافي بعد عودتهم إلى المملكة العربية السعودية. استخدمت الدراسة المنهج النوعي السرد، حيث جمعت البيانات من خلال مقابلات متعمقة مع ستة من أولياء الأمور وأنشطة بصرية تشاركية مع ستة أطفال. أظهرت النتائج أن الأطفال تأقلموا بسهولة مع بيئة بلد الابتعاث في البداية، إلا أنهم واجهوا عند العودة تحديات اجتماعية ولغوية متعددة أعاقت إعادة اندماجهم في المجتمع المحلي. تمثلت أبرز الصعوبات في ضعف إتقان اللغة العربية، وغياب الخبرات المشتركة مع الأقران المحليين، والشعور بالاغتراب والاختلاف الثقافي. كما لعب الآباء دوراً محورياً في التخفيف من هذه التحديات عبر الحفاظ على التواصل الأسري وتعزيز القيم الثقافية والدينية. وأشارت النتائج إلى ازدواجية المشاعر لدى الأطفال بين الحنين لحياتهم السابقة في الخارج وتقديرهم للعادات السعودية، مما يعكس تعقيد عملية إعادة بناء الهوية بعد العودة. وتؤكد الدراسة أهمية تطوير برامج تعليمية واجتماعية موجهة تساهم في تيسير الانتقال وتعزيز الانتماء لدى الأطفال العائدين، انسجاماً مع رؤية المملكة 2030 الهادفة إلى تحسين جودة الحياة وبناء بيئة تعليمية شاملة تدعم رفاهية الطفل وتكيفه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إعادة التكيف، أبناء الثقافة الثالثة، الاندماج الاجتماعي، الهوية الثقافية، دعم الوالدين.



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1. 1 Introduction

With the rise of globalization, international student mobility has become an increasingly common phenomenon worldwide (Taylor & Cantwell, 2015). Since the establishment of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in 2005, thousands of Saudi students have been granted the opportunity to pursue higher education abroad, contributing significantly to the Kingdom's the long-term human capital development. Upon completing their studies, many of these graduates returned to assume roles in universities, educational institutions, and governmental sectors.

However, the return process often presented considerable challenges, particularly for the children of these students who had spent formative years immersed in cultures and societies that differed markedly from those of Saudi Arabia. Reintegrating into their home country could be a complex and emotionally demanding experience, as these children sometimes struggled with adapting to local norms, values, and social expectations.

Despite the growing number of returning families, research exploring the social adaptation challenges faced by Saudi children upon their return from long-term parental study abroad is still limited. This research focuses on children's adaptation to the Saudi cultural and social life, their integration into the local communities, and the development of effective social communication skills. By highlighting these challenges, the research aims to contribute to the psychological well-being and social inclusion of returning children. This aligns with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes community mental health, social cohesion, and sustainable national development.

1.1 Research gap:

Previous studies have examined a variety of challenges encountered by Saudi students abroad, including the transition from gender-segregated to gender-integrated classrooms, language barriers, and adaptation to diverse educational styles (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Binsahl, Chang, & Bosua, 2015; Unruh & Obeidat, 2015). There remained a scarcity of empirical research examining the social adjustment difficulties encountered by Saudi children returning home after long-term parental study abroad. limited knowledge was found regarding the long-term consequences of the lived

experiences of Saudi children who accompanied their parents abroad for an extended period (Ittel & Sisler, 2012).

1.2 Research Objective

- To explore how Saudi children socially and culturally adapt after returning from long-term parental study abroad.
- To examine how Saudi culture and identity are maintained among these children during and after their time abroad.
- To investigate the role of families and schools in supporting children's reintegration and sense of belonging upon return.

1.3 Research Questions

1.3.1 Main research question:

What social and cultural adjustment difficulties do Saudi children face upon returning to their home country after an extended period abroad due to parental scholarship?

1.3.2 Sub-research questions:

Theme (1): Adaptation

1. How did Saudi children cope with the social and cultural life of the host country, and how did they adapt upon returning to Saudi society?

Theme (2): Identity

1. How was Saudi culture and identity maintained during their stay abroad, and how do children perceive their cultural identity after return?
2. Theme (3): Family and institutional support
3. In what ways do families and schools contribute to easing the re-entry process and supporting children's social reintegration?

1.4 Research Aim:

The increasing number of international students worldwide has attracted the attention of researchers to explore their experiences of culture transition (Alasmari, 2023). Saudi Arabia holds the leading position among non-European countries in sending students abroad relative to its population and is third globally, following China and India. The practice of studying overseas began in Saudi Arabia nearly ninety years ago (Mughal, 2021).

Married students are permitted and financially supported by the Saudi government to bring their children as dependents, regardless of their numbers or ages. Indeed, in several host countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and Canada, the number of dependents accompanying Saudi international students exceeds the number of the students themselves (Safeer, 2020). The length of stay of these dependents in the host country varies depending on the nature of the academic program and duration of the study. During their residence abroad, Saudi students and their families engage in daily activities such as schooling, shopping and social events which inevitably foster interactions with host nationals and exposure to different cultural and social norms.

Saudi children who accompanied their parents while studying during their study abroad experiences have spent a significant period of their lives interacting with a different culture different from that of their parents. This experience created that is known as Third Culture Kids (TCK), defined by Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock (2010) as “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture” (Pollock et al., 2010, p. 19).

Research offers limited insight into the long-term impact regarding the lived experiences of Saudi children who spent extended periods abroad with their parents (Ittel & Sisler, 2012). Therefore, this research is aimed to examined the social difficulties faced by Saudi children upon returning home after living abroad due to their parents’ study journeys. The research focused on three key areas: social engagement, communication skills, and lifestyle adaptation in Saudi Arabia. Allowing children’s voices to be heard regarding challenges they encountered within their cultural context helped to understand the adaptation needs of TCKs and contributed to developing effective programs, initiatives, and support systems in schools and communities to reduce these challenges meaningfully and sustainably.

1.5 Research Significance:

Exploring the re-entry adaptation experiences of Saudi TCKs who accompanied their parents to study abroad during childhood and returned to their country was of great significance. Understanding children’s voices was essential for predicting their

future adaptation, particularly given the long-lasting effects of such experiences on their lives (Hervey, 2009). The challenges these children faced upon returning to their homeland could have profound implications that often extended into adulthood and even after marriage.

This research provided valuable insights into the unique needs of (TCKs) and helped inform the development of support programs within schools and the broader community to address those needs effectively. Furthermore, the difficulties they encountered during re-entry adaptation influenced the strength of familial relationships. Therefore, conducting this research was vital to better understand and support the re-integration process, ultimately helping to preserve and strengthen family connections in accordance with cultural values.

In alignment with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, which emphasizes enhancing quality of life and building a vibrant society, this research played a crucial role in promoting the wellbeing of children facing adjustment difficulties after returning to their home country (Saudi Vision 2030, n.d.). By identifying the social challenges these children encountered, the study aimed to support their mental health and facilitate their integration into local communities.

Gaining a deeper understanding of these issues could guide the development of effective support systems within schools and communities, ultimately contributing to stronger, more inclusive environments. This research not only supported individual well-being but also advanced national efforts to foster a healthier, more cohesive society.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies have emphasized the growing phenomenon of international student mobility and its impact on accompanying family members. Saudi Arabia ranks among the leading countries sending students abroad through government scholarships such as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which has enabled thousands of families to experience extended periods of residence in foreign cultural environments. Within this context, the experiences of children accompanying their parents abroad have attracted increasing attention, particularly regarding their social and cultural adjustment both during and after the scholarship period.

According to Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock (2010), children who spend a significant part of their developmental years outside their parents' culture are known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs). The literature suggests that TCKs often experience identity confusion and a sense of disconnection from their home culture upon return. Their exposure to diverse cultural and moral frameworks frequently leads to internal conflicts and challenges in re-establishing a sense of belonging. Scholars adopting a social constructionist perspective argue that identity is continuously shaped through social interaction and self-perception (Jackson II & Hogg, 2010).

Existing research highlights language barriers, social isolation, and loss of shared experiences as key obstacles to reintegration for returning children. At the same time, studies point to the importance of family communication and parental guidance in maintaining cultural and religious identity. These findings underscore the need to understand the complex process of re-entry adaptation and to provide support systems that foster children's social and emotional well-being within their cultural context.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research design:

A narrative qualitative design was adopted to explore how Saudi children interpreted and made meaning of their re-entry experiences after accompanying their parents during scholarship abroad. Narrative inquiry focuses on understanding lived experience through storytelling, where identities are shaped and reshaped through daily interactions (Leavy, 2014; D. J. Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This design was well-suited for the present study because it provided access to rich personal accounts that reveal children's social and cultural adaptation upon returning to Saudi society.

Stories were not treated as simple recounts of events but as meaningful constructions through which participants negotiated identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. Narrative inquiry offered a framework for examining the interplay between experience, language, memory, and social context (J. Clandinin et al., 2016). This methodological lens aligned with the purpose of the study, avoiding positivist assumptions and instead centering subjective meaning-making (Walther et al., 2017).

3.2 Methods of Data Collection

The study utilized two data collection methods, combining narrative interviews with visual participatory research methods to capture rich and multidimensional insights into children's adjustment experiences. One-hour narrative interviews were conducted with six parents (three males and three females) to collect in-depth qualitative data on their children's adaptation processes. In addition, six children participated in visual participatory activities, during which they engaged in guided discussions about the three stages of their lived experience abroad: before, during, and after returning to Saudi Arabia. To capture their perspectives, each child was asked to produce three drawings, with each drawing representing one of these stages.

Throughout the activity, the children were asked a set of open-ended, age-appropriate questions intended to encourage richer detail in both their drawings and their accompanying narratives. These questions focused on their daily life, emotions, and the challenges they encountered in each stage. The drawings, along with the children's verbal descriptions, were used to elicit deeper insights into their personal experiences and sense-making across the three periods.

Traditional verbal expression through interviews requires a certain level of experiential maturity and linguistic competence that young children may not yet possess. In contrast, visual participatory methods reduce the dependence on language, allowing children to communicate their thoughts and experiences more easily. This approach provided greater freedom, independence, and comfort for children, positioning the researcher as an observer rather than an authority figure.

The visual participatory method empowered participants to frame and express their realities in ways that were both personally meaningful and contextually relevant (Literat, 2013). Consequently, it had the potential to foster both individual and collective empowerment by promoting self-efficacy and a shared sense of agency. This method was chosen for its co-constructed and playful nature, making it particularly effective and ethically suitable for engaging children from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The analysis of the drawings, supported by contextual discussions, provided a nuanced understanding of children's concepts, emotions, and experiences in an expressive, empowering, and personally meaningful manner (Sevón, Mustola, Siippainen, & Vlasov, 2025). Furthermore, each participating child was asked to verbally describe his or her drawing to complement the researcher's interpretation and ensure an authentic representation of the child's perspective.

3.3 Sample:

The study included six parents (three males and three females) to collect in-depth qualitative data on their children's adaptation processes. To avoid gender bias, I selected an equal number of fathers and mothers, ensuring balanced views in the study. Married parents were intentionally chosen, as the presence of both the mother and father was essential for capturing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges their children faced across different stages of relocation. Variations in socioeconomic or educational background were not specified, as these factors were not directly related to the research objectives.

The six participating children were recruited from the same families involved in the parental interviews, allowing for alignment between the children's perspectives and their parents' narratives. To engage the children meaningfully, I employed a visual participatory method. This approach was selected because young children may not yet possess the experiential maturity or linguistic competence required for traditional interviews. Visual expression therefore enabled them to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences more easily and authentically.

The study was conducted across three Saudi cities—Riyadh, Jeddah, and Jizan. Riyadh, as the capital, represents the central administrative and cultural hub; Jeddah, the second major city, reflects a diverse and highly urbanized context; and Jizan was included as it is the region where I work, providing deeper contextual understanding and facilitating accessibility for data collection.

3.4 Data collection procedure:

This research employed snowball sampling strategy to recruit the participants.

Snowball sampling is mostly used in qualitative research (Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019). This method started by selecting an initial group of participants who met the research criteria and were invited to take part. After they agreed to participate, they were then asked to suggest other people who also met the criteria and might be interested in joining the study.

Social networks, particularly WhatsApp, were used to establish the initial connections. An invitation message was sent to various groups, and individuals who met the research criteria were instructed to confirm their participation via email and schedule their interviews. Participants were also encouraged to forward an invitation message to others who may qualify for the study. Consequently, several voluntary participants reached out after receiving messages from the earlier participants.

There are three criteria mentioned in the invitation message included married parents (three male-three female) with children aged 3–6 years, who are residents of Riyadh, Jeddah, and Jizan, Saudi Arabia. The number of the recruited participants was divided into two from each city Jeddah, Jizan, and Riyadh. In addition, I recruited six children to participate from the same families.

3.5 Data analysis approach:

Data were analyzed using grounded theory approach, which involved systematic coding and the development of themes to identify recurring patterns and core insights. Regarding the children's drawings, the researcher engaged in brief conversations with each participating child both during and after the completion of their drawings to discuss the content and meaning of their work. Throughout these interactions, the researcher documented all the children's narratives as they described their drawings and the feelings associated with them. Several open-ended questions were used to encourage the children to freely explore their lived experiences abroad across its different stages (before, during, and after). Based on the children's explanations, a narrative description was constructed for each drawing. Each narrative was then organized and categorized according to the assigned drawing number to ensure clarity and maintain anonymity. This approach provided a deeper understanding of the children lived experiences by capturing both their visual expressions and their verbal interpretations.

The collected data, including parents' interview transcripts and children's drawing narratives, were treated as raw data and analyzed using grounded theory procedures as outlined by Charmaz (2006). (Charmaz, 2006).

In grounded theory approach, there are three stages of coding: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). The initial coding phase was crucial for identifying gaps in the data during early analysis and guiding further data collection. In this process, the researcher conducted the initial coding word by word, line by line, and incident by incident. The selection of initial codes that offered the greatest analytic insight guided the broader categorization of the data (Birks & Mills, 2019). These analytical decisions were informed by both the existing literature and the guiding research questions, ensuring that the coding process remained conceptually grounded and theoretically coherent throughout the analysis.

The second stage of coding is focused coding, in which the process became more selective, deliberate, and conceptual compared to the detailed word-by-word approach used initially. This phase required a higher level of abstraction, enabling the systematic connection of categories with their related subcategories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During this stage, the researcher established links between the emerging categories and the specific conditions and contexts influencing the phenomenon under investigation (Charmaz, 2014).

Finally, the analysis progressed to the third and final stage of coding: theoretical coding. According to Creswell (2013), this phase involves clarifying the relationships among the categories developed during focused coding. Theoretical coding played a crucial role in capturing key concepts, integrating and refining categories, and guiding the formation of substantive theory (Benaquisto, 2008). During this phase, the researcher began constructing a narrative that illustrated the interconnections among the emerging categories (Creswell, 2013). This stage fostered innovative thinking and encouraged new ways of linking codes and categories (Charmaz, 2014). It served as an integrative process that strengthened focused coding and provided a solid foundation for the analytical narrative. Through theoretical coding, the researcher demonstrated the relationships established during focused coding

and guided the analytic interpretation of categories toward the development of an emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014).

3.6 Ethical issues:

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Jazan University. Confidentiality was considered a central ethical issue in this research. The ethical risks of the research were minimized through several steps. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parental consent for the children's involvement in the study. At the beginning of the drawing activities, parents were invited to be present to provide emotional reassurance and to help the children feel secure and comfortable during the process. I personally conducted the drawing sessions with the children, creating a supportive and trusting environment that encouraged them to express their thoughts and emotions freely. Throughout the activities, I focused on building rapport with each child to ensure they felt respected and safe in sharing their experiences. As the children engaged in the drawing tasks, I invited them to talk about their experiences and the challenges they had encountered, carefully documenting their narratives in their own words. The presence of parents also aimed to maintain the authenticity of the children's responses, particularly given that my presence as a researcher might initially be perceived as unfamiliar.

3.7 Trustworthiness of the Study:

To ensure the research's credibility, triangulation was achieved by using two data sources: parents' narratives and children's drawings. Member checking was conducted with the parents, who reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the interpreted interview data. Thick, rich description was provided to support transferability, and peer debriefing sessions with qualitative research experts enhanced analytic rigor.

4. Discussion

4.1 Social Adjustment of Saudi Children in the Host Country:

All participants agreed that the Saudi children generally adapted rapidly and positively to the culture and society of the host country at the beginning of the scholarship period in an unexpectedly rapid manner, with the duration of adaptation and integration ranging from one to three months. The only initial

challenge consistently reported by all participants was the language barrier, as Saudi children initially lacked sufficient proficiency in English, which temporarily limited their social interaction. Despite this obstacle, the finding revealed that most Saudi children were able to adjust successfully to the local community within a relatively short period of time, not exceeding three months.

Participants attributed this swift adaption to several key factors: strong parental support that encouraged children to integrate and adjust; high cultural awareness and openness within host communities, which emphasized respect for diversity; and the presence of educational and moral programs in schools designed to support third-culture children (TCKs).

The findings further indicated that the Saudi children achieved smooth social adaptation, demonstrating active integration with peers at schools, as well as with neighbors in residential communities. Participants consequently noted that host societies were highly receptive to cultural diversity and showed genuine respect for international students and their families. One participant explained: "For many years, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has offered scholarship programs for its students. Due to the increasing number of students sent abroad annually, most host countries have developed a culture of awareness and acceptance toward international students and their children." Another participant shared: "We did not face any difficulty in socially adapting to Australian society. The community was friendly, accepted our differences, respected us, and loved us, given that it is a country that has hosted thousands of students and immigrants over the years."

These reflections highlight how the openness and inclusivity of host societies played a significant role in facilitating adaptation and integration for both students and their children throughout the study period. From a social constructionist perspective, these experiences illustrate how identity and belonging are co-constructed through continuous social interaction and cultural exchange. Children's sense of self and social identity evolved through engagement with peers, school environments, and local communities, reinforcing the importance of social context in shaping adjustment outcomes.

4.2 Culture and Identity for Saudi Children in the Host Country:

Participants identified several distinct cultural differences between the host country during their scholarship period and Saudi society. One of the most prominent distinctions, highlighted by five participants, related to parenting practices and educational philosophies. Several parents observed that Western approaches to child-rearing emphasize dialogue, persuasion, and reasoning as key strategies in guiding children's behavior. They also noted, that Western culture encourages children to express their opinions freely, engage in open discussions, and participate actively in decision-making processes. As one participant expressed, "I noticed flexibility and the promotion of dialogue in raising their children. I was so impressed by this approach and observed its significant and positive impact on the children's personalities."

Parents agreed that Western culture directly and indirectly influenced their parenting styles. Many participants explained that they adopted some positive parenting practices, such as, reasoning, open dialogue and encouraging critical thinking, to enhance their children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. The majority of participants affirmed that these parenting adaptations contributed to the development of important personal and social skills among their children, including decision-making, acceptance of others' opinions, leadership, self-confidence and independence.

In addition, participants highlighted substantial differences in cultural norms, traditions, and daily practices between Saudi society and those of the host countries. They unanimously emphasized that maintaining their children's cultural and religious identities throughout the scholarship period represented a significant and continuous challenge. Preserving these identities required international efforts to educate children about Islamic, Arabic, and Saudi values, while helping them navigate exposure to new cultural contexts. As one participant explained, "I was keen to ensure that my children were aware of the cultural differences that might impact their faith and identity. I used every opportunity to highlight the difference between us as a conservative Muslim Saudi society and the local community in the country of study." Another participant shared, "This was the biggest challenge

I faced during my scholarship period, explaining the differences and justifying them from a cultural and religious perspective that children might find difficult to understand».

These reflections illustrated the parents' deep commitment to safeguarding their children's sense of identity and belonging while living abroad. Despite the influence of the surrounding environment, parents played an active role in reinforcing their children's moral and cultural foundations.

According to the reviewed literature, TCKs often possess limited knowledge about their home country, culture, and kinship networks, which contributes to feelings of disorientation and ambiguity regarding cultural values and the civic norms (Pollock et al., 2010). TCKs frequently experience internal conflict and confusion when navigating differing moral frameworks, as they are exposed to value systems that may contradict those of their native culture, leading to uncertainty in identity formation.

From a social constructionist perspective, identity is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic process formed through self-perception and social interaction (Jackson II & Hogg, 2010). In this context, TCKs tend to perceive themselves—and are perceived by others—in four possible ways: (a) as foreigners who both look and think differently from the dominant culture, (b) as adopted individuals who appear different but share similar thinking, (c) as secluded immigrants who look similar but think differently, or (d) as mirrors who both look and think like members of the dominant culture (Pollock et al., 2010).

The analysis revealed that Saudi families placed great emphasis on maintaining regular communication with relatives in the Saudi Arabia during their stay abroad. This continuous contact was viewed as essential to providing psychological support and reinforcing a sense of belonging for their children. Parents actively facilitated interaction with extended family members, such as grandparents, uncles, and aunts, using modern communication tools including video calls and messaging applications. This practice was part of a broader strategy to preserve familial and social ties, instill Saudi values and traditions, and strengthen cultural identity.

These efforts reflected parents' pedagogical awareness of the importance of maintaining strong cultural and social connections as a foundation for fostering a balanced identity among children growing up in multicultural contexts. From a social constructionist viewpoint, such interactions represent ongoing processes of meaning-making, where children continuously negotiate their sense of identity through communication, reflection, and cultural engagement.

4.3 Social Adjustment of Saudi children after re-entry in Saudi Arabia:

The findings revealed that children returning from their parents' scholarships abroad faced numerous challenges in social adjustment; however, they managed to cope with these difficulties in various ways. Upon return, the children recognized a noticeable difference between life in the host country and life in Saudi Arabia. Separation from their friends and communities abroad, including neighbors, schools, and teachers, affected their social adjustment, their acceptance of the transition, and their ability to establish a new beginning at home.

Participants agreed that the most prominent challenge the children encountered after returning was the difficulty of social interaction with the surrounding community, primarily due to their lack of proficiency in Arabic, the native language of Saudi society. Feelings of alienation were closely linked to the inability to communicate effectively with local peers. This challenge was compounded by the diversity of Saudi dialects, which require, to match plural subject) extensive knowledge and familiarity with colloquial expressions across the Kingdom's regions. As a result, returning children experienced additional pressure in understanding the nuances of regional speech.

One child expressed this by saying, "I felt they understood each other quickly, spoke Arabic quickly, and laughed at jokes I didn't understand." Several children reported feelings of social isolation and disconnection from their peers in Saudi Arabia. This sense of estrangement manifested in different ways, often associated with weak Arabic language skills and cultural unfamiliarity. One child summarized this sentiment by saying, "They all understand each other and speak fluently, but I don't feel they understand me because I don't speak Arabic as well

as they do.” This statement illustrated how language served as a major barrier to social interaction and spontaneous communication, leading to a sense of exclusion.

Another participant added, “The children here speak Arabic quickly and understand each other, but I felt like a stranger among them.” This expression reflected an acute awareness of differences, not only in language but also in the shared background that unites local children while excluding those who have lived abroad. One child described feelings of confusion upon meeting new peers at school, saying, “I was happy at first, but I found it difficult to integrate with them and form relationships.” This observation indicated that although the desire to integrate was present, the realities of social reintegration made the children feel hesitant and isolated.

Both male and female participants affirmed that such social isolation stemmed not only from linguistic barriers but also from the lack of shared memories or local cultural experiences. As one child explained, “They remember things and situations that happened to them together, even though I wasn’t with them.” This comment demonstrated that the absence of a shared past with peers deepened feelings of alienation and social disconnection among children returning from abroad.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Saudi children who accompanied their parents abroad due to scholarship programs, focusing on their social and cultural adjustment upon returning to Saudi Arabia. Through interviews with both parents and children, the research revealed key themes such as identity negotiation, challenges in social reintegration, and the crucial role of parental support in facilitating adaptation. One of the most prominent findings concerned the difficulties of social reintegration, particularly for children who spent significant developmental years abroad. Common themes that emerged included language barriers, shifts in daily routines, and the loss of familiar peer relationships.

Children expressed feelings of difference and alienation, not only linguistically, but also in terms of shared experiences and cultural reference points with their local peers. Many struggled to communicate fluently in Arabic or to understand local linguistic

expressions and social dynamics, which contributed to a sense of social isolation. Despite their initial excitement about reuniting with extended family, several children reported challenges in forming new friendships and developing a genuine sense of belonging in their new environments.

At the same time, the research highlighted the emotional complexity of re-entry. While the children missed their lives and friends abroad, they also expressed appreciation for aspects of Saudi life, particularly the emphasis on family gatherings and cultural traditions. This duality, of loss and rediscovery, underscored the importance of acknowledging reverse culture shock in children, and the need to design educational and social programs that support smoother transitions.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that returning children are not simply “coming home”; rather, they are navigating a profound process of cultural reorientation. In alignment with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, which prioritizes the enhancement of quality of life and building a vibrant, cohesive society, understanding the challenges and perspectives of these children is essential to fostering inclusive and responsive environments across schools, communities, and families.

This research contributed meaningfully to national efforts by illuminating the psychosocial challenges faced by children returning from abroad. By addressing the complexities of their adjustment and identity reconstruction, the study offers valuable insights that can inform strategies aimed at promoting children’s well-being and facilitating smoother reintegration into Saudi society.

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open green spaces on children's growth and overall development; Employing artificial intelligence in early childhood education. ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5149-9774>

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