



## **Educational Resilience of an Undocumented Immigrant Student: Educators as Bridge Makers**

Despite facing multiple challenges in obtaining a college degree, some immigrant students successfully navigate the US educational system. Learning about their experiences in our schools can help us identify and implement specific practices and policies that make schooling more rewarding for a large student population. The journey of a Guatemalan immigrant from elementary school to a 4-year university is described in this article. The obstacles she faced throughout are presented and ways in which hurdles were overcome are explained. Educators from kindergarten teachers to university professors are encouraged to learn about the context in which students emigrate to the US and the multitude of out-of-school factors that influence their educational achievement.

### ***A Better Life***

*I'll give you a better life, she said  
She had a dream we could all come to the US  
She took matters in her own hands*

*We left everything we knew and I cried for many nights I confess*

*Today I'm here because she did what she said  
Nine years have passed and she is losing her strength  
She told me that when she looks at me, she could see herself  
But I can only hope one day I can be like her*

*A woman capable of leaving everything for her children*

*A woman so proud of who she is*

*For many years I was confused of who I was  
Ashamed of my ethnicity and my status  
One night while driving by Geneva Avenue  
I finally understood that I am Sandra*

*An undocumented student*

*Today I can freely say I am a dreamer  
I am Kaqchikel (Sandra)*

In this article I describe the educational journey of a Guatemalan immigrant woman from elementary school to a four-year university and detail obstacles she faced and the ways in which she overcame them. The purpose of this article is to illuminate the complex pathways immigrant students take in their educational journeys and to provide the reader a deeper understanding of school practices that are necessary in supporting immigrant students to become academically successful.

Educators are aware that economically disadvantaged immigrant students are educationally, politically, and socially disenfranchised in the US. Some immigrant parents may have escaped from violence and abject poverty in their home countries and it is also well documented that most immigrant parents enter the US in search of a better life, including better educational opportunities for their children (González, 2000).

Studying a Guatemalan immigrant's educational history is relevant for educators because her country of origin has had a close historical relationship with the US. A long-lasting civil war and decades of economic stagnation have forced many Guatemalans to flee their country. The Pew Hispanic Center (2013) reports that an estimated 1.3 million immigrants from Guatemala live in the US. Guatemalans have obtained lower levels of education in the US with only 9% being able to graduate from college. The Pew Hispanic Center further reports that this group as a whole is economically and socially marginalized from mainstream America. In fact, the rate of Guatemalans living in poverty is significantly higher than that of the general population.

In presenting the respondent's social integration, academic achievement, and identity development, I hope to inspire educators, administrators, and policy makers to establish more appropriate support systems to bridge existing gaps across educational institutions. To better serve immigrant students and provide a more rewarding environment leading them to successfully obtain college educations, educators need to tear down walls and instead build bridges.

As immigrants settle in the US, multiple obstacles prevent the vast

majority of their children from obtaining college educations. Some of these families are undocumented and thus face even more challenges. Immigrant students' educational journeys are seldom without complications and many are forced to give up on their schooling far too early. Some are compelled to exit at middle school. Others will persevere through high school and a small percentage makes it to community colleges.

My focus on immigrant students' schooling experiences as a contiguous journey will provide educators and policy makers with a deeper appreciation of the enormous obstacles that confront economically disadvantaged immigrant students in the US. Overcoming multiple hurdles takes much more than sheer personal determination on the part of the individual student and rather requires interconnected support systems, including family, community, and school. Pedagogy employed by teachers must have a critical lens and should work toward social justice.

Ladson-Billings (1995) presented *culturally relevant pedagogy* as a theoretical model that supports teachers in developing a critical perspective to confront racial and social injustices taking place in their schools and society (Gay, 2000). Gay and Kirkland (2003) explain that culturally responsive pedagogy involves using the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of students of color as filters through which teachers can focus on academic knowledge. In addition to espousing sociopolitical consciousness, culturally relevant pedagogy advocates for academic success for all students as well as promoting cultural competency for students and teachers alike.

I want to draw specific attention to the sociopolitical-consciousness component of this model and extend the model to include knowledge of immigrant students' countries of origin and in particular, historical events that lead to students' immigration to the US. By being knowledgeable about students' countries of origin, teachers can more effectively instruct and motivate their immigrant students to excel. Educators must ask what sociopolitical forces have pushed so many immigrant families to flee their home countries. By learning more about Guatemala we can better understand the experiences of Guatemalans in the US.

### **Research Focus**

The student's reasons for migrating to the US, her educational experiences in the country of origin and in US schools, and factors that influenced her academic success at various stages of her education were the focus of this study. I was also interested to learn about the consequences of US foreign policies and actions on Guatemala.

## **Methods**

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit academically successful Guatemalan immigrant students attending a large university in the western US. Academic success was defined in terms of undergraduate students with good academic standing. I sought the support of the academic staff who work with Latino students to recruit potential participants. Selection criteria included:

1. Good academic standing at the university;
2. Minimum of five years of education in country of origin;
3. Minimum of five years of schooling in the US; and
4. Willingness to commit 10-15 hours to the study over a period of three months.

### ***Data Sources***

A series of eight semistructured interviews over a period of three months were conducted with a Guatemalan immigrant. Other sources of data included a questionnaire regarding her views on the quality of education she received in the US; four language self-assessment tools describing her listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency levels in English and Spanish; and books and journal articles about Guatemalan history, which I reviewed in order to situate the respondent's experiences within the broader historical context of events that took place in Guatemala.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data were analyzed through an emergent process that involved reading of my detailed notes of each interview and organizing themes into emerging categories. I attempted to identify both risks and protective factors that influenced the respondent's academic success. I specifically looked for information about supportive individuals and the roles they played in contributing to the respondent's educational achievement. To ensure the accuracy of the collected data, at the beginning of each interview, I orally reviewed my notes from the previous interview with the respondent and asked for clarification where necessary. In addition, upon completion of the manuscript, I asked the respondent to review and to provide further feedback.

A brief historical context is necessary before I present Sandra's educational journey. It is not only our experiences in life that determine where we end up physically and socioeconomically. Our countries' histories and series of events that shaped our people's past and present can dramatically influence our ultimate destinies.

### ***Brief History of Guatemala***

In 1952, the Guatemalan National Assembly passed an agrarian reform law in which all uncultivated land on estates larger than 672 acres could be seized and redistributed (Kinzer, 2006). The Guatemalan government announced that it would compensate owners according to the land's declared tax values (Cullather, 1999). United Fruit, the biggest US corporation and landowner in Guatemala, intensely objected and actively engaged in undermining the Guatemalan government (Kinzer 2006). The CIA's "Operation Success" was organized and began with a propaganda campaign, proceeded with destabilizing the government by violence, and culminated in bombing attacks of civilians as well as military barracks. Finally, some military officers forced President Jacobo Arbenz to give up power (Cullather, 1999).

By overthrowing Arbenz, the US crushed a democratic experiment that held great promise for Latin America. His government embraced fundamental American ideals and carried no animosity against the US (Kinzer, 2006). It wanted only to take control over its own natural resources. Subsequent decades proved to be turbulent for Guatemala with military coups toppling leader after leader and the formation of governments and paramilitary organizations responsible for the killing of thousands of Guatemalans, particularly Mayans.

### **Sandra's Story**

Sandra is a 27-year-old Guatemalan woman who came to the US at the age of 15 to reunite with her mother after five years of separation. Sandra initially attended high school for two and a half years and, upon graduation, enrolled in an adult school for six months. Sandra then continued her education in a community college and after three years entered an urban public university, where she majored in accounting and recently graduated. She hopes to start her own business and has aspirations to attend law school.

I present her experiences as a narrative in my attempt to accurately share her educational journey. What I learned from Sandra could not have been achievable through a few structured interview sessions. The building of trust takes time and mutual respect must be established before respondents become willing to share their life stories. In fact, Sandra shared most significant and impactful elements of her story with me during our last two interview sessions.

### ***Life in Guatemala***

Sandra Ramirez (pseudonym) was born in Guatemala in 1989, 35 years after her country's democratically elected President Arbenz

was overthrown with the support of the US government (Cullather, 1999). Sandra's family lived in a small town near the capital city. Her parents owned a little bakery and provided a modest life for their three children. However, underneath this seemingly tranquil surface, reality was quite different.

Marital issues were always present and tension and arguments caused a lot of frustration between my parents because of my dad's infidelities, alcoholism, and gambling problems. There was also physical and emotional abuse towards all of us.

When Sandra was 10 years old her mother planned a two-week trip to the US for herself and her sister, ostensibly to attend the wedding of an uncle. Sandra's aunt was instrumental in making this trip a reality. As a secretary to the town's mayor, she was familiar with the regulations for obtaining a visa and knew exactly what to do in order to obtain proper documentation. Sandra's mother had visited the US twice before, staying for only a few weeks each time despite her desire to remain in this country. This time, however, she was determined not to return to an abusive husband.

I believe the reason my mom decided to stay in the US was because she wanted to give us a better life, including the opportunity to get an education. She says she didn't stay in the US in her previous visits because we were too young.

Sandra was sad and confused by her mother's departure but life went on. She was a good student at school and really enjoyed math. Throughout her early years in Guatemala, Sandra was an eager learner. She frequently volunteered in class, where she felt comfortable with the language of instruction. She was hungry to learn about everything her teachers taught her. Her enthusiasm for learning and her academic achievements earned her the right to serve as the school flag bearer on special occasions. She also loved to play sports, particularly soccer. However, because of her mother's absence, Sandra's responsibilities at home increased significantly. She was expected to cook for her father, older brother, and younger sister. She had to clean the house and was responsible for much of what her mother used to do, including doing chores at the bakery. "Even though we were small children we were expected to work at the bakery. My brother started to work there when he was seven years old."

With increased responsibility also came increased freedom. With her mother gone and a father not particularly involved with the chil-

dren, Sandra was free to do what she wanted and to make many independent decisions. She continued to do well in school, but she was disappointed and angry that her mother had left her. "Life wasn't as easy when you are 10 and you need your mom and she is not there."

### ***Arrival in the US***

Five years later, Sandra's mother returned to Guatemala and told her children to get ready to move to the US. Within two weeks, Sandra and her sister arrived in San Francisco. Her mother had paid a substantial sum to arrange for her daughters to be accompanied by a couple whom they did not know. Sandra had to pretend that these strangers were her parents and stayed with them for two days. The couple even styled Sandra's hair similar to the woman's to make their relationship seem more authentic. Although years have gone by, she still is uncomfortable talking about this experience and did not provide details regarding her arrival in the US.

Despite Sandra's excitement about coming to the US, she found the first two years in the US to be extremely difficult. "I went through two years of depression and cried for months." She struggled to reconnect emotionally with her mother, get acclimated to a new country, and learn a new language. For the first time, school was difficult for her. When she first arrived, Sandra was confronted with the unexpected news that her mother was now involved with another man and struggled to accept a new family dynamic. "I didn't know what was going on. My mom hadn't told us about this man. I didn't like him [her stepfather] in the beginning." Sandra explained further:

My mom was living with my stepdad, but they didn't get married. She didn't divorce my dad because he didn't want to sign the papers when my mother went back and she was busy arranging everything to move to the US.

Sandra's confusion regarding these new family dynamics is echoed in the experiences of many other children and adolescents during transnational relocation.

Adaptation strategies that immigrant youth employ are complex. Along with confusion, Sandra experienced sorrow; she was homesick and missed her relatives and friends in Guatemala. Comparing her circumstances in Guatemala and the US, Sandra described the relative privileges that she enjoyed in Guatemala, as her family owned a bakery business and they could afford to live in a modest house. In the US, however, she lived in a small apartment. Her father was not very attentive to Sandra but she had some emotional connection with him.

In the US, Sandra was forced to accept the reality that her mother was now with another man. “I didn’t know what was going on. My mom didn’t tell me that she was with him and for the first few days of our stay, they even slept separately.” Sandra further explained that it took her a long time to get to know her stepfather, and eventually, to like him. “He is a good man, a working man. He is from Mexico.” Sandra also experienced some joy in her new environment and attempted to focus on the positive aspects of a new chapter in her life. “Things were different here. Our small apartment was carpeted—it was cool! We had a refrigerator, microwave, and a TV-DVD player.”

### ***Schooling in the US***

It was December when Sandra began her educational journey in the US as a sophomore at a high school she described as being ethnically diverse. For the first time she encountered students from other parts of the world as well as a school that was vastly different from what she was used to.

There were different people—Chinese, Middle Eastern, Mexican, but the teachers were white. . . . It was hard at the beginning—different cultures. I lived in a small town [in Guatemala]. I wasn’t exposed to drugs, sex, and things. High school [in the US] is different—I didn’t feel comfortable.

Sandra explained that peer pressure was not an issue at her new school. In fact, she developed good friendships with students whose focus was not schooling. “We were good friends with each other; we ate lunch, but they were into stuff but I wasn’t and they were OK with it.”

When Sandra entered the US she knew only a few words of English. She describes her first English as a second language (ESL) teacher as a white woman who was very strict and often yelled at her students. Sandra recounts her classmates, many of whom were Mexican boys, as very disrespectful to this teacher. Sandra’s only non-ESL classes in her first year of high school were physical education (PE) and photography. She noted that she never spoke with her photography teacher and always asked her friends who were more proficient in English to explain what she needed to do in this class. Her limited ability to speak English caused her frustration, at times pain, and a sense of rejection:

I experienced discrimination because of my lack of English fluency ever since I was in high school. Since I was a little girl, I would always speak up in class, but after noticing how people laughed at



me because of my accent, I was afraid to participate in class. I felt dumb and unintelligent for a while. It made me feel so insecure about myself.

In her second year of high school in the US, Sandra continued to take four ESL classes. She described one particular ESL teacher (Ms. Turner, pseudonym) as a “sweet old lady who treated us like we were little kids and during Thanksgiving made us paint turkeys—I guess that was her way to teach us to get to know the [American] culture.” She described her junior-year ESL classrooms as chaotic with young men mostly yelling and interrupting the teachers.

Sandra’s senior year was markedly different as she was able to take algebra, science, art, and PE. She still took two ESL classes, noting that: “The same people always stayed in ESL.” According to Sandra, science and art were difficult subjects; however, she was resourceful and sought the support of classmates to explain concepts that she was not able to comprehend because of her limited proficiency in English. Although science was difficult for Sandra, she worked hard and in particular for group projects she did much of the work. Her project partners were not as enthusiastic as she was but were helpful in translating the assignments so that Sandra could complete them. Algebra was different, as she excelled in this class and if she needed particular clarifications, she remained after class and received support from her teacher. She continued to socialize with other Latino students and remembers lunchtimes as opportunities for her friends to “hang out under this tree—some [of my friends] were born here and others were immigrants but we hung out.”

Sandra reflected further on her high school education and in retrospect described her teachers as having low expectations for their students and not really being engaged in students’ educational development. Although she thought that her teachers were well qualified to teach and for the most part caring, she found that many could not manage their classes well. Sandra added that frequent disruptions by other students got in the way of her learning.

When asked if she had recommendations for high school teachers dealing with immigrant students, Sandra eagerly expressed that teachers need to be more involved and caring. She urged them to recognize that students have different needs. Particularly, she emphasized that learning English is quite challenging and noted that immigrant students need various support systems in order to become highly proficient. “I think they [teachers] need to understand that immigrant students have necessities. For example, while learning the language an immigrant student also has to learn about the culture and other

things.” Sandra said that ESL programs need to put more emphasis on the literacy development of immigrant students and should give multiple opportunities for these students to write essays and reports, and not “just mak[ing] us write small, simple sentences.” Sandra also expressed the need for teachers to give frequent feedback to their students along with multiple chances to improve their reading and writing skills. She further articulated the need for teachers to guide immigrant students in understanding postsecondary educational opportunities and noting that this support is not usually available at home. “Also teachers should encourage students to pursue higher education because many students come from families that do not encourage them to go to college.”

During her senior year, Sandra had one particular ESL teacher who was subjected to disrespectful behavior from students. However, this teacher continued to be a caring educator for Sandra and told her that she believed in her. In fact, this teacher gave Sandra an opportunity to translate at a parent conference. Sandra did not think that she was proficient enough in English to translate for her teacher. Yet she embraced this opportunity. Ms. Albright’s (pseudonym) positive attitude toward Sandra encouraged her to strive to improve her English language literacy skills. Sandra explained that after two and a half years of high school she continued to struggle with English and did not find books and materials to support her English language development. Furthermore, with the exception of Ms. Albright, Sandra noted that most teachers were not particularly helpful in supporting her second language acquisition.

### ***Adult Education School***

As Sandra was preparing to graduate from high school, a community college counselor suggested that she enroll in an adult school program in order to obtain sufficient credits to qualify for in-state tuition. This counselor had taken the time to come to Sandra’s high school to encourage students to continue their educations beyond high school. Thus, this professional created a link to college, providing students a sense of hope along with valuable knowledge. They realized that going to college is an achievable task. The option to attend adult school for six months transformed access to college from a dream to reality. Because paying out-of-state tuition was not an economic feasibility for her, she took this counselor’s advice and attended adult school for six months. Upon completion, she had had three years of schooling in the US and therefore was no longer required to pay out-of-state tuition. Sandra noted that teachers at her adult school were highly effective.

### ***Community College***

Sandra subsequently enrolled at a local community college, took a series of transferable courses, and three years later was admitted to a four-year university. Sandra's community college experience also gave her the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of social issues that affected her life and her community. She joined a program designed to bring Latino/a students together to discuss issues that directly affected them. It was at this time that she became aware of a national movement that urged policy makers to make significant changes to laws that affect the undocumented community. Through social media, Facebook in particular, Sandra began to read and write about how students can organize and voice their views. She shared her perspectives on the societal neglect of many undocumented students. She began to attend meetings and participated in marches supporting the rights of undocumented members of her community. Sandra views her activism as a necessary component of her educational experience. She also took specific courses that enabled her to understand current social issues through a historical perspective. In particular, she became aware of the history of Central America and specifically her country of birth, Guatemala.

### ***College***

Sandra is a highly motivated person with enormous potential. She recently graduated from a large public university. She majored in accounting and has ambitions to start a business and intends to continue her education in order to obtain a law degree with specialization in immigration law.

In her history courses at the university, Sandra learned about President Arbenz's attempts to bring agrarian reform to Guatemala and about the subsequent campaign on the part of an American company (United Fruit Company) to topple his government (Schlesinger & Kinzer, 1982). As an adolescent in the US, Sandra was aware that her family's socioeconomic standing was significantly lowered when they emigrated to the US, but it was not until college that she learned about the impact of a series of military dictatorships for nearly four decades that caused much death and destruction in Guatemala.

Sandra attributes her academic success to her unwavering desire to make a good life for herself and her family. Words of encouragement and positive role models helped Sandra to aspire and dream of a better future. She is thankful to family members and educators who have helped her thus far. In particular, she spoke of family members in Guatemala who frequently encouraged her to work hard in school. As

a child, she was encouraged by her aunt and uncle to pursue education with vigor.

All my life I was taught that education is the key to success by my mom, uncle, and aunt. Success, however, can mean many things to different people. To me, it means to be able to help my family, specially my mom. My mom always said I was going to be someone in life because I was going to get an education. I do not know if she really knew the power of her words, but they influenced me and in the journey of going to school I also discovered the love for learning.

Sandra complimented specific educators who paid special attention to her academic development. “In my case, I think my high school education was effective in the sense that I was exposed to the English language and I learned a lot.” She discussed one teacher in particular:

There was this teacher who made us present poems. She tried to teach me how to pronounce it correctly. I think she had experience working with children that drop out of high school for several reasons and that made her capable of caring and being able to work and help immigrant students like me. However, it wasn't until college that I began to enjoy learning.

She discussed one particular English instructor who taught her to write essays and worked with her to gradually improve her academic writing proficiency.

### ***Identity Development***

During high school Sandra clearly understood the need to assimilate in her new environment. “I wasn't Mexican but I wanted to fit in with my Mexican friends; I wasn't white, but I wanted to be a part of that school.” Her desire to be accepted by different groups is not unique; however, her ability to be malleable yet her resistance to giving up her ethnic identity is noteworthy. Identity development is an ongoing process with discrete stages that depend upon internal and external forces. During our sixth meeting (approximately two months into the study), Sandra confided in me that she was of Mayan heritage. She expressed that when she arrived in the US she was not proud of her Mayan background.

I was so ashamed because I belong to the Mayan community. Over there [Guatemala] you face discrimination; people call

you Indio or Indian. This is a very offensive term and they also see you differently like you are worth less just because you wear your Guatemalan outfit (*corte* and *Guipil*). I used to wear Mayan clothes in Guatemala. I used to know Kaqchikel [language]; my mom and grandma spoke to us in the language when we were kids but now I've forgotten. Here in the US, I never told anyone about my Mayan background because I thought people would see me differently. However, taking classes at the university and during the process of your research [the author], I have finally accepted who I am and I am proud of being indigenous.

Sandra continues her social activism in which she educates the community about the realities of undocumented students and advocates for those who are struggling to achieve US permanent residency. She expresses her love for this country and with conviction she stands up for the rights of other young immigrant students who wish to someday become American citizens. Yet she notes that she is frequently subjected to acts of microaggression and discrimination. She describes one in particular:

One specific time was when I was waiting for the bus. I heard a woman talking in Spanish on the phone. I don't remember how, but we began a conversation and when I replied in Spanish she was surprised. She said she thought I was Chinese because I was holding my books and usually Latinas don't go to school. When I tell people about my schooling, they think I am in school to learn English.

### ***Immigration Status***

During our seventh interview Sandra confided that she was an undocumented student and eagerly expressed optimism about her chances for obtaining US residency documentation. A few weeks later, she jubilantly informed me that she had just learned that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement had accepted her application, and that she was hopeful that she would eventually become a legal resident of the US. This was a momentous day in the life of this young woman. Yet her mother still faces an uncertain future, as she has not obtained proper documentation to reside in the US. Sandra describes her mother's struggles by noting:

I got my first job at the age of 17 years old. I saw how people treated immigrants who don't know English and I know my mom was experiencing it. But most of all, I remember the day I picked her

up after work and after working there for 10 years, she said, “*me van a verificar mis papeles*” (they are going to verify my papers) [or social security number]. And all I could say was everything is going to be OK. I felt so powerless.

Because of the fact that she has been living in California since her arrival in the US at an early age, and graduated from high school and college, Sandra was granted a two-year reprieve from deportation through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). She hopes to obtain permanent residency of the US. Her current status allows her to work.

### **Discussion**

Presenting Sandra’s journey is particularly important as she helps us in having a better understanding of the multidimensionality of immigrant experiences. Economically disadvantaged immigrant youth are constrained by severe social injustices that negatively affect their schooling experiences (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The academic success of immigrant students is to a large extent dependent upon educators who appreciate the realities of immigrants and schools that have appropriate resources to meet the unique needs of their immigrant students.

Individuals who played the role of interagency bridge makers had a positive impact on Sandra’s goals of achieving academic success. Immigrant students can achieve further educational success if they are provided with sufficient emotional, informational, and financial support to navigate the American educational system. Furthermore, students’ educational backgrounds in their home countries affect their schooling trajectories.

### ***Emotional Support***

Academic success is highly dependent upon the emotional state of a student. Sandra’s family, friends, and specific teachers motivated her to carry on in spite of facing challenges. In addition to developing and cultivating Sandra’s intellectual capacities, some teachers also instilled pride in her cultural heritage and helped her to overcome obstacles in and out of school. Teachers such as Ms. Albright make critical positive changes in the lives of immigrant students. She gave Sandra the opportunity to translate at a teacher-parent conference. This experience undoubtedly boosted Sandra’s self-esteem as it reminded her that people with higher social capital believed in her. Being told by her teacher that her English proficiency was advanced enough to conduct a complex translation gave Sandra the motivation to further de-

velop her English skills. This teacher helped her student to recognize her strengths, talents, and ways that she could use her talents regularly to achieve her goals. Particular educators also made significant contributions in giving her valuable information with which to carry on her schooling.

### ***Informational Support***

In addition to providing opportunities for Sandra to demonstrate her talents, some teachers mentored her in ways of navigating the school system. Some college counselors were also important guides for Sandra as they reassured her that entering college is indeed a reality for her. These educators generated optimism in spite of obstacles and provided pathways and plans so Sandra could achieve her goals. These educators realized that goals are obtained step by step and knew that their guidance was crucial for Sandra's academic success.

### ***Financial Support***

Sandra's mother and stepfather worked hard to financially support her. Sandra also started working at a young age to support her family and concurrently attended school. She toiled long hours to pay for college, as she did not qualify for any scholarships because of her undocumented status. Paying for college tuition and other related schooling expenses was highly burdensome for Sandra and her family. Yet her determination and prior schooling experiences prevented Sandra from dropping out.

### ***Strong Academic Background***

Sandra's educational journey is successful. She was fortunate to have a support system that maintained her resiliency and encouraged her to move forward. Her strong academic background significantly contributed to her educational achievement in the US. Sandra was academically solid in Guatemala and benefited from a broad range of subject-matter knowledge and skills when she entered high school in the US. The educational capital that students bring with them to the US plays a major role in their academic success in American schools (Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001). Some teachers recognized her educational capital and viewed her previous schooling experiences as assets that could positively affect her academic development in her new context. Sandra's academic success provides further evidence supporting a relatively large body of research that has found that robust academic language skills in the native language are a significant resource for learning a second language (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

## **Recommendations**

We need to build a well-designed system that provides systematic academic as well as social/emotional support to all immigrant students so that they can become successful in our schools. What we need to focus on are not only the complexities that students such as Sandra face and the multiple paths they take before entering our classrooms but also complex support systems that they need to succeed in school. Their journeys are often filled with difficulties and their stories do not begin or end when they set foot in our schools. Immigrant youth face many challenges as they settle in the US. Multiple out-of-school factors, including poverty, limited social capital, and societal rejection and discrimination, put many immigrant students at risk of school failure. The more challenges a student faces, the more likely she or he will not do well in school.

### ***Providing Financial Support***

Educational advancement continues to play a major role in economic mobility of immigrant students. Yet they are often confronted with the daunting task of affording to pay for the high cost of obtaining a college education. Subsidizing higher education will provide substantial economic benefits to our society. Colleges and universities should be more accommodating to immigrant students: encouraging them to seek higher education, helping them navigate the system, and supporting them to complete their college education. Community colleges can be instrumental in this process, as they are serving more immigrants than any other postsecondary institution. Financial restrictions and documentation challenges are among the most formidable obstacles for college entrance and completion among immigrant students. Our financial aid and admission policies need to be transformed in order to respond to the needs of immigrant students, in particular undocumented immigrant students. Many students like Sandra not only have significant financial needs, but they are also unfamiliar with how to obtain institutional support. Providing immigrant students with financial support gives them better odds at obtaining their goals, including economic mobility.

Another way of supporting students such as Sandra is to see their English language development as a process that needs institutional support. The majority of English as a second language courses at community colleges are not eligible for federal financial aid. Furthermore, many of the courses that immigrant students have to take are not transferable to four-year colleges since they are categorized as remedial. Sandra spent three years at a community college before she was able to transfer to a university.



Thus, the process of obtaining a degree from a community college or another institution of higher education is not only more costly for most immigrant students, but it also takes longer than for English-proficient students. These current policies certainly need to be revisited and modified. In addition, the status of English as a second language programs in colleges and universities needs to be elevated so that they are not seen as merely remedial education programs with limited status and substandard funding.

Enhancing the economic productivity of students such as Sandra is no longer an ethical discussion; it is a national priority. The educational achievement of immigrants has a direct impact on the economic vitality of the US. Therefore, providing opportunities for immigrant students is not just a generous act, but also an act of self-interest.

### ***Learning About the Context of Immigration***

Olivos and Quintana de Valladolid (2005) express the importance of integrating students' experiences into the classroom. Poverty and war incur long-lasting devastation and their impact is multigenerational. Numerous immigrants from countries across the globe have experienced war and economic devastation. Teachers need to focus not only on the educational histories of their students but also need to be informed about students' countries of origin and how their histories affect their current socioeconomic standing. Learning from immigrant students can provide opportunities for teachers to reflect upon their teaching practices. Educators from kindergarten teachers to university professors need to learn about the context in which students emigrate to the US and the multiple factors that influence their educational achievements. Teachers need to be informed of the reasons for which hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans fled their country.

As so many students attempt to escape wars and poverty they face new obstacles. Although learning a new language is not easy and takes many years, getting out of poverty and maintaining economic security, at times, is much harder and takes many more years to achieve. Educators' appreciation of the complexity of students' experiences is crucial to their eventual success. Educators need to support immigrant students with kindness and clear pathways to college. We need to believe in all students and provide them with the highest level of educational opportunities, something that we expect and demand for our own children.

This discussion cannot be complete without recognizing that US foreign policies and actions directly affect migration trends to the US. Although Guatemala is not now being ruled by military dictators, it is

still suffering economically from the ravages of decades of war, exploitation, and US interventions. Today, many obstacles, including poverty, unemployment, limited educational opportunities for the majority of Guatemalans, violence from gangs and drug trafficking, as well as a multitude of other social problems, are holding Guatemala back. Meanwhile, several US companies continue to operate and profit in Guatemala, including United Fruit. It is now called Chiquita Brands International and is the leading distributor of bananas in the US.

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