

The Importance of First-Generation Immigrants' Education

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### ***Abstract:***

The overall purpose of this study was to research educational equality for first generation immigrants. I interviewed five first generation immigrants with the purpose of finding out which factors contributed and withheld these students from achieving higher education. These factors included their educational exclusion, the obstacles faced throughout their school years, and their resilience in educational settings. Some major findings were that all the participants had very similar experiences as first-generation students. All of them struggled with the language barrier, ESL (English as a second language) classes, socioeconomic status, and lack of parental help with school. My findings are that schools, high schools in particular, need to implement more programs for first generation immigrants, because although most grew up in the country they immigrated to, they still have parents at home who do not speak English. Most immigrant students do not get the help they need in school and most definitely do not get that help at home from parents.

### ***Introduction:***

Statistics show that only 56% of students whose parents have no more than a high school education enroll in college, whereas the percentage is 85% when students' parents have at least a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999, Figure 3). Secondary schools do not have the resources to prepare immigrant youth to transition from high school to college. Despite this, many immigrant youths can become resilient towards these obstacles. The language barrier is a struggle many first-generation

immigrants deal with. Along with immigrant students not having someone who can interpret for them, low socioeconomic status, and lack of guidance from their parents. All these factors contribute to making the learning process more difficult. As a first-generation immigrant myself, it is important to shed light on some of the struggles that we face that many people fail to acknowledge. Any time that someone is introduced into a new country they are going to face obstacles and challenges that many people are unable to relate to and sympathize with. I was once in that position and I felt as if not enough people were aware of my circumstances and there was a lack of support for my situation. Being an immigrant has its benefits, such as, contributing to diversity in schools as well as improving work ethic towards schoolwork. Although there have been programs implemented for immigrant students, such as ESL (English as a second language) there is a large gap in educational equality for students who are not fluent in English, are low-income and have parents who did not attain higher education. Immigrant students are not eligible for financial aid; therefore, many are unable to pay for college due to low income. All these factors as well as the lack of support from parents affects the process of educational attainment for immigrant students. Educational attainment varies depending on circumstances, but I specifically will be analyzing educational exclusion in immigrant students, obstacles to educational achievement and resilience in educational settings for immigrant students.

## *Literature Review:*

### **Theory About Educational Exclusion in Immigrant Students:**

Many schools do not prepare students for higher education in ways that they should. Studies show that when children of immigrants have parents with low socioeconomic status (SES) it greatly influences the outcome among their children's SES (Feliciano, 2018). Along with low family socioeconomic status, exclusion from financial aid limits undocumented students from achieving higher education (Gonzales, 2010). Due to the lack of limited guidance and socio-economic issues from immigrant students' parents, many of them struggle in school. Moreover, schools often do not have the resources or structures in place to make up for financial and cultural challenges that immigrant students face at home. This can lead to a drastic negative impact on their education (Benson et al. 2010). In contrast, many students also feel the need to succeed in order to make up for their parents' loss. To prove something of themselves, and the few that do complete high school are more likely to complete higher education (Perreira, Harris & Lee, 2006). Many first-generation immigrants obtain more education than their parents but second and third generation students are not as successful in obtaining it. As for dropout rates, they find that those with low social income are more likely to dropout. Perreira, Harris and Lee create various hypotheses throughout the study in order to predict what can be a possible outcome. They have the straight-line hypothesis and the selective assimilation hypothesis: the straight line predicts that dropout rates will diminish over time while selective assimilation predicts the opposite. They find that those who complete high school are more likely to complete higher

education. With these findings they can conclude that the straight-line hypothesis was correct. Now that they have gathered this information, they want to research programs that will help students to graduate high school, help students with a language barrier and to have them interact more and be a part of the school community. Lack of guidance from parents plays a major part in immigrant student's success. In order to prevent this, schools should implement programs that allow for parents to be more involved in their kids' school life.

Segmented assimilation theory shows that immigrants who come from a different country deal with societal prejudice (Portes and Zhoie 1997; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). People tend to hang around people that are like them and that they can easily relate to. Many of the times immigrants do not have people they can easily relate to due to the difference in cultural background. That hinders the process of making friends whereas studies show a large friend group would help to reduce prejudice (Feliciano, 2018). Assimilating into a different culture and tradition is not easy, making it strenuous to make friends and fit in. W.E.B Du Bois (1903) talks about the lack of equality and diversity in the United States while also explaining the consequences of the lack thereof. As a country we have always put minorities at the bottom of the list, whether it is the color of their skin or their immigration status, they will never be seen as true Americans. Du Bois' theory of being a second-class American relates to how immigrants are seen and how they react in response to their perceived reception. They are in a constant state of "double consciousness" meaning that they feel as though they need to act and behave a certain way when being watched, hiding their native culture to seem more American. They cannot be their true selves outside of their community/homes. They are in constant fear of being

judged, bullied and taken advantage of. Although many can “pass” as being American based on looks, they must be constantly aware of blending in, and forgetting their true culture. Assimilating into American culture means leaving everything you know behind, even if it means losing your sense of self (Lobban, 2013).

Literacy skills are another factor that contributes to the obstacles faced, and many believe that it is one, if not the most, important factor. Riederer and Verwiebe in “Changes in the Educational Achievement of Immigrant Youth in Western Societies: The Contextual Effects of National (Educational) Policies” study the literacy skills of immigrants, something that is rarely investigated. Without literacy skills there is no language, communication, social, and cultural integration. They are a key factor in achieving and developing knowledge. Literary skills are the capacity to understand and reflect and it is necessary to fully participate in society. Characteristics of educational policy, such as the quality of the educational system, and migration policy (social composition of the immigrant population) are significant factors for immigrant students’ educational achievement. Quality of education system refers to whether there are resources available in schools, admission policies, school funding, and social and ethnic composition (Lee and Smith, 1993; Rivkin et al., 2005; Palardy, 2008; Creemers and Kyriakides, 2010). If a student cannot understand what is being taught, then there is no learning.

Kao and Taggart in “Effects of Social Capital on Minority and Immigrant Students’ School Achievement\*” examine children of immigrants and minority children and how they are disadvantaged in their access to social capital by using the National Educational Study of 1988 (NELS). Social capital means to have effective and functioning relationships with people in your society. Having a lack of social capital, immigrant status, race and ethnicity

can negatively affect educational achievement (Kao & Taggart, 2003). Twenty percent of immigrants make up the current school population in the United States (Zhou 1997; U.S. Census Bureau 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). Kao and Taggart's purpose for this study is to examine how immigrant families differ from native-born families regarding how non-economic resources affect educational achievement. It is no surprise that social capital affects educational achievement but what needs to be examined is how it affects children of immigrants who have less social capital. Being a first-generation student has its negatives, one being that parent-school social capital is almost nonexistent. This tremendously affects educational outcomes, less social capital leads to lower standardized test scores. Parents of minority and immigrant children have the chance to better their child's chance for educational success simply by interacting with the school community and parents of their children's friends. Although, it is not as easy as it sounds because immigrant parents are disadvantaged in English language, social and cultural customs. Having less access to social capital leads to less interaction with their children's friends and involvement with the school. They predict that social capital that is available to minority and immigrant students will lead to positive outcomes on their academic achievement such as higher standardized test scores and GPA (Kao & Taggart, 2003).

Without high expectations towards a college degree and achieving higher education, social mobility is nearly impossible. Expectations for higher education vary among several groups, factoring in race and socioeconomic status. These factors play a major part in expectations for higher education. Researchers find that immigrant students' educational expectations are unique (Wells, 2008). Socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity are important for successful educational attainment, those with lower SES do not have



successful educational experiences. Nonetheless, immigrant students generally have higher expectations for postsecondary education, higher than nonimmigrants. Most recent immigrants are often non-white, adding a racial/ethnic component, showing that Latinos have the lowest aspirations for higher education compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Wells, 2008). This is due to each individual and unique experience, including varied educational backgrounds, the age of entry into school, cultural conflicts, parental involvement with school, mobility issues, work, and adjustment to a new culture (Gonzalez, 2005).

Immigrants' experiences with higher education consists of academic barriers, exclusion and a sense of not belonging that makes it difficult to achieve higher education. Most people view college as a way out of poverty, to do better, to succeed and get a well-paying job. However, many immigrant students do not have this opportunity due to non-resident tuition and fees (that are typically doubled due to status). Although some legislation has been put in place to make tuition more affordable for immigrant students that have attended for at least three years, this mainly applies to schools that have a large immigrant population. Furthermore, most immigrant students are not permanent residents or citizens therefore they are not eligible for any type of financial aid, grants, scholarships or loans (Rocha-Tracy, 2009). All these factors make it nearly impossible for immigrant students to afford college and is a significant disincentive to enroll. For those who can attend college face other problems such as language barrier, cultural assumptions, professors who lack cultural diversity, and finding social acceptance from their peers. When conducting a survey with non-immigrants and immigrants about their college experience, Rocha and Tracy find that none of the non-immigrant students reported having

the problems that are common to immigrant students. It was found that those non-immigrant students were aware of differential treatment and experiences of their immigrant classmates (Rocha-Tracy, 2009). Many immigrant students stated that they felt their professors made assumptions and stereotypes that underestimated their abilities and intelligence. University professors need to be more accommodating and welcoming to immigrant students.

Immigrants have a lot to deal with when coming into a foreign country, aside from the language barrier and often, low socioeconomic status, many immigrants face racism and discrimination as well. Immigrants who populate small and rural areas are susceptible to discrimination (Silver, 2012). Populations that are not accustomed to immigrants coming in react negatively towards them building a life there. Immigrants already have restricted opportunities, but these communities make it so that they have none. Immigrant youths have both advantages and disadvantages to this. These youths can forge meaningful connections with teachers and peers through the school that they attend. Although, these students must not only incorporate themselves into these discriminatory communities but be a part and contribute to them (Silver, 2012).

### **Obstacles to Educational Achievement in Immigrant Students:**

Immigrant students can succeed in achieving higher education despite obstacles through individual capital and structural support. Obstacles to educational achievement comes in many forms, some will experience one more than the others, but they all play a part in hindering the process of achieving higher education. These are different for

everyone depending on their situation, but most first-generation immigrants deal with lack of support from parents and/or parents lack of educational attainment, lack of support from their school, low economic income and language barrier. Many of the times it is not just one obstacle faced but many, and most of the time it is all of them combined. A small but difficult part of assimilating into a new culture is learning the language. The language barrier poses many difficulties, the biggest being the process of learning. It makes students feel ashamed of their lack of knowledge with the English language, making the learning process unpleasant. At home especially, the student does not have help from their parents so getting homework done is a lengthy and hard process. Parents' educational attainment also plays a big role in the students' success with higher education. Those who have parents who did not attain higher education are less likely to do so themselves, and those who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to drop out (Perreira, Harris & Lee, 2006).

College is an expense many nowadays are unable to take on. Students will have to work long hours in order to afford college, making it hard to balance school and work. Working long hours also does not allow for the student to be involved with school programs, and campus life. Therefore, first generation students are less prepared to succeed in college with work and financial burdens (Mehta, Newbold & O'rourke, 2011).

Sandy Baum and Stella Flores argue that low-income students and those with parents who have not attained higher education are more likely to follow in those footsteps. More specifically, they state, "make it essential that as many young newcomers as possible enroll and succeed in postsecondary education." In other words, the authors suggest that schools cater more to the needs of immigrant students because many are

known not to succeed. Although this may apply specifically to Latino/as, a more careful examination of first-generation students would reveal a more complex situation.

Immigrants succeeding in education improves economic and social mobility for society.

When studying the determinants of higher education and success they find that parents' education, academic preparation, and age of immigration all play a major role in whether one can and/or will succeed (Baum & Flores, 2011). Sandy Baum and Stella Flores focus on how immigrants and their children play a major role in the United States and how they should be given the same educational opportunities as anyone else. They find that low-income students and those with parents who have not attained higher education, are more likely to follow in those footsteps. Throughout the study they examine the educational attainment of immigrants and their children, determinants of higher education participation and success, and educational outcomes. They compare immigrants to U.S. natives to have that comparison on educational attainment. They also have them compare their race, age at immigration and origin.

Baum and Flores start by comparing the educational attainment of different groups of immigrants and their children to those who are native to the U.S. They differentiate their race, origin, community and quality of school. They find that when immigrants succeed in education it improves economic and social mobility for society. Although there are many barriers that prohibit an immigrant from achieving higher education, they find that "immigrants are actually more likely than their native counterparts to enroll in postsecondary education, and most children of immigrants attain higher levels of education than their parents." (Pg. 177). A major setback from the data was making funds available to those who cannot afford a higher education, and the lack of information given to immigrant

students about higher education. The process of receiving aid is not an easy one and many people are unaware of how to go about it, making the process harder than it already is.

Schools nowadays are helping to propel immigrant youth towards college in various ways. Academic achievement is a collective process, not an individual attribute. Positive social relations at school are highly productive. They allow for the accumulation of social capital that can then be converted into socially valued resources or opportunities, such as good grades or a diploma. Many schools are organized in a way that divides students and staff, not only socially but culturally. Social relationships are fragile, incomplete or non-existent. Teachers do not forge meaningful connections with their students and many of the times students are alienated and hostile towards one another. Studies show that subtractive schooling and forcing them to assimilate into a new language and culture leaves immigrant students vulnerable to academic failure (Valenzuela, 1999). Schools are responsible for student achievement and higher education. Without implementing these factors students will not succeed in the way that they should and can. Several studies have shown that parents' education, their cultural capital, the distinction between first and second-generation immigrants are major predictors of immigrant students' success. Cultural capital means to have assets that promote social mobility within a society. Education, style of speech and dress, and intellect all contribute to cultural capital. It is difficult for first generation immigrants and their parents to have cultural capital due to the language barrier and different customs. First generation immigrants who have only been in this country for one to five years, who are in ESL programs, struggle to form friendships among students outside of those classes and they are at greater risk of dropping out. Valenzuela finds that ESL programs are subtractive and are designed to transition youth

into an English-only curriculum, they neither reinforce their native language skills nor their cultural identities (Valenzuela, 1999).

Many schools are organized in a way that divides students and staff not only socially but culturally. Social relationships with peers and teachers are fragile, incomplete or non-existent. Valenzuela finds that the economy and political struggles over language, race, and immigration clearly influence the process of social reproduction for Mexicans. Social reproduction is the reproduction of social inequalities throughout generations. This study highlights the institution of schooling as a central agent of reproduction. Schools and educational policies and practices are responsible for student achievement. Those who come to the United States as small children, who are bicultural and bilingual, enjoy and seek out to participate in school activities. They can benefit from both cultures, taking in and learning the process from both. Although they are bicultural and bilingual, academic achievement is a collective process. One cannot do it alone; it is not an individual attribute. Positive social relations at school are highly productive because they allow for the accumulation of social capital that can then be converted into socially valued resources or opportunities e.g., good grades and a high school diploma (Valenzuela, 1999).

Undocumented immigrant students face social, political and economic barriers that prevent them from pursuing higher education and/or allow them to exceed beyond that due to lack of legal status in the United States. (Frum, 2007; Stevenson, 2004; Flores and Chapa, 2009; Seif, 2004; Perry, 2006; Gonzales, 2007; Contreras, 2002; Perez, 2009; Rincon, 2010). Regardless of legal status, there are approximately 7,000 to 13,000 undocumented students that enroll in universities throughout the nation, according to Urban Institute & Pew Hispanic Research Center. Nevertheless, these undocumented immigrant students

obtain their degree, surpassing obstacles and beating the odds. Although they have surpassed the obstacles of obtaining a degree, not much can be done with it due to their lack of legal status, leaving these undocumented immigrant students from making use of this accumulated human capital (Perez, 2011). Immigrants have not been given the opportunity to establish themselves and assimilate into the “American dream” or the “land of opportunity”. This leads to the dominant society viewing these immigrants as burdens and problematic, causing controversial immigration debate in the U.S. (Borjas, 1999; Alba and Nee, 2007; Morawska, 2007; Waters and Jimenez, 2005).

On the contrary, those who came to the United States as small children, who are bicultural and bilingual, enjoy and seek out to participate in school activities. Their culturally assimilated status (bicultural) makes these youth accessible to both their Spanish dominant and English dominant peers. Educational achievement in immigrants is in great part related to their respectful, obedient, and differential behavior, and these behaviors are rewarded by their teachers (Valenzuela, 1999). These findings do not mean that every single immigrant that comes here as a child experiences the same thing. Not every person is the same in terms of personality, and learning ability. Although this study suggests that those who come as small children have a better experience, not everyone has this same experience. These findings show the benefits of a particular group of immigrants. Those who come into this country at an older age do not benefit the same way.

Many of these students find it hard to envision a future for themselves, these immigrants that are coming into the U.S. are multiethnic, multilingual but grew up speaking their native language at home and within their communities (Harklau, 2003). The term “generation 1.5” is used when discussing those who were ESL learners but are now

entering college. These students display features of not just a first-generation immigrant experience but a second-generation immigrant experience as well (Rumbaut & Ima, 1998). Being brought into a new country at a young age is bound to bring its obstacles. Being bilingual and bicultural can be a very much positive aspect but can hinder English learning skills. Brown (2000) originally stated that when families immigrate into a new country with a new culture they struggle to adapt. There are four steps to the acculturation process, the first being that the families have excitement and happiness about being in a new environment. Then they move into the culture shock stage, while the third is learning to adapt to this new culture while compromising the native culture. The fourth is fully adapting to a new culture, although that does not mean it is the end of the cultural struggle. Limited English skills do not allow for these immigrants to succeed in higher education, because the higher education system requires advanced academic English skills. The lack of language skills results in lower motivation to learn and lower self-esteem (Stoffa, 2007). A teacher's confidence in their teaching can make a huge difference in the students' academic achievements. She proposes that teacher preparation programs need to cater to the generation 1.5. Not only does this allow for a better understanding of their students but it helps to create effective ESL curriculums and assessments (Stoffa, 2007).

### **Resilience in Educational Settings for Immigrant Students:**

First-generation immigrants want to succeed in school. Despite the obstacles faced, social capital and how it is used to navigate through social institutions helps to pursue a higher education (Enriquez, 2011). Developing an emotional and financial relationship



with family, peers and teachers leads to economic and cultural capital. With the help from peers and teachers one can receive academic advice and skills. This then leads to human capital which is educational success. Enriquez finds that social, economic, and human capital work best when trust is involved and when a form of reciprocity is generalized (Coleman, 1988). Immigrant youth are more likely to live in poverty, have parents who speak little to no English at home, and struggle with the language barrier. Having parents who speak little to no English at home results in poor academic performance and a delay in their development (Tienda & Haskins, 2011) Because immigrant children are becoming more prominent in the United States, it is important to provide a good future for them. Tienda and Haskins find that immigrant youth are more likely to live in poverty, and struggle with the language barrier. They argue that making preschool available based on residence in targeted communities would boost immigrant children participation. They also argue that publicly subsidized programs can be marketed to minimize obstacles such as language barriers, cultural sensitivities, lack of information, and misperceptions about programs. In terms of college, they feel that they need to cater to the needs of immigrants, to make their experience at college run smoothly, because they want to better themselves, they just do not have access to that information. If nothing is done about the development of immigrant children, they will continue to fall behind unless some of the recommendations are implemented. On the contrary, some studies show that children of immigrants have higher grades, test scores, educational ambition and attainment than US born students (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). When immigrating to a new country, many people are forced to downgrade their occupational status due to lack of educational attainment and language barrier (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017). Parents of immigrant children

use their socioeconomic status as an incentive for their children to work harder, to not follow in the same footsteps (Feliciano & Lanuza, 2017).

Policy changes and a better partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions is necessary for a first-generation immigrant students' transition to college (Kanno & Varghese, 2010). If we are to not do anything about the development of immigrant children, they will continue to fall behind unless some of the recommendations are implemented. Investments in health and education are a priority when it comes to immigrant youth development (Tienda & Haskins, 2011). Without the obstacles they would not be as determined to succeed and would not push as hard for success. Having to teach themselves when unclear about a topic, having no help from parents at home with homework and applying to college on their own. The resilience of first-generation immigrant students is what leads to their success in the future, attaining higher education and making something of themselves. Being a part of the school community, interacting with faculty members and using residence hall resources makes for a smoother and easier academic transition (Inkelas et al., 2007). We need to accommodate first generation immigrants; they are the future of our society. With a college education comes earned income and less reliance on public assistance (Bui, 2005).

Immigrant students have higher educational expectations than nonimmigrant youth (Chykina, 2019). The reason for this is that immigrant students come from families that hold positive characteristics where the parent holds high levels of optimism for their children. Immigrant students also have a higher motivation to do better and be better, often known as the "immigrant drive." First-generation immigrants will experience a stronger positive inflation in educational expectations (Chykina, 2019). Immigrant youth

who have a migrant background have increased educational aspirations but are unable to strive for them due to disadvantages in stratified school systems (Murdoch, et al., 2016). Setting up vocational pathways for immigrant students to achieve higher education might prove helpful in facilitating their educational aspiration. Education system as well as language, social background, educational aspirations, immigrant selection and gender all affect their chances of achieving higher education. Attending a school with an education system set up to be comprehensive towards youths with migrant background will be advantageous for them and will likely increase their realization for educational aspirations (Murdoch, et al., 2016).

The United States has always been a melting pot of different races, ethnicities and nationalities and has always had new immigrants welcomed in. But those born in the United States have a hard time adjusting to new immigrants, so much so that they impose new policies that restrict opportunities for them (Silver, 2012). Although some young immigrants can create connections with teachers and peers, their future after high school is still uncertain. Immigrants who live in smaller towns may have the advantage on those who do not, social networks within small towns can be used to access educational opportunities. But even these educational opportunities are limited due to legal barriers that hinder educational mobility and motivation, even if that student has social support (Silver, 2012). Immigrant students are urged to form connections with adult mentors within their school community due to lack of immigration policy reform. These mentors, who are somewhat parental figures to these students, can help them to build strong social networks and acquire positive influences. Despite all of this, there are still feelings of exclusion due to legal status. Legal status plays a major emotional and psychological role in these immigrant

students' lives, living with the uncertainty of what is to come next. Undocumented immigrants in the 1.5 generation are less aware of their exclusion due to immigrating to the United States at a very young age, so much so that many have little to no memories of their home countries (Silver, 2012). Immigrating to a new country at a young age can have its benefits such as easily integrating into the schools, maintaining friendships and effortlessly integrating into the norms and customs of the culture. But this can also be detrimental to their success after high school, many do not feel the impact of their undocumented status until they graduate high school. Due to financial and legal restraints, opportunities for undocumented students are limited. These restrictions can negatively affect these students emotionally causing feelings of uncertainty about their future, many feel uncomfortable and afraid to discuss their circumstances (Silver, 2012). Many undocumented students feel that they cannot succeed or attend a well-known college due to their status, so they reject the school before the school has a chance to reject them (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Feelings of frustration, fear and helplessness stay with these undocumented immigrants well into their adulthood and most times will never go away.

### ***Methodology:***

In order to better understand the challenges that first-generation immigrant students face in college, I conducted five interviews with first generation immigrants that are 18 or older. Using this method, I can get an in depth and detailed perspective on the education of first-generation immigrants. My research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Purchase College. The purpose of this research is to bring light onto the

struggles and obstacles that first generation immigrants faced and that go unnoticed by society. Although being an immigrant has its benefits, I want to further research on how receiving an education that does not cater to your language barrier (lack of knowledge with old language and lack of help with new one), hinders the process of educational attainment as well as how pursuing higher education is possible with all obstacles faced and how first generation immigrants have overcome them.

This method will allow me to get a detailed perspective while also getting efficient data on the education of first-generation immigrants. I want to understand them myself while also showing others and having multiple perspectives on this topic because everyone deals with situations differently. I will be using convenience sampling to recruit my subjects for this interview. Participants will complete an interview regarding the education they have received, the obstacles faced, how the obstacles have benefitted them, how the obstacles have hindered them, and the education they are currently receiving. Interview questions can be seen in Appendix A. I will include the participants age, gender, race/ethnicity, class status, and college status/schooling completed. The interview will last between thirty minutes to an hour and participants will be asked open-ended questions which will allow them to expand on their personal experiences. I propose that through hard work, help from their peers and professors, and a desire to achieve what their parents could not, is the best way an immigrant can succeed in college.

## ***Findings & Analysis:***

### **Obstacles in School:**

My participants consisted of five women aged between 21 and 24, three of the five were born in Guatemala, one was born in Portugal and the other was born in Ecuador. My findings with the interviews was that the responses I received are very similar to what many of the researchers discussed. First generation immigrants who come into this country at a young age do not know the language, neither do their parents. Most of the time that child grows up to learn English but does not speak English at home because the parents will not understand. Parents also do not help with schoolwork, are not involved with the school and do not help with the college process. High schools need to be more considerate of first-generation immigrants when it comes to achieving higher education. More programs need to be put into place to help them understand the programs and the process because they do not have that guidance from parents. Many first-generation students feel clueless and lost when it comes to the application process, looking at schools, filling out applications and choosing which college is best fit for them. Implementing programs at schools, and high schools to be more specific, to cater to the needs of first-generation immigrants (application process, searching for colleges, etc.) will help them to succeed in achieving higher education.

The participants' ages from when they first came to this country varied from 10 years old to 3 ½. When starting school, some participants stated that they did not make friends easily, especially with those outside of their background. Being that there were not many, or any kids within their background they felt isolated and alone. Participants "C" 24, "L" 22 and "CR" 23 felt that they were not able to make friends because there were little to

no students who were from the same background/ethnicity. Participant “E” 21 was enrolled in a program at the age of 3 ½ for students who did not speak English, so she was put in a class with Spanish-speaking students and made friends easily. Participant “LI” was 10 years old when she first came to this country, this was a big difference in age compared to the other four, but it seems that she faced many of the same struggles. They were all enrolled in ESL classes throughout their school years, but some more than others depending on their language skills and reading skills development. Half of the participants had extra help from teachers and the other half did not have help from teachers, only from the ESL teachers. Four out of five participants felt that ESL classes helped with language skills, the fifth participant felt that they did not help with language skills and they only focused on reading comprehension which, for her, was not enough, making it hard for her to learn English.

Making friends was not easy as stated by all my participants, many of them felt isolated due to the barriers. One participant stated, “Speaking English is crucial to making friends, and keeping up with societal standards to not be singled out or look different.” All my participants felt out of place and had to act certain ways to seem more “American” whether it was the way they spoke or dressed. Participant “L” stated, “I feel like if you live in an area that is more affluent you do have to keep up with societal standards in order to not be singled or look different. I think that you have to act and dress a certain way for you to be able to make friends and interact with others.” Having to deal with a double personality because they did not want to be judged for their culture and language, which they were ashamed to admit. Four of the five participants felt that they had to break the stigma of what being an immigrant means. Participant “E” stated, “I’ve never lied to make

myself seem more American, but I've always had to carry around that stigma that I'm Hispanic. I am going to be judged for it no matter the circumstances. I also felt that I had to act a certain way to not fit into a stigma. I'm ashamed that I had to do that, sometimes even to this day." They felt the pressure to prove themselves to people, to be different from their own kind, to break the stigma that they will not graduate high school and do better for themselves. Being at home and being at school were two different experiences, at school they were one person and at home they were different. Being at home meant a different culture, language and customs and being at school means portraying American values. Acting differently outside of the house, having to maintain this image of what an American is, just to fit in, and not be seen as an outcast was something all my participants agreed to.

They all got jobs at very young ages to be able to provide for themselves and not having to rely on parents' money. They were always told, if you want something you have to work for it, and they live by that to this day. Participant "C" stated, "I did not have an allowance because I was of a lower socioeconomic group, my parents didn't have the means to supply me with extras. I wanted to have lunch at school, and I wanted something that was not paid for by the school. I just remember that I needed my own cash because my parents weren't going to supply me with that, so I started working for myself." One participant felt the pressure to get a job at the age of 16 because she knew once she turned 18 that she would be responsible for herself, not because her parents said so, but because she didn't want her parents to worry about her. Maintaining a job while attending college is no easy task, all the participants agreed that their jobs interfered with campus life and schoolwork. Balancing schoolwork and their jobs were a challenge they all faced. Most of them stated that they did not spend much time on campus, after class they would



immediately go to work and then back home or campus to finish homework. There was no time to hang around campus to be a part of clubs or programs, their lives revolved around class, work and homework. Participant “L” stated, “I do felt like I was like going to school from 7 a.m. till 3 p.m. and then I was working from 4 p.m. till 10 p.m. and then I was going home doing homework and doing it all over again. I would be so tired, and it would just be like six or seven days a week working. It was difficult completing assignments and schoolwork, sometimes I’d spend lunch doing homework.” All of them felt that their jobs took away time from studying and completing homework, but that maintaining a job was necessary.

### **Difficulties at home:**

All my participants had to speak a different language at home because the parents did not speak English, and they did not have help from parents with schoolwork. Participants’ parents were not very involved in school, and those that were needed translators for parent teacher conferences. Participant “CR” stated, “My mom would attend parent conferences when a translator was available. She didn’t attend school events because she felt that she didn’t fit in with the school community.” Only one out of the five participants were applicable for FAFSA and/or financial aid, and parents did not help with these applications. None of the participants had help from parents with college applications and/or the college process. Three participants’ parents completed some college, and two of the participants’ parents completed some middle school and/or high school. All the participants are currently enrolled in college or graduated college. All of them felt that they needed to pursue higher education to prove something of themselves to their parents. Participant “L” stated “Although they didn’t pursue higher education themselves, they do

believe that education is one of the most important values and they instilled in me from a very young age that education leads to more opportunities in the workforce for a better future.” All parents immigrated here for a better opportunity, so they felt that they had to make something of it, and their parents thought education was the only way to succeed. They were able to afford college through private scholarships, endowments and some help from parents, and all were of lower middle-class status at the time of enrollment.

### **Lack of preparation for College:**

Previous schools did not help prepare for college, they all felt that counselors were discouraging and trying to find alternative options to school aside from Community College. They all felt that the counselors pushed for community college because it is a good financial option. The participants felt that they did not see potential or the capabilities of one to pursue a private or public four-year school. Participant “E” stated, “I felt that I was always pressured to settle for less due to my economic status and immigration status. The guidance counselors told me community college would be the best fit. They did not push for me to strive for more or better. I had to push for myself because I was not getting that support from my school. Had I not persisted they would have had me settle for community college. They also told me that they weren’t sure that I would be accepted into a private college.” Many felt discouraged about pursuing higher education because they did not have that support from guidance counselors when they were the only ones able to help them. They felt pressured to settle for less due to economic status, and felt it was a rushed process and not much one on one. Had they not pushed for more, they would not have gotten it. When participant “L” was asked if she was able to develop a relationship with teachers she answered, “I was able to develop a relationship with my teachers and peers

but I feel that only happened because I am very extroverted and went out of my way to do so. Had I been shy or introverted then I don't think it would be the same." One participant, who came to the US at the age of 10, felt that guidance counselors had helped her to keep on track with college applications and financial aid but that they could've done more for her as an older first generation immigrant. She also felt that high schools should have started earlier on with the college process versus starting in her junior and senior year.

One big factor that I noticed all my participants agreed strongly with was high schools not catering to their needs as first-generation immigrants. Participant "C" stated, "We need to implement guidance counselors who understands your needs as a first-generation immigrant. One who understands your language barriers who understands that you are not getting the same help at home. That you might need a little extra help with that college application, or you might need the extra time with that teacher. I think having specific guidance counselor who can reach out and give you that support that your parents cannot or that your peers cannot because of those barriers. That is what would help first-generation immigrants achieve higher education." Whether you are a first-generation immigrant or not you are still expected to have the same amount of credits and still do the same amount of work. They all felt that they were put into a "category" where their best bet was community college and that's it. The participants did not have help at home or previous experience with applying to college and all the applications that come with it. Many were clueless and relied on the school for help but felt that they did not get it. Being able to have someone there who understands your position and issues is essential, and to have those who see your potential. There needs to be more programs created solely to help first generation immigrant students through the college application process, everything

from standardized testing to looking at schools. Helping with application essays and working on different aspects of the process to make sure that students can get it done. Helping to apply for financial help so that they do not have to worry about where they are going to get the money for college. A lot of people do not go to college due to finances and even though they had options, were unable to. Schools need to invest more resources and mentors in the community that would help a first-generation immigrant through the process because they will not be getting that help anywhere else.

### ***Conclusion:***

The overall purpose of this study was to research educational equality for first generation immigrants. I interviewed five first generation immigrants with the purpose of finding out which factors contributed and withheld these students from achieving higher education. These factors included their educational exclusion, the obstacles faced throughout their school years, and their resilience in educational settings. Some major findings were that all the participants had very similar experiences as first-generation students. All of them struggled with the language barrier, ESL (English as a second language) classes, socioeconomic status, and lack of parental help with school. Originally, I focused on how immigrant students face many challenges in school and included a list of challenges. Those challenges are very much relevant to this research and first-generation immigrants achieving higher education. Interviewing the participants brought about a new perspective that my literature review did not point out. I found that all my participants felt that high schools need to implement more programs for first generation immigrants.

Because although most first-generation immigrants grow up in the country they immigrated to, they still have parents at home who do not speak English and know almost nothing about their child's education. Most immigrant students do not get the help they need in school and most definitely do not get that help at home from parents. If first-generation immigrants were to have that help from guidance counselors throughout their school years, they would be able to achieve so much more. These students feel isolated and confused because they do not understand the process, no one they know understands the process. Having a guidance counselor specific to first-generation immigrants would help tremendously. They would have someone to go to instead of wandering aimlessly throughout their school years. Having that help in school will help first-generation immigrants succeed in school and achieve higher education.

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### ***Appendix A: Interview Questions***

How old were you when you first came to this country?

How old were you when you started school?

What grade were you enlisted in?

Did you make friends easily? Were you able to make friends with people within your background?

Did you speak any English? If no, did you have any type of ESL help?

Did you have extra help from your teachers? What kind of help?

Until what grade were you enlisted in ESL classes?

Did you feel that the ESL classes helped?



Did you have a hard time learning English? Why?

Did you speak English at home with parents/siblings? If no, why not?

Did you have help from your parents at home with schoolwork? If no, why not?

Were your parents involved in school? If no, why not?

If you currently attend/attended college, did parents help with college application?

Did parents help with FAFSA? (if applicable)

Were you eligible for financial aid?

Do your parents have higher education? If no, what grades have your parents completed?

Why did you seek higher education?

How did you afford college?

What was your parent's socio-economic status at the time you enrolled?

Do you feel that your previous schools (high school) helped to prepare you for college?  
How?

Did/were you able to develop a relationship with your teachers/peers?

Did you feel that you received academic advice and skills? What advice?

Did you feel that you had to act a certain way to fit in, to make friends? If so, why?

Did you lie about your background to seem more "American"? If so, why?

Did/do you act differently outside of your home? If so, Why?

What age did you get your first job?

Why did you get a job?

Did your job interfere with schoolwork/campus life? How?

Did you feel that schools catered to your needs as a first-generation immigrant? How?

What do you feel is necessary in helping second generation immigrants achieve higher education? Why?

Do you believe that being a part of the school community, interacting with faculty members and using residence hall resources makes for a smoother and easier academic transition?