

0:04 Erika Franco-Quiroz: Hola! Buenos Días. Mi nombre es Erika Rubi Franco-Quiroz, y soy de Reynosa, Tamaulipas, México. Estoy aquí hoy para hablarles un poquito de mi experiencia en el sistema escolar y de todas las dificultades que tuve que pasar con mi familia.

0:22 What? Did you not understand what I was saying? It's a weird feeling, right? Listening to someone ramble on about something that could be important but not being able to understand what they are saying.

0:37 Well, as an immigrant, I faced this difficult barrier for a long time. When my family first moved to the United States, everything was a struggle. We only had one car, none of us spoke English—except my dad, but he didn't quite dominate the language—and it was impossible to figure out the school system, except for one obvious thing: I did not fit in.

1:02 The first couple of weeks of school, I can tell you now, that I faked headaches, stomachaches, and just about every other type of pain possible just to go home. Everyday, as I climbed onto the school bus, I cried and I begged and begged my mom to let me stay home with her. School was just so terrifying. I knew no one, I understood no one, and I had no friends.

1:31 There was only one other Spanish-speaking student in my class, and of course with my luck it was a boy. He did not want to have to sit next to me, all the way in the back of the classroom, to translate everything that was going on, and I don't blame him. So instead, teachers tried to help me. But I couldn't understand what they were saying to me either. They would sit there and try to show me what everyone else was doing, and I could see how hard they tried to get me to understand, but all I could do was nod.

2:03 I nodded to everything, whether I understood or not. I mean, I did not know what else to say or do. Even asking to go to the bathroom was terrifying. I didn't even know how to. Would I be interrupting? Would everyone stare at me? Laugh if I said something wrong? There were so, so many scary thoughts going through my head.

2:28 I was only six, and I felt completely alone. I felt like an infiltrador, an intruder. Yes, some students would come up to me and try to talk to me, but that lasted no more than five minutes. After all, what could we say or do together, if we didn't speak the same language? And eventually, after trying, they would leave, and I would be alone once again.

2:54 My fake pains went on for about a month until I met the Spanish teacher at the elementary school. I felt a little bit safer with her around, but even then I would still cry from time to time, and I would continue to fake pains just to go home. I'm sure the teacher knew I was making them up, but they would go along with it. Worst of all, it was too late in the school year for me to make any friends, since the kids were so used to me crying all the time.

3:20 But I was really lucky to have my Spanish teacher. I felt such relief every time I saw her, and she along with several others helped me get through the rest of that year. Then, my neighborhood was redistricted, which means that after such a long year of struggling to fit in, I

would have to face the new year at a different elementary school. It was a really hard move. But then, it became a fresh start. I felt so much better about my English, and I was hoping to make some friends at my new school.

3:53 I was really lucky there. I had two amazing ESL teachers. They continuously checked up on me throughout the entire school year, and they did something no one else had done before. They asked me about my feelings. They worried about how I felt and if I was comfortable at my new school. They worked with me when I did not understand something, but most importantly, they gave me affection. They showed me that they cared about me, which was what really helped me open up with them.

4:27 They saw my potential, and helped me understand that it was important for me to do well in all my classes and show everyone what I was capable of. They actually raised the bar on what was expected of me, and pushed me to reach that bar. This challenge was huge for me, because I was so used to everyone worrying and trying to help me, so I wasn't doing any of the work.

4:53 But it was not only my two ESL teachers that made it possible for me to succeed in school. Another person played a huge role in my success. It was a teacher, but it was a teacher that never actually taught me in a class. After meeting my parents and realizing that my younger siblings and I, of ages seven, five, and one, would be home alone the entire summer while my parents worked, this teacher decided she would help.

5:20 Ms. Medina took care of me and my two younger siblings over the summer in her classroom. I have to emphasize to you how magnificent this was. This teacher decided she would care for us the entire summer without any obligation to do so. My mother worked with someone from our neighborhood that would pick her up and drop her off every day, while my dad had just started working after recovering from ankle surgery, and because we only had one car, he would take us to school every day before going to work, and we would have to wait for someone to pick us up.

6:00 There were days when my parents were late by maybe an hour or two—there were even some days when we weren't sure who was picking us up. But Ms. Medina never showed any sign of frustration. On the contrary, she always patiently waited until someone came. This extraordinary woman put her heart into helping me and my brother with our math skills and most importantly our English skills, including reading, writing, and the hardest part, speaking. She helped me understand things I would have never ever understood in an actual classroom, and because she spoke Spanish, she was able to explain everything so thoroughly.

6:40 I will never forget all Ms. Medina did for us. I remember reading a story about a princess and her Prince Charming, and so that my brother and I got a full understanding of the story, she had us make puppets out of the characters. "Well hello, beautiful princess!" "Oh, [inaudible] te un guapo". We acted out the entire story in Spanglish, with her and my little sister as the audience.

7:10 I remember math books that my brother and I would bring home to show our parents and then work on at home so we could take them to school the next day and show her what we had done. I remember us waking up every morning and feeling so excited to get ready to go to school to her classroom.

7:30 My brother and I moved into standard level classes in all subjects for the upcoming school year. I even tested out of English as a second language. Later, I managed to excel in math and by the third grade, I was competing in Math Olympiads, where I was identified for the academically gifted services. As the years went by, I continued this trend, and today I am more than proud to say that I'm a straight-A student.

8:10 I work to help my family, I'm a cheerleading captain, I'm a member of the Minority Student Achievement Network, and I'm in the Youth Leadership Institute, which is a program that specializes in performing community service projects including working at the food bank, helping a special garden grow that will provide food for the less fortunate, and my favorite, building homes at the Carolina Tiger Rescue.

8:40 And I guess it's safe to say that my English has greatly improved. What's so important for you to understand today is that teacher-student relationships are essential--essential!--in a child's education. Some kids will not open up and actively engage in their learning environment unless they feel safe and feel that someone cares about them. I did not feel safe in my initial environment, so I couldn't be active in my learning, because I didn't feel anyone knew or understood me.

9:16 I can't imagine my success being so great without the initial support from my Spanish teacher, my two ESL teachers, and especially not without the help of my special summer teacher Ms. Medina. All four of those amazing women took time out of their days to care enough to talk to me, and to get to know me. Not only that, they also took the time to get to know my family.

9:39 Their attention built strength and confidence in my young brain. They're the reason I did not just quit or end up in lower level courses with lesser expectations. They saw my potential for something greater. I can tell you about others I grew up with that weren't quite as lucky as me. They did not receive the same support, and today, they are still struggling with school. That could so easily have been me.

10:11 I watch and listen as students talk about how hard school is. I hear them complain about teachers all the time. I hear all the negative comments, just as I hear the positive ones, and I can tell you from my experience that the teachers you remember the most, the teachers who truly make a difference, are those who take the time to get to know *you*. They're those teachers who are always open to helping you with anything, even if it's not school-related. They're those teachers who will worry when you seem upset, who will ask if anything is wrong. They're the teachers who will embrace your culture in front of the entire class. They're those teacher who will let you know how important you are to their class.

11:00 Many of my teachers are both my mentors and my friends. I am an undocumented student. There's no way for me to become a citizen in this country. My parents brought me here when I was younger in hopes for a better education. I tell you this because, believe it or not, for me, college will be the biggest challenge I will have to face, not because I don't have the grades or I'm not well prepared, but simply because I will have to pay out-of-state tuition while not being able to receive financial aid. Which means that furthering my education will cost too much money.

11:43 This seems to be such a common trend, the breaking and throwing away of amazingly talented individuals simply because they don't have the money needed to succeed in this country. But do you know what has kept me striving for the perfect grades that I have when many have told me that I probably won't even be going to a "good college"? The amazing teachers like yourself that would look at me every day and tell me that I'm an admirable person.

12:13 Those teachers that would take the time to get to know more about what being undocumented entails. Those teachers that would try to find me scholarships and the teachers that will encourage me to keep up my good work every single day. Those are the teachers students need. Those are the types of relationships students need.

12:37 I am one student succeeding from the relationships that I had and the help I received from magnificent teachers. When all teachers value those relationships fully, we will have more students striving for the best and refusing to settle for less. I hope all of you will join Jotham and I in our Student Six Breakout Session. It's a workshop that we're going to be running. Thank you.