

# Im/migrant Children’s Education Experiences and Families’ Sacrifices in a Global Pandemic

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*Family separation policies’ impacts on children’s education and well-being are critical issues of our time. This paper argues through ethnographic study that although im/migrant parents believed in the promise of a better life for their children as they migrated, COVID-19 and remote schooling contributed to a breakdown in structures of care once they were in the United States. Thus, the experience of remote schooling during 2020 was a difficult task for parents and children who were already dealing with the trauma of detention or separation at the border. Ultimately, we argue that to understand the educational experiences of im/migrant parents and children in the United States, we must consider a multiple disruptions framework. The findings in this article reveal the layered consequences that broader immigration policy has on the everyday educational lives of im/migrant children and their parents.*

Keywords: *border, children, detention, ethnography, families, globalization, immigration, immigrants, in-depth interviewing, pandemic, policy*

FAMILY separation policies’ impacts on children’s education and well-being are critical issues of our time, as reports reveal the dreadful circumstances to which im/migrant<sup>1</sup> children and families have been subjected in government facilities across the country. These family separation policies and other immigration approaches have become increasingly consequential in shaping how im/migrant children experience life, come of age, and adapt in the United States (Gonzales, 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). We argue that although im/migrant parents believed in the promise of a better life for their children as they migrated, COVID-19 and remote schooling contributed to a breakdown of care structures that were once common in the United States, making conditions in 2020 difficult for parents and children already dealing with the trauma of recent detention or separation at the border. Ultimately, we argue that understanding the educational experiences of im/migrant parents and children in the United States during 2020 requires consideration of the multiple disruptions they suffered along the way. Our ethnographic findings reveal the complicated, layered consequences of immigration policy on the everyday educational lives of im/migrant children and their parents.

The increasing number of students who have experienced separation and/or detention at the border, coupled with spreading fear about and risk of deportation, motivated

us to take a closer look at the lives and experiences of im/migrant families and their children in U.S. schools. Available statistics about im/migrant families do not address their frayed and nuanced lives during the pandemic. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic data, we illustrate how 10 families who were separated and/or detained at the border between 2018 and 2019 cared for their children’s education while grappling with magnified stressors during a global health crisis in 2020. Specifically, we explore three intersecting disruptions affecting these families’ everyday lives: trauma from family separation and/or detention under the zero-tolerance policy, COVID-19, and pressure to support children academically at home due to school closures.

Families in the study are from Brazil (three), El Salvador (three), and Guatemala (four); all crossed the U.S.–Mexico border and were detained together and/or separated for up to 6 months. These families have since been reunified, and they live in a town in the northeastern United States. The experiences of detention and/or violent separation that these children and parents suffered at the border have created long-term trauma. They continue to cope with this issue while also grappling with newfound realities, vulnerabilities, and fear in the United States, which have included navigating the ongoing and constantly evolving impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, we shift the



discourse on im/migrant narratives of sacrifice, a concept referring to the hardships, selfless acts, and exhaustive efforts that im/migrant parents endure with the hope that their children will have access to better schools and brighter futures.

This article's inquiry places at the forefront the everyday struggles and examples of determination that sometimes surface amid devastating circumstances for im/migrant families, with the hope that highlighting lived experiences during this unprecedented time will motivate those working in schools that serve im/migrant students to reimagine their roles with respect to reaching out and caring for those children and their families. To this end, this article presents data to address the following questions:

1. How have multiple disruptions—a migration journey, a global pandemic, and remote schooling—shaped the educational experiences of im/migrant children in the United States?
2. What are the consequences of a global pandemic on the care and education of im/migrant children?

### *Background*

A complex constellation of factors and stressors affected im/migrant families during the pandemic. Although numerous non-im/migrant families also experienced some of these challenges, specific factors affected im/migrant communities in distinct ways. Im/migrants were at a much higher risk of COVID-19 infection than the U.S.-born population due to higher incidences of poverty, overcrowded housing conditions, and jobs where social distancing was difficult (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), during 2020, Latinxs were nearly twice as likely as white, non-Hispanic persons to contract the coronavirus and nearly three times more likely to die from the infection. The rates of Latinxs requiring hospitalization from the coronavirus were four times those of white, non-Hispanic persons; were comparable to those of Native Americans; and surpassed those of Black and Asian persons. Ultimately, Latinx death rates from COVID-19 were among the highest in the United States, paralleling only those of Black persons and outnumbering those of Asian persons and Native Americans.

Furthermore, school closures and remote learning measures intended to curtail the spread of COVID-19 put the children of Latinx im/migrants at a disadvantage because their parents had less familiarity navigating U.S. school systems and less facility with the English language than U.S.-born parents, both of which were important skills needed to navigate the challenges of distance learning (OECD, 2020). Children of Latinx im/migrants were also less likely than students with U.S.-born parents to have access to a computer, a home Internet connection, or a quiet place in which to do homework (Rideout & Katz, 2016). In this paper, we anchor

our data analysis in a multiple-disruptions framework (a migration journey, a global pandemic, and remote schooling), as told by participants. In the next section, we provide theoretical and conceptual grounding for our study, situating our work within frameworks that consider the compounded consequences of im/migrant families who experience multiple losses or hardships and grounding our study in scholarship that considers the impacts of immigration policies on structures of care, psychosocial well-being, and the education of im/migrant children.

### **Literature Review**

An expansive body of psychological and legal scholarship has examined the impact of family separation and deportation on the lives of undocumented families residing in the United States. Many im/migrant families contend with the possibility that a family member could be deported, approximately 5 million children under 18 live with at least one unauthorized im/migrant parent (Capps et al., 2016), and many more children know at least one undocumented im/migrant in their larger social circle. A historic percentage of im/migrant families has continued to seek refuge in America in the past several years, and this section explores literature relevant to the research questions via focus on three dimensions: immigration policy and legal frameworks, breakdowns in care, and the experiences of im/migrant families with education.

### *Impacts of U.S. Immigration Policy*

Between 2018 and 2020, under the Donald Trump administration, the U.S. Border Patrol apprehended or arrested 759,219 family units at the Southwest border (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2021). In fiscal year 2019, the U.S. Border Patrol saw an increase of more than 370 percent in the number of family units apprehended, compared to the year prior (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2019). Today, 60 percent of apprehensions along the Southwest border are family units and unaccompanied children, made up predominantly of individuals from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

In July 2017, the Trump administration initiated a policy of separating migrant families at the border to discourage immigration (*Ms. L et al. v. U.S. ICE*, 2019). Started quietly by the Department of Homeland Security through Customs and Border Protection personnel at border facilities in Texas, the policy was eventually publicized on May 7, 2018, when the U.S. attorney general announced that under the “zero-tolerance policy,” all migrant parents entering unlawfully between ports of entry with their children would be criminally prosecuted and separated from their children. The policy resulted in the haphazard separation of 5,500 children from their parents, most of whom were seeking asylum from countries in Central America—and many of whom had

entered the U.S. *legally* at official ports of entry (*Ms. L et al. v. U.S. ICE*, 2019, 2020). Most of the children were ages 12 and under; more than 200 were under 5 years old (*Ms. L et al. v. U.S. ICE*, 2019). During this time, children were sent to facilities sometimes thousands of miles away from their parents (*A.I.I.L. v. Sessions*, 2019). Separated family members were not told when or if they would ever see each other again—and many did not see each other again for a year or more. The separated children were detained in dreadful conditions, with no way to communicate with their parents for weeks or months; parents thus had no idea how their children were being cared for, or by whom. Several parents attempted suicide, and tragically, some succeeded.

Traumatized children were not granted any meaningful treatment to address the suffering they experienced or the lasting effects of their separation and detention. In addition, parents prosecuted for unlawfully entering between ports of entry were *not* reunified with their children, even after serving their brief criminal sentences, because border authorities had no adequate systems to keep track of which children belonged to which parents, and no plan had been designed to reunify these families. Children too young to speak were asked to recognize their national flags to provide clues about where they were from (*A.I.I.L. v. Sessions*, 2019). Migrant parents remained separated from their children for months while pursuing asylum claims and other relief from removal, and many were deported to Central America without their children. After the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a federal lawsuit (*Ms. L et al. v. ICE*, 2019) to end family separation and the court ordered the administration to abandon the zero-tolerance policy on June 20, 2018, President Trump did not address reunification or outline standards for separating family units in the future (*Ms. L et al. v. U.S. ICE*, 2020). Although most children have now been reunified with their parents, thanks to the efforts of the ACLU and other pro bono law firms, news reports in October 2020 revealed that 545 children still had not been reunified with their parents.

On January 26, 2021, during the first month of the Joseph Biden administration, the Department of Justice formally rescinded the zero-tolerance policy. Family separations do still occur at the U.S.–Mexico border, but the rate is much lower. From January to March 2021, an unprecedented 33,000 unaccompanied children arrived at the border (Statz & Heidbrink, 2021); although most of these children did not travel alone, they were deemed “unaccompanied” due to Title 42, a policy that instructs the U.S. Border Patrol to refuse entry to adults recently in a country where a communicable disease, such as COVID-19, is present (Statz & Heidbrink, 2021). Themselves turned away under Title 42, many parents sent their children to the U.S. alone rather than remain in Latin America under dangerous conditions (Kanno-Youngs, 2021). Unlike adults, children from non-contiguous countries cannot be deported immediately; they enter the custody of the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services (DHHS) and are held in unlicensed sites until they are united with family in the United States, enter federal foster care, or are deported (Heidbrink, 2020).

In response to this increasing number of “unaccompanied” children and teenagers, the DHHS opened new facilities for detained migrant children in converted convention centers, stadiums, and military bases, with as many as 5,000 beds (Statz & Heidbrink, 2021). Global public health scholars have identified how these facilities negatively affected migrants’ mental and physical health and further increased vulnerability to COVID-19 (Keller & Wagner, 2020). The American Medical Association (2020), American Public Health Association (2020), and other organizations have specifically denounced the detention of migrant children and families (Linton et al., 2017); called for culturally sensitive, evidence-based, and trauma-informed health care for detained migrant children; and highlighted where this care is needed. Experts in psychology, public health, and medicine agree that even the brief detention of children can result in posttraumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide and can further the intergenerational trauma experienced by many young migrants and families.

Researchers have long explored how immigration status influences the development of children in im/migrant families. Parental deportation has more negative effects on children than other kinds of separation, in part because deportation of a parent is associated with grieving the loss of the parent/caretaker as well as the financial resources that the parent would have contributed to the household (Dreby, 2015b). Parental separation and other factors associated with having an undocumented parent have been shown to negatively affect children’s emotional and behavioral development (Allen et al., 2015; Bean et al., 2015; Brabeck & Sibley, 2016; Lu et al., 2020; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011).

In a mixed-method longitudinal study of 380 mothers of infants in New York City, Yoshikawa (2011) finds that mothers’ undocumented immigration status negatively affected their U.S. citizen children’s early development because undocumented mothers were reluctant to access social service programs and benefits for their children. Undocumented immigration status also appears to influence caregiving by restricting travel, prohibiting driving, and sparking fear of the police—restrictions that limit the financial resources and opportunities of undocumented parents to thrive in their communities, get involved in local schools, and access social services, which, in turn, affect the well-being and education of even their U.S.-born children (Berger Cardoso et al., 2018; Dreby, 2015a; Enriquez, 2015; Yoshikawa, 2011).

Dreby (2012, p. 831) describes a “deportation pyramid” to illustrate the far-reaching impacts of immigration policies. Although relatively few children (the top of the pyramid) experience the most severe consequences, the deportation of a parent causes many more children (the base of the pyramid)

to experience effects, such as fear of family instability, confusion over the impact of legality on their lives, and the conflation of immigration status with being undocumented or “illegal” in their minds. In Brabeck and Sibley’s (2016) exploration of social-emotional development across a sample of Mexican, Central American, and Dominican Republic families with U.S.-born children ages 7 to 10, they find that children of undocumented parents, based on their own and their parents’ reports, have higher levels of anxiety than children whose parents are documented.

Enriquez (2015) labels the immigration enforcement policies of the U.S. government “intergenerational punishment.” Constant fear related to these conditions has emotional and traumatic effects, particularly among Latinx families (Dreby, 2015a; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Menjivar et al., 2018), and negative effects on the mental and emotional health of im/migrant children (Gonzales et al., 2013). Deportability has led im/migrants, especially Latinxs, to alter their daily routines to avoid getting caught (Abrego, 2011; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Our work thus builds on studies that recognize the deep consequences of immigration policies on the lives of im/migrant families, as we follow families’ stories through a pandemic.

#### *Breakdowns in Care, at Home and Transnationally*

Latinxs compose about two-thirds of undocumented im/migrants in the United States and make up approximately 95 percent of the detained and deported (Menjivar et al., 2016; Passel & Cohn, 2011). Interior enforcement targeting Latinx im/migrants, often regardless of legal status and connected to risk of deportation, has instilled in Latinx im/migrants fear of contacting public institutions and spending time in public spaces. Although scholars have addressed the impacts of fear and isolation on im/migrant families in the context of increased U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement presence and anti-immigrant sentiment, limited scholarship specifically addresses the trials of im/migrant families during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mercado et al., 2019; Mercado & Venta, 2018).

The existing literature addresses fear and isolation as common sentiments for undocumented im/migrants and shows that the social isolation of im/migrant families has critical socioeconomic impacts and is linked to poor health outcomes and reduced access to health care (Hagan et al., 2011; Livingston et al., 2008; Martinez et al., 2015; Menjivar, 2002; Negi, 2013; Simmons et al., 2021). Hagan et al. (2011) and Simmons et al. (2021) suggest that im/migrant women, who have historically been anchors of community building, take on a new role in the context of deportability. Whereas past research has shown im/migrant women with children to be more likely to be socially active than their male counterparts (Menjivar, 2002; Schmalzbauer, 2014; Valdez et al., 2013), these researchers find that im/migrant women with

children describe comparatively more social isolation and withdrawal from the community; those responsible for caring for children are apprehensive about immigration authorities, with increased fear of leaving the house, feelings of isolation, and/or feelings of being under suspicion. Our research adds to this body of literature by looking specifically at how im/migrant parents’ narratives of care unfolded during the coronavirus pandemic.

#### *Im/migrant Families and Education*

A nationwide survey of educators finds that 45 percent of educators have observed decreased parental involvement among im/migrant children in contexts of increased immigration enforcement (Ee & Gandara, 2020). This decrease may result from Latina im/migrants’ social isolation causing a shift from the norm of women usually being the parent most involved in children’s schools. Furthermore, for Latina im/migrants in particular, social isolation can lead to decreased help-seeking behaviors for domestic violence and other concerns, thus increasing vulnerabilities for domestic violence and putting women at increased risk (Engelbrecht, 2018; Reina et al., 2013).

Im/migrant mothers also face the challenge of raising their children in a context with new social institutions and expectations that differ from their own upbringing. Research in the United States has shown that im/migrant parents of all national origins tend to have (very) high educational aspirations and expectations for their children, yet not all groups of children experience equal success in school (Lee & Zhou, 2015; White & Glick, 2009). Recent studies have explored how im/migrant mothers and fathers could more effectively support their children’s efforts in school with a focus on “concerted cultivation” of parenting behaviors associated with school readiness and success among American parents (Glick et al., 2012; Lareau, 2011, p. 2). Crosnoe et al. (2016) find that Latina im/migrant mothers are less likely than other groups to engage in school-based activities, enroll children in extracurricular activities, and provide educational materials at home. Furthermore, they find that this behavior is related to Latina im/migrant mothers’ lower educational attainment, not necessarily their legal status. Indeed, Latina mothers who increase their own education during adulthood also increase their involvement in their children’s education, which is likely, at least in part, attributable to enhancements in the mothers’ understandings of and confidence in interacting with U.S. educational institutions (Crosnoe & Kalil, 2010). Low educational attainment and limited familiarity with U.S. schools may explain why the children of mothers who arrived in the United States during adolescence have lower early school performance and social-emotional development when compared with those whose mothers arrived as young children themselves (Glick et al., 2009; Glick et al., 2012).



These researchers, Crosnoe et al. (2016), Glick et al. (2009) and Glick et al. (2012) however, do not consider the pervasiveness of immigration policies on the lives of im/migrant mothers, who may have to remain in isolation to protect themselves and their families from deportation. As Collins (1994, p. 49 and p. 59) explains, marginalized mothers are mainly concerned about the “right of their children to exist” and to “survive” in such harsh settings. The right to mothering is at risk in contexts wherein children’s lives are endangered due to poverty, violence, or deportation, especially if mothers make extreme sacrifices—including migrating and/or working long days—that prevent them from being present to their children (Bianco, 2019).

The anti-immigration climate affects the lives of Latinx im/migrants and their communities so deeply that it is shifting social dynamics in ways that are detrimental to im/migrant families, especially mothers. What historically has typically given mothers a social advantage and even a sense of belonging is their ability to make networks beyond the family to interact with institutions (schools, hospitals, churches), create community (connect with other caretakers during school pick-up), and advocate for their rights and those of their children (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Martinez, 2010; Terriquez, 2012).

The pervasive presence of immigration policies and increased climate of fear during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States created extra urgency around understanding the social practices of caring for children in im/migrant family life and the variability within Latinx communities, depending on the country of origin. We theorize that the pandemic diminished Latinx families’ public presence and social network involvement, pushing them into further social isolation (Valdez et al., 2013). Our research reveals how the compounded consequences of multiple disruptions—“nightmares,” as one participant described—influence im/migrant families’ narratives of sacrifice, education, care, and schooling.

### **Methods**

Begun in 2018 and carried through 2020, this research is ethnographic in design, a suitable method to illuminate how shifting immigration practices affected children’s education experiences and teaching in schools. Ethnography offers a window into the long-term complexities of real-world situations and highlights experiences, perspectives, and truths that are often silenced (Dreby, 2015a; Gálvez, 2011). Our research was conducted in one town in the northeastern United States. This town is in a state that is home to more than 1 million im/migrants, or 16 percent of the state’s population (American Immigration Council, 2017). In the aftermath of the family separation policy, families in the state had united in a lawsuit against Attorney General Jeff Sessions, detailing the stories of Guatemalan families seeking asylum in the United States.

Our family recruitment process was two-pronged. In 2018, Gabrielle worked closely with a school district that welcomed high numbers of im/migrant children, and school events became spaces where Gabrielle met and recruited families to participate in the study. In parallel with a local nongovernmental organization that provides food, clothes, and legal and work support to im/migrant families, we created a list of and got in touch with more than 40 parents and explained the study, seeking their participation. All shared the same characteristic: their families had crossed the U.S.–Mexico border and been detained and/or separated—and then reunified—between 2018 and 2019.

We sought to shed light on this population who had been so directly targeted and affected by the zero-tolerance policy practices under the Trump administration. Of the 42 families we contacted, more than 30 signed up to participate in the study. Families who formally declined explained that they did not believe that they had time to participate. For consistency reasons, the findings in this article are based on 10 families with whom we spent an equal amount of time ( $N = 33$ ); three of the families were Brazilian, three Salvadoran, and four Guatemalan (Table 1). All lived within a 5-mile radius; their children went to public schools in the district and were part of the same local support system (transportation, after-school care, food pantry, clinics). They interacted with a total of 10 teachers, five aids, and eight specialists, in addition to principals and community center administrators, after-school program coordinators, and others who provided care for them ( $N = 36$ ). We include brief comments from teachers in the last section of the findings to further contextualize the experiences of these families.

Data were collected in the following ways in 2019: interviews with the 10 families’ parents and children twice per month; interviews with each teacher three times over the 18 months; classroom observation for every elementary child participant once per month; and observations outside the school (home, church, doctor) of each family twice per month. Gabrielle spent 4 days of each week since 2019 in classrooms, schools, and homes in this town. During observations outside the school, which lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours, she observed parents cooking, cleaning, working, and helping children with homework. Gabrielle accompanied families to church, parks, grocery stores, and neighborhood festivities during/for observations. She participated in lawyer meetings, parent-teacher conferences, sessions at tutoring facilities, and events with a local parental school outreach organization. Interviews focused on children’s separation and/or detention experiences, educational experiences, attitudes toward school, support for education from their community, perceptions of the role of education in realizing future aspirations, and support from teachers.

When school buildings and broader social life shut down in March 2020, we adapted our methods of data collection. Although we conducted some interviews via phone,

TABLE 1  
*Focal Participants*

Country of Origin	Primary Caregiver(s)	Children in the U.S. & Ages	Border Experience
Brazil	Celia João	Joana, 7 Clara, 3	Detained and released together after 4 days
Brazil	Marta Horácio	João, 9 Marcela, 12 Rodrigo, 17	Detained and released together after 6 days
Brazil	Ana	Diego, 9	Separated at the border for 35 days
El Salvador	Yenny Hector	Lily, 11 months Miguel, 8	Detained and released together after 4 days
El Salvador	Dulce Angel	Sebastián, 8	Detained and released together after 6 days
El Salvador	Feliciano	Cristian, 7	Separated at the border for 42 days
Guatemala	Yaritza	Agustín, 17 Nino, 5 Leo, 4	Detained and released together after 11 days
Guatemala	Mari	Lucía, 14 Silvio, 10	Detained and released together after 6 days
Guatemala	Virginia Adrien	Adrien Jr., 9 Nelly, 6	Mother and daughter detained together; father and son detained and deported to Mexico, where they stayed together for 6 months
Guatemala	Juan	Heloise, 6	Separated at the border for 72 days

Gabrielle focused on communication via social networks and connected with families via video call during meals. For observations and interviews, we received WhatsApp written or audio messages detailing participants' days. Online one-on-one conversations continued to happen with children and parents. Younger children enjoyed drawing and narrating how they were feeling, while adolescents recorded messages on their parents' phones and tagged Gabrielle on their posts on Facebook and Instagram. Gabrielle was able to conduct online observations in the first- and second-grade classrooms in which participating children were enrolled, and she was often looped in as a translator for school- and health-related issues. Although communication during COVID-19 took a different form, the consistency remained. Gabrielle had daily interactions with the 10 families that varied from a 20-minute call to 2 hours of exchanged messages or video calls. We were able to capture important shifts as family members became sick, went to the hospital, lost their jobs, started new jobs, taught their children at home, and survived during a pandemic. From July to September 2020, in addition to collecting data digitally, Gabrielle resumed observations and conversations in person, but outside, with participants wearing masks and at a distance. In November, that strategy came to halt due to the cold weather.

Researcher Gabrielle is a white Brazilian im/migrant woman and mother who speaks English, Spanish, and Portuguese and has been engaging with research with im/migrant populations from Latin America for the last decade. She has been engaged with this specific community in the

northeastern United States since 2018 and has partnered closely with teachers and families to improve the lives of im/migrant children in the district. Researcher Marisa is a white doctoral student, former teacher, and mother who is fluent in Spanish and English and interested in practices that exclude boys of color in schools.

### Data Analysis

In this ethnographic analysis, we follow the model of Emerson et al. (1995), iteratively drawing patterns from hundreds of field notes, transcribed interviews, pictorial representations, and narratives. We analyzed the data throughout the data-collection stage, but the larger set of data analysis included open coding using the qualitative data software program NVivo. The categories that came from deductive and inductive approaches around immigration and schooling were "care," "education," "sacrifice," "promise," "school," "invisibility," "immigration," "disruption," "pandemic," and "separation." Drawing on the aggregated data sources (interviews, participant observations, multimodal data), we drew a chronological diary on how families were coping with a national policy that has affected tens of thousands of people. We followed the stories (Marcus, 1995) from departure to arriving to going to school exactly as families narrated their own sense of multiple disruptions. We were also able to analyze how teachers in schools and classrooms responded to the needs of recently reunified children and parents.

Deductive codes for all materials included family separation, parent engagement, schooling experience, immigration, emergencies, attitudes toward schooling and the facility, academic achievement, educational investment, educational aspirations and expectations, peer influence, teacher influence, immigration status, care, and pandemic. The literature presented in this article helped inform these codes, but as ethnographers, we looked for emic concepts that emerged as patterns from the observations and interviews. After we read interview transcripts and field notes thoroughly and repeatedly, we created case summaries for each family and teacher to describe life histories. After this step, we established six key themes: pre-migration context, separation context, reunification context, global pandemic, schooling, and care. The result of this analysis is an ethnographic study that tracks how families and school staff have worked with children who were separated from their parents to better their educational experiences but then [also] faced a global pandemic. Gabrielle engaged in multiple member-checking practices, including sharing family case summaries with participants.

In this article, we focus on disruptions as narrated by the families, so during our data analysis, we created a multiple-disruptions framework to illustrate the layers of im/migrant family life in the United States. This framework was composed by three dimensions: pre-migration expectations, separation or detention at the border, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Taken together, these three dimensions exacerbated existing educational inequalities for im/migrants in the United States and were connected to breakdowns in care structures at home and the challenges that came with remote schooling. This complex constellation of stressors has also been referred to in psychological literature as compounded trauma (Garcini et al., 2020) and compounded loss (Cardoza, 2021). We borrowed from this literature to map out a framework according to the ways that families discussed their experiences. Families in this study described their experiences as a “series of emergencies” or “new nightmares.” Caregivers and children, when telling their stories, started with their reasons for leaving their countries of origin in the first place. They then spoke about the pain and grief that detention and separation brought about for them, only to be hit by a pandemic that directly affected their hopes and dreams of a better life. Families in this study discussed the *multiplicity* of ways in which their lives were affected by uncertainty. We mapped out the named stages that children and parents described as influencing their educational lives in the United States and based our findings on how families described their own experiences, using their chronology of events.

### **Findings**

In the sections that follow, we have organized our findings to reflect the chronological way that families reported

the multiple disruptions that happened in their lives before and during the pandemic. Each section of the findings corresponds to a phase of the multiple-disruptions framework described in our research questions and methods. Data presented are situated in the policy background that we previously described as well as in the literature on the impacts on care and education during a pandemic. We start with parental narratives about the promise of education and a better life that motivated these families to leave their home countries, which reflect the migration journey to the United States. We then show how COVID-19 shaped care arrangements at home and children's remote schooling, reflecting the moment when the pandemic started and the changes that ensued. Finally, we conclude with reflections from teachers who were involved in the teaching of the children in the study as a way to show the long-term consequences of the breakdowns that occurred when school buildings were closed. We show how remote schooling offered an entry into the intimate lives of families but sometimes created an even stronger barrier/obstacle for understanding the multiple disruptions that im/migrant families had been experiencing and continued to actively experience.

#### *The Promise of an Education*

Data reported in this section of the findings were collected in 2019 and early 2020, before the pandemic hit the United States. Families interviewed in this research were categorical when talking about what they sought by migrating to the United States. “I believed there was an opportunity here to help my children,” explained Mari, a 43-year-old mother from Guatemala who migrated with two of her children, 10-year-old Silvio and 14-year-old Lucía. Mari had two other children in Guatemala, 5-year-old Enrico, who had severe health issues related to his heart and lungs, and 21-year-old Carmen. When Mari was detained for several days and then separated from her young daughter Lucía, for 22 days, she held tightly to the idea of opportunity for her children in her prayers and thoughts: “I had to tell myself, ‘You will escape this situation, your kids will have a good life. God willing. Soon enough we will be together, and they will be okay.’” Mari and her children had left their home in Guatemala for several reasons. Her husband abused her and suffered from alcoholism: “I thought if I didn't leave, I would be dead.” She cleaned homes for a living in Guatemala and supported her children financially and emotionally. Her oldest child, Carmen, had her own baby and was working toward a certificate to become a beautician. Mari reported having taken multiple loans from questionable organizations in Guatemala to pay for Enrico's health treatments. She explained that she had accumulated a debt that she could not repay with her salary in Guatemala. She was worried that her children would fall into deep poverty and violence if she didn't have enough money to support them. Mari was also

particularly worried about Enrico, who was constantly being hospitalized and needed money for health bills. Mari's plan to leave was thus a strategy to make sure that the promises she had made to herself about her children having stability and opportunities would be realized. Silvio and Lucía worried about their mother; they also worried about their siblings in Guatemala. Whereas Enrico stayed under the care of his grandmother and older sister, Lucía and Silvio felt the pressures of being the ones who crossed over. "Sometimes I ask myself if being separated from my *mamá* was my punishment for leaving my brother and sister," said Lucía, referring to her own terrifying experiences at the border. She and Silvio were enrolled in a school with a bilingual Spanish/English program. "Sometimes I have bad dreams and nightmares, but I know my *mamá* wants me to do well in school, so I try," Silvio explained. Silvio's dreams had to do with the separation and detention and the looming feeling that his mom could be deported at any moment, since she was waiting for a judge's decision.

Marta, a Brazilian mother who made the long journey from Brazil to the U.S.–Mexico border and then into the United States, described her 11-day detention with her three children: "It was like we were in jail. . . . [W]e put a little mattress on the floor, and there were no covers. We stayed there for a few nights, then we got moved to another place." Marta was shocked at the sight of so many young children; she described the presence of "lap children" and contended how she thought her journey walking into the United States was not as bad as the journeys of people who had to carry multiple crying children. She explained that her group of Brazilian im/migrants crossing into the United States had 25 people. Having learned about the opportunity to cross from friends in her small town in Brazil, Marta had decided to bring her children to the United States for financial reasons. She had been robbed multiple times in Brazil and had accumulated large sums of debt. She wanted her children to attend private schools in Brazil but could not afford them. Her husband, Rodolfo, was supportive of Marta as they migrated together. However, after arriving in the United States, Rodolfo left the marriage to be with someone else. Marta was with 9-year-old João, 12-year-old Marcela, and 17-year-old Rodrigo. Her fears about not being able to support her children tested her belief in the journey that she had just been through: "I did this so my kids can live free and have a real shot in life. Good schools, speak English, get work . . . but many things happened between me leaving Brazil and being here now. It makes me pray that much harder. But I believe I can fulfill my promise to give my children a better life." João struggled with nightmares and constantly feared the sound of someone being at the door. He was convinced someone would show up to take them from their home and felt the safest at school: "At least here, no one will do evil to me," he explained.

Juan, 38, a father from Guatemala who was separated from daughter, Heloise, for 72 days, also discussed his journey for a better future for his daughter. He explained that he thought that he would not be alive to support his daughter financially and emotionally. He worried that the longer he stayed in Guatemala, the higher the probability that Heloise would not have a father to look out for her. Juan's decision didn't come easily; Heloise's mother stayed in Guatemala because of a health issue. "I could have come on my own, but that would not help Heloise. . . . [W]ho knows where the money I sen[t] home would [have] end[ed] up?" Heloise was 5 years old when she and her father were separated at the border. Juan still struggled to tell the story almost 2 years after the separation had taken place. He admitted to questioning his own decisions to migrate when he was separated from Heloise.

Ana, a Brazilian mother who was separated from her 9-year-old son, Diego, reiterated a similar point: "I left everything so he could have a better chance in life, but I worry about the trauma I put him through." Jenny, a mother from El Salvador who came with her 4-year-old and a 7-month-old baby, reflected on the promise that education held for her family: "I thank the Lord every day we were not separated, we were together, but my daughters cry a lot, and I think sometimes they are sad. I want to tell them that it will be worth it, they are getting a great education. But sometimes I can't. Am I able to fulfill my promise?"

While other scholars have reflected on narratives of sacrifice for migrant parents across the world (Boehm, 2011; Dreby, 2015a; Gálvez, 2011; Negrón-Gonzalez, 2014), the family separation policy in its latest iteration created yet another traumatic moment for these families. Reflections revealed parents' and children's tensions between hoping and believing in the promise of a better life and thinking through trauma that detention and separation had caused. Yet education remained the perceived currency or gateway to a better life. Families held on to the idea of a hopeful future to cope with loss, fear, nightmares, and disruptions. In this section, we show how the impetus behind leaving a country and what happened at the border deeply shaped parents' perceptions of their sacrifice as well as children's well-being. In the next section, we describe what happened when the pandemic hit this population.

#### *COVID-19 and Breakdowns in Care and Education*

By early 2020, many of the focal families were starting to find their footing in the labor market, experiencing steadiness in their jobs and consistency in sending remittances to their home countries. Children had been in schools for 1 year since families had been released together or reunified post-separation. Out of the 10 families in this research, half had enrolled their children in therapy, following the recommendation of a counselor at the school during 2019. All the



families depended on free or reduced-fee school lunches every day. The parents in these families worked as house cleaners, restaurant line cooks, mechanics, grocery packers, construction workers, care workers, and factory workers. They lived in small apartments that usually had one or two bedrooms, located in affordable housing areas. The infrastructure of these homes was already under pressure prior to the pandemic: insufficient data plans for multiple device users; no available devices, such as laptops or iPads; and limited spaces to rest or do schoolwork.

Before the pandemic, families in this study depended on children being in school from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day. They used early drop-off and after-school care at the Boys and Girls Club, and school buses got children from one point to another; none of these families owned a car, and no one had a valid driver's license. When schools closed on March 12, 2020, parents had to figure out how to care for their children during hours when they would be working outside the home, which many of them still had to do, as they were essential workers (Liu, 2020) and needed to be able to pay rent, buy food, and continue sending remittance money home. Until April, when online learning was finally offered, all these parents described lacking help to continue supporting their children's learning at home.

Juan explained the complicated predicament he found himself in: "I came here to escape death and provide a better life for my daughter, but now I had to ask someone I know to watch her while I am gone working. . . . [I]t's hard because we are still working on what happened to us at the border, you know?" Juan was concerned that Heloise would be spending long periods of time with someone he didn't know well, as opposed to being in school, a place he considered "good for her." He was nervous that she would have more time to think about "all of the sad things that happened to her because I brought her."

Yenny, a mother from El Salvador who migrated with her husband and two children, stayed home with her children while her husband continued to work for a construction company. Because she was caring for her baby at the time, her biggest worry was healthcare. Her oldest son, Miguel, had respiratory issues while traveling from El Salvador to the border and developed panic attacks that he attributed to sleeping in shelters and then being in detention. Miguel often talked about the foil blankets that he used while detained and asked to sleep with his parents, and he had been seeing a therapist who recommended parental physical presence. Yenny had been taking sporadic jobs cleaning homes, but in March 2020, she believed that she had to stop that work to stay home: "I'm afraid of what this new problem can make him feel," she contended. Although Yenny's two-parent situation allowed some room for reconfiguring care systems, decreased income affected the amount of remittance that Yenny sent home; she later reflected, "At least I can see how he's doing in school!"

When COVID-19 was spreading quickly through communities where im/migrant families lived, the disease directly influenced many parents' ability to care. Yaritza, a mother of three boys from Guatemala, contracted COVID-19 in April 2020. While we subsequently saw much higher peaks of transmission and death by COVID-19, this was the first wave in the United States. Because, as she explained, "I couldn't breathe," Yaritza called 911, and an ambulance showed up at her house. Her oldest son (17) was left in charge of the preschoolers (ages 5 and 4). Five-year-old Nino was surprised by the noise and lights that materialized in front of his home that night: "It was red, flashing red, and firefighters came." Yaritza stayed in the hospital for 7 days. During that period, her sons could not see her, but they sent messages and videos. Looked after with the support of neighbors and a local nongovernmental organization, the children received food, clothes, and distanced visits, including from Gabrielle, who had known them for several months. Back at home, but still isolated in a makeshift division in her apartment, Yaritza explained, "I want to say that it was the scariest moment of my life, but there have been so many losses on the way," referencing all the traumas she had endured after leaving her small town in Guatemala.

Parents worried that their academic knowledge was not enough to support their children with at-home learning. For a while, children in these families were connecting with their teachers through their parents' smartphones as best they could. Even when schools distributed Chromebooks and data cards to assist parents in using Wi-Fi, communication between schools and parents was uneven—a clear line of communication depended on teachers and/or staff who could actively translate messages. Families did not know how to download multiple applications or use specific codes given by the school and had to locate links and assignments and call specific numbers to activate the funds in their cards. At least six families did not use the money they received to buy food because they were not able to activate the cards by calling the number provided.

Virginia, a mother from Guatemala who was detained and released with her 6-year-old daughter but was separated from her husband and son 9-years-old for 6 months, explained that she felt like she was always facing "emergencies." Every time she heard news that things were getting worse, she thought, "Can it be worse than me being separated from my boy and my husband?" Like other parents, Virginia was concerned about how family separation and now a global pandemic were shaping Adrien's experiences: "There are some topics that Adrien Jr. doesn't talk about in school. He shuts down, and I can help him at home a little bit, but his teachers can't."

Children in this research were school-dependent, meaning that parents and children alike relied on the school for food, health, and care. When physical buildings were shut down, and there was no immediate plan for children's online

learning, parents again thought about their sacrifice through migration as being worthwhile, even as they described their lives as a series of emergencies.

### *School Supports and Responses*

Little is known about the recent 2018 forced family separation consequences with respect to how children have subsequently fared in and experienced school, and this ethnographic research has captured the experiences of children and families who were still navigating recent experiences of detention and separation. In this article, we bring attention to the layered breakdowns and disruptions that followed families from the moment they had to leave their countries of origin. We contribute to the scholarly work that has emphasized, the impact of family separation and deportation on the lives of undocumented individuals. This study also shows that immigration policies do not just affect the targeted individuals—they shape entire families (e.g., Brabeck et al., 2011; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Thus, unlike research on immigration and schooling that focuses on adolescents and those who would benefit from the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Flores, 2010), we focus on entire family units. Thus, for this section of the paper, we focus on the main implication of our study: how educators have been shown to play a key role in shaping the experiences of im/migrant students and their families (Dabach, 2015; Mangual Figueroa, 2017). The disruptions in the continuity of services provided by schools and community organizations available pre-pandemic can be consequential for im/migrant families.

Prior to the pandemic, most children in this study were receiving one or more in-school services, such as push-in or pull-out English instruction, speech therapy, counseling, and reading interventions; a few had individualized educational plans. During the pandemic, these services were interrupted, and when they resumed, new school staff supervised these children's cases. Parents like Juan worried about the lack of continuity for the progress that Heloise had made in trusting adults in school. Mari explained that, depending on the teacher, her family would go days without any communication. Families appreciated the services that their children were receiving, but they rarely felt part of the "team" looking after their children at school. Parents worried about disclosing too much information about their journeys and the visibility that might create for their children, but they also expressed gratitude toward the school and especially toward the teachers for *caring* for their children (Oliveira et al., 2021). Administrators and teachers sometimes perceived parents' actions as reflecting lack of concern or capacity for regarding their children's educational trajectories, calling im/migrant parents "too busy" or "lacking basic literacy skills to support their children." Other scholars have identified similar patterns in their own studies with im/migrant children and schooling (Carreón et al., 2005; Langenkamp,

2019). Our article shows the complexity of these lived experiences, and with that we hope that interventions and school-related services can be formulated to match the needs of families.

While different family setups (e.g., having one or more caregivers, the types of jobs parents had) shaped much about these participants' experiences with care and school, one thing was constant: Information arriving via parents' inboxes and phones was unclear. Parents struggled to understand the instructions for new logins, and even when the text was translated into Spanish or Portuguese, parents did not know whom to contact if they had questions and worried about the visibility of their immigration status as they called places and gave their names. To activate the previously mentioned food cards distributed by the district, for example, an adult had to phone a specific number between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. It took some families weeks before they were able to set up and use the card to buy food. In the fall of 2020, when teachers used WhatsApp groups to connect with parents, the families reported improved home-school communication. School staff were understandably swamped with constantly changing information from the federal and state governments in 2020, but im/migrant parents were trying to survive each day and needed clarity in communication. On top of this, most services that their children had been receiving either stopped or were significantly impacted for weeks and sometimes for many months. That *care* that parents had once identified and appreciated as crucial help had disappeared.

### **Conclusion**

During one of our interviews, Juan, the father from Guatemala who migrated with his daughter, Heloise, asked, "I wonder if they will care? . . . Do you think if the teachers and all of the people, if they know about all the things we have been through, I wonder if they will care about Heloise more?" Based on our review of the literature, we contend that broad immigration policies and their related government implementation apparatus have real consequences for the lives of im/migrant children and adults in the United States. However, little research has yet highlighted the ways that recent immigration policies intersected with the pandemic and shaped the educational experiences of children and their families. Thus, we propose three recommendations for educators who may encounter im/migrant families in their schools: (a) assess the multipronged complexity of the disruptions experienced by children and their parents; (b) understand the meaning of the promise of an education for families and the sacrifices involved in leaving one's country; and, finally, (c) make space for conversations and discussions that involve immigration policy and the impacts that they can have on families' well-being. Im/migrant parents who have endured separation and or detention care deeply for their children's educational trajectories.

In 2019, we were not expecting to document the consequences of a global health crisis on families who had been very recently reunified after suffering under zero-tolerance policy enactment in 2018. In this article, we attempt to show how family separation and detention at the border, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated already unequal structures of care for im/migrant families in the United States. Juan's lingering question calls us to make more visible the multiple losses and harms that families have experienced during their journeys to the United States—and then to act. Our hope is that educators on the receiving end of a migration continuum will actively explore and seek to address the realities and implications of multiple disruptions when getting to know their im/migrant students or supporting them in any capacity.

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### Open Practices

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### Note

1. We use the term *im/migrant* in reference to the flow of people across national boundaries, accounting for “migrants,” “immigrants,” and “refugees.” Research participants held different immigration statuses, which in many cases were transitional and not fixed, so we are intentional about seeking to reflect this diversity in our choice of terms.

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