ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF LATINO PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

---

by

Dionicia A. Rivera

May 2023

ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF LATINO PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

by

Dionicia A. Rivera

APPROVED:

Ricardo Montelongo, PhD
Committee Director

Peggy Holzweiss, PhD
Committee Member

Susan Borg, EdD
Committee Member

Stacey L. Edmonson, EdD
Dean, College of Education

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my parents, Sam and Lupe Rivera. Although I fought you for the first 20 years of my life, you never gave up on me and always pushed me to not give up on myself. By working multiple jobs and putting our needs before your own, you enabled Maria, Sam, and me to be where we are today. You taught me the values of hard work, integrity, and honesty, and I am forever grateful for the sacrifices you made so that I could succeed.

I also dedicate my dissertation to my work colleagues and my friends of Cohort 40, or Cohort 4.0. You all made this process better than I thought it would be through your support and your humor. Thank you for checking on and encouraging me to continue through this process.

To Megan, my best friend for the last 25 years, thank you for supporting me through the good times and the bad. You are the funniest person I know, and your sense of humor has gotten me through a lot. Thank you for your guidance and positivity. You are truly one of a kind.

Finally, to Letty, who got me roped into this program in the first place. You are not only a dear friend, but you are my mentor and a person I truly admire. I would not have gotten to where I am today without you. Thank you for always pushing me to do more than I ever believed I could.

ABSTRACT

Rivera, Dionicia A., *Online learning experiences of Latino public middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Doctor of Education (Educational Leadership), May 2023, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

The COVID-19 shutdown in the spring of 2020 was a historic and unprecedented event creating a ripple effect that will affect our world for years to come. Scholars and researchers have already studied the effects of the shutdown on economics, health care, education, and more. We now have information about how student learning and progress were affected by the pandemic, but we needed to hear directly from students who experienced this event.

In this phenomenological study, I explored the complex experiences of Latino public middle school students who were online learners during the COVID-19 pandemic school year. Prior research on the topic of online learning focused primarily on college students. Research about online learning during a pandemic has only been published within the last year and collecting the voices of Latino middle school students has not been done as of this writing.

In this study, research is presented about the unique needs of middle school learners and Latino learners, culminating in the results of interviews with six Latino students who were in middle school when the pandemic hit. The findings are presented with implications for practitioners studying this population and those who are exploring the strengths and weaknesses of an online learning environment.

KEY WORDS: Latino, COVID-19, Online, Virtual, Middle school

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the faculty of Sam Houston State University. From the first day of orientation, the professors encouraged and supported us. In addition to learning about the research process, we experienced excellent courses in educational leadership, diversity, and organizational theory. We discussed pertinent social issues, and I was able to challenge my own thoughts and beliefs to grow as a person and school leader. My two years of coursework at Sam Houston impacted me tremendously.

I am also thankful that I had an awesome cohort of colleagues to grow with in this journey. Cohort 40, you are the best. I looked forward to going to class every day, and when the pandemic hit, I was sad because I missed seeing you every week. I was nervous about the cohort at first, but all of you made the courses so fun, and I will cherish the connections that we made.

Finally, thank you to my committee: Dr. Ricardo Montelongo, Dr. Peggy Holzweiss, and Dr. Susan Borg. I appreciate the thoughtfulness of your feedback and input as you have guided me through this extended process. Thank you for your encouragement and for inspiring me to complete this work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

DEDICATION iii

ABSTRACT iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

TABLE OF CONTENTS vi

LIST OF TABLES x

LIST OF FIGURES xi

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION 1

Statement of the Problem 2

Purpose of the Study 4

Significance of the Study 5

Research Questions 7

Theoretical Framework 8

Definition of Terms 10

Delimitations 12

Limitations 12

Assumptions 13

Organization of the Study 13

Summary 14

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 15

A History of the Latino Learner 15

Social Capital 17

Student Perceptions and Belonging 22

COVID-19 Educational Response 25

Experience of Teachers 28

Challenges for Students 31

Teaching English Learners 33

The Middle School Learner 35

Summary 36

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY 37

Research Design 37

Context of the Study 38

Participant Selection 40

Instrumentation 41

Data Collection 43

Interviews 44

Role of the Researcher 44

Trustworthiness and Credibility 46

Data Analysis 47

Summary 48

CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA 49

Introduction 49

The Writing Approach 49

Demographics of The Participants 50

Summary of Procedures 51

Student Profiles 52
Emergent Themes 55
Personal Reflection 72
Summary 73
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS 74
Overview 74
Context 75
Discussion of Findings 76
Discussion of Findings as Related to the Review of Literature 78
Discussion of Findings as Related to the Conceptual Frameworks 81
Implications for School and District Leaders 84
Implications for Online Teachers 88
Implications for Parents of Online Learners 89
Implications for Policymakers 90
Implications for Mental Health Practitioners 91
Recommendations for Future Research 92
Conclusion 94
REFERENCES 96
APPENDIX A 116
APPENDIX B 118
APPENDIX C 124
APPENDIX D 127
APPENDIX E 128

APPENDIX F.. 129

LIST OF TABLES

Table **Page**

1 Grade 8 STAAR Reading Performance Data for 2020-2021 39

2 Demographics of Study Participants... 50

3 Significant Statements Supporting Theme One 59

4 Significant Statements Supporting Theme Two 66

5 Significant Statements Supporting Theme Three 68

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure **Page**

1 Summary of Themes and Subthemes 56

CHAPTER I

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, our world was struck by a pandemic that changed lives globally. The novel virus crossed the globe in a span of months, and once it reached American soil, COVID-19 shut down our economy, our lifestyle, and our schools. Many students only had hours to say goodbye to friends and teachers before being sent home indefinitely, others never returned to school from spring break. In an instant, millions of students suddenly had nowhere to go, and teachers wondered what would happen to those students left at home.

Within days, school leaders organized laptop and supply pickups. Wi-fi hotspots were added for students without internet access. Nutrition departments mobilized to feed the tens of millions of students on free or reduced lunch. And teachers learned how to use Zoom and Google Meet to conduct online lessons, while also learning how to use learning management systems such as Canvas and Google Classroom to share resources with students (Bigman & Mitchell, 2020).

As teachers were working hard to reach their students virtually, the experience of receiving instruction from teachers at home was a new concern. A child's school experience is not only academics but their social life as well. Social aspects include extracurricular activities, visiting with friends, interacting with staff members (Hoffman, Agi, Rivas-Drake, & Jagers, 2019; Wentzel, Donlan, & Morrison, 2012), a sense of purpose and belonging, and how connected they feel to the school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Perry & Lavins-Merillat, 2018), especially for middle school students. The students must feel connected to the school and feel like they play a role in

the system to have a purpose. The social and emotional development of students as a whole provided extra challenges for educators in middle school because middle-school students have needs that are unique when compared to elementary and high school students. During middle school and early adolescence, students' bodies and minds experience dramatic changes that affect them cognitively, socially, physiologically, and psychologically (Borman et al., 2019). Therefore, middle school students often struggle and feel a decreased sense of belonging and connectedness to others. Educators wondered about the effectiveness of the online learning platform for students with such great needs (Gao et al., 2021). Educators also worried about English Learners who need increased social support, as well as high-context, visually rich lessons with targeted strategies (Halwani, 2017). This research study aims to answer the question: What was the experience of Latino middle school students during online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Statement of the Problem

The Latino population is thriving. In 2018, more than a quarter of the nation's newborns were Latinos, and by 2040, Latinos are projected to make up 27% of the overall U.S. population, according to Census Bureau projections from 2017 (Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, & Krogstad, 2020), and by 2050, Texas Latino workers are projected to outnumber White workers three to one (Paredes, 2019).

With these population projections, Latinos will have a significant impact on our society and economy, so they must not be marginalized in schools. Unfortunately, their peers are currently outperforming Latino students. While they have made some gains, such as the dropout rate reaching a new low in 2014. Although the dropout rate fell from

32% in 2000 to 12% in 2014 among those ages 18 to 24, the Latino dropout rate remains higher than that of Blacks (7%), Whites (5%), and Asians (1%) (Noe-Bustamante, Lopez, & Krogstad, 2020). In addition, Latino students have a performance gap of almost 30% lower than their White peers in reading and math (Hughes et al., 2015).

Numerous studies (Aud et al., 2010; Delgado & Stoll, 2015; Gándara & Aldana, 2014; Hughes et al., 2015; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Salazar et al., 2008) have been conducted to examine the achievement gaps between Latino and non-Latino students to determine what will improve Latino student achievement. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed much of what we know about student experiences because many students spent the 2020-2021 school year enrolled in online learning, causing physical separation from the schools and their teachers. Some important issues to note, which are described later in the literature review, are the unique and specific needs of Latino learners, of middle-school students, and the types of support and connections the students need to be successful and feel good about themselves. Another important issue is the challenge educational systems faced with the pandemic shutdown and how school districts quickly responded to continue teaching and learning for students. Finally, the experience of teachers and students, and how the shutdown affected the students academically and emotionally. For example, the majority of students and teachers in public K-12 education did not have experience working in an online environment (Adams, 2020). The COVID-19 shutdown changed their world completely. The current study will take the above issues into account and reveal lived experiences of Latino middle school students enrolled in online learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of Grade 8 Latino students in a suburban middle school in Texas during the 2020-2021 school year. These Grade 8 students were enrolled in an online school program provided by the public school district. A research gap exists when it pertains to the online learning experiences of K-12 students, specifically for Latino students who may have less support at home because of language barriers or a lack of access to communication technologies (Gonzalez et al., 2013; Kono & Taylor, 2021; Yoder, 2020). This study will contribute to the research by describing their lived experiences, sharing the stories of students, and humanizing those who have been traditionally defined as "minority," "at-risk," "marginalized," and "disadvantaged" by the scholars of the past and the K-12 education system (Davis & Museus, 2019; Dotterer & Lowe, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Stein et al., 2012; Torres & Santiago, 2018).

In addition, studying Grade 8 middle school students add more insight because researchers have shown that high-achieving students, especially Latino students, may begin their academic decline when they transition to middle school, and by the time they reach high school, they are not on a college-ready academic track (Borg et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2015). A high-achieving student is defined as one who earns the traditional honor roll and achieves higher than average scores on standardized tests. Researchers view early adolescence, or the middle school years, as a sensitive developmental time because of dramatic biological and cognitive shifts, changes in self-perception, and changes in relationships with peers and parents (Dahl et al., 2018; Inhelder & Piaget, 1999; Kuhn, 2009; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009; Yoder, 2020).

As for the face-to-face school experience, numerous studies have revealed a relationship between academic achievement, school belongingness, students' perceptions, and participation in school-sponsored activities (Delgado et al., 2016; Meier et al., 2018), especially among Latino students (Espinoza, 2012; Hayes et al., 2015; Voight et al., 2015). Researchers have referred to current K-12 students as the "lost generation" (Sawchuk & Samuels, 2020) because schools have been unable to physically find their kids, and the term also refers to lost learning, or the gaps of knowledge, that students could have as a result of the school shutdown. The current task is to determine the effect that a physical separation will have on the academic achievement and social-emotional development of online Latino learners.

Significance of the Study

By studying the lived experiences of Latino middle school Grade 8 students participating in online learning through a crisis, educators can learn what instructional practices and student support methods are most effective in a remote setting. At this writing, we are witnessing a resurgence of COVID-19 cases after months of suppression in several parts of the world, including several variants of the original virus like the Delta and Omicron (World Health Organization, 2022b). School leaders and educators need to know how to effectively connect with students remotely if schools are shut down again in the future.

In addition to the current pandemic, climatologists are predicting changes to learning as a result of climate change (Nordengren, 2021). For example, the Miami-Dade school district in southern Florida has had an online learning plan in place since 2012 because the area is prone to natural disasters. When the district of 520 schools made the

transition to online learning in March 2020, it was relatively smooth compared to other parts of the country. Similar to when schools are canceled for "snow days," schools can shift to online learning, even for a day or two, then student learning can continue despite environmental factors.

Effective online learning practices will also benefit students who must stay at home because of illness or injuries; they can simply switch to online learning. This study will benefit practitioners by allowing them access to the lived experiences of the students and what they require to be successful in the online learning environment. By learning what the students are experiencing through their own words, educators can truly know what practices are most effective.

By determining the specific variables that are having the most significant impact on the achievement of Latino students in the online learning environment, educators and policymakers can make decisions and create programs to target those variables. The experience of Latino students could also be transferred to other subpopulations to better educate practitioners and policymakers for the benefit of all students. Lastly, we can gain a better understanding of how students have coped mentally and emotionally in addition to academics. Researchers have recently learned that various populations of people and students are being affected psychologically by online learning and the pandemic shutdown, particularly adolescents (Aponte, 2020; Asmundson, 2020; Fitzpatrick & Harris, 2020; Leeb et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021).

Research Questions

For this study, the overarching question was: What were the online learning experiences of Latino public middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic? This primary research question was developed through my own experience as a principal who supported teachers, parents, and students during online learning. I received a lot of feedback from the adults, but we never asked the students about their experiences. The focus is on middle school Latino students because middle school can be a "make or break" time for students; their experience and performance sets the stage for what type of academic track they will be placed on in high school (Hughes et al., 2015). As stated earlier, the adolescent mind of a middle school student is also delicate because of the physiological and emotional changes happening during that period of life (Aponte, 2020), so I focused on their particular needs. Finally, I focused on Latino students because of my own Latino background, and because of current research stating that Latino students are underperforming and require more support than their non-Latino peers (Aud et al., 2010; Delgado & Stoll, 2015; Gándara & Aldana, 2014; Hughes et al., 2015; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Salazar et al., 2008).

Participants engaged with me by reflecting and describing their day-to-day experiences in the online learning environment. Specific questions were asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their own and their families' everyday lives, the types of support they had during online learning from school and at home, how those supports or lack thereof affected their learning, and finally, how students felt about online learning in general.

Theoretical Framework

The examination of lived experiences of middle school Latino students participating in online learning included specific concepts that the literature suggests students may mention when asked about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their everyday lives. One prevalent concept from the literature is the amount of support or social capital that students receive from the school staff and their homes. James Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital describes the amount of support students receive in all areas of their lives, including the relationships they have with their parents and with staff within the school system (Garcia-Reid et al., 2015; Goodenow, 1993; Hagborg, 1998). Social capital describes who the students can rely on and trust. A look at teachers, counselors, peers, and extracurricular sponsors can give a clear view of how much support students have at school (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Social capital in the home refers to the level of engagement parents and guardians have with the school regarding academic achievement, as well as the amount of family cohesion and warmth (Crean, 2004). Researchers have discovered a correlation between Latino students participating in school-sponsored activities and academic achievement because school-sponsored activities foster social integration and increased sources of social capital (Hughes et al., 2016; Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Based on the literature, online learners are losing that social capital because they are not participating in school activities or making connections with peers and school personnel while learning from home (Blakemore, 2012; Klein, 2021; Toness & Gecker, 2022; Yoder, 2020).

Coleman (1998) described social capital theory using three aspects: trustworthiness, information flow, and norms and sanctions. Trustworthiness describes

who the students can depend on and who will be an advocate for them. Information flow describes who can give the students reliable information, such as teachers and counselors. Parents and guardians are also a part of this if they are engaged in the students' learning. The final aspect of norms and sanctions describes the rules and expectations of the community in which the student lives and operates. For example, it is what the community values, whether that is education, family, or public displays of wealth. In the online learning environment, several aspects of social capital are simply no longer present in the students' lives.

A second theory used to create and guide the research question is the theory of school membership (Goodenow, 1993). The theory of school membership describes how much the students feel respected and supported in school and at home, as well as the level at which they feel they belong in the school. School belonging is defined as the interpersonal interactions that can facilitate a sense of psychological connection between students and their peers and teachers (Goodenow, 1993). This theory falls within the boundary of social capital because they are both about who can support the student. The school membership aspect is important because it is about the students' perceptions and how comfortable they feel at school. In addition, school membership can also describe how comfortable and accepted the parents feel at school. Researchers have connected parental involvement with school connectedness and prosocial behaviors, which are voluntary actions that benefit others and lead students to higher achievement (Streit et al., 2021). School connectedness and membership have also been linked to higher academic expectations, greater academic competence, and high school completion and attendance among Latino youth (Castro-Schilo et al., 2015; Niehaus et al., 2016).

Definition of Terms

Key terms and phrases central to understanding this study are provided here:

At-Risk. Students are designated as at-risk if they are under the age of 21 and meet one or several criteria outlined by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), such as if they fail state assessments, they have been retained, they are classified as an English Learner, or they qualify for the free and reduced lunch program (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

Bilingual. In the educational setting, bilingual indicates that the student is participating in a state-approved bilingual education program. The program must be a full-time program that provides dual-language instruction through the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in the content areas (i.e., mathematics, science, health, and social studies) in the primary language of English language learners (ELLs). In addition, the program must provide for a carefully structured and sequenced mastery of English cognitive academic language development (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

COVID-19. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a new coronavirus identified in 2019 to which humans have never been previously exposed. COVID-19 can cause severe illness and even death, with increased risks to some groups. It was designated as a pandemic in early 2020 and has killed over six million people worldwide as of December 2022 (World Health Organization, 2022a).

Economically Disadvantaged. An economically disadvantaged student is defined as one who is eligible for free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Program (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

English Learner (EL). A student is classified as an English language learner when a language other than English is used as the primary language in the home and the student's English language proficiency is determined to be limited by a Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) or as indicated by a test of English proficiency. Most students identified as English language learners receive bilingual or English as a second language instruction (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

Latino. People who directly come from or whose ancestors come from Mexico, Central America, or South America. I acknowledge that there are discussions in other research about whether or not to use Latino, Latina, or Latinx. For this study, I have decided to use the term Latino because that term better reflects the preference of the community of my research site. The term Latinx is not currently used in this area.

Middle School. For this study, middle school refers to a school that serves students in Grades 7 and 8.

Online or Remote Learning. Online or remote learning is when students are interacting with teachers through the internet only. During the 2020-2021 school year, many students were not allowed in school because of the quarantine, so they interacted with their teachers solely through online video programs such as Zoom. Remote learning uses eLearning tools to actuate distance learning for students who, for whatever reason, could not be in the classroom. (TeachThought, 2021).

Title I. A school is designated as Title I if it has over 40 percent of its students participate in a program authorized under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which is designed to improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students.

Delimitations

The first delimitation was collecting information from students who were enrolled in one middle school in a suburban area of southeast Texas. The reason students needed to attend the same school is that each participant needed to be offered the same programs from the same school. For this type of study, I could not compare, for example, the experience of a student in a tiny town with a student from an inner-city school. Objectively, those opportunities, resources, and programs offered are too different. Another delimitation was selecting participants who attended the same elementary school. This delimitation existed because I was focused on students who have had similar educational backgrounds and opportunities so that I could target the impact of online learning and not the impact of various previous schools of the online learner. Finally, I selected students from similar backgrounds. Similar backgrounds include similar socioeconomic levels, similar levels of education attained by their parents, similar ethnic backgrounds, and similar language needs. These delimitations were the controlled variables so that the independent variable could be the experience of each online learner.

Limitations

The first limitation of this study was my role as a researcher. To minimize this influence, I bracketed my thoughts and feelings as an educator before the interviews. Qualitative research hinges on my ability to record and interpret responses. To safeguard against any biases and increase validity, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using a third-party, online company called Trint. The participants' direct quotes were used as much as possible so that the readers could receive the students' own experiences without interpretation or interference from me. In addition, I kept a

reflection journal to help debrief after interviews and observations, to check biases by writing them out, and to keep track of the steps involved in the research. I also used anecdotal memos to write down and reflect on my thoughts about the study as they happened in real-time. Finally, I went through peer debriefing with my dissertation chair and with a fellow graduate student.

Another limitation of the research was any biases, behaviors, or attitudes that the participants had. I depended on the participants to give honest answers without being influenced by me. Since I was familiar with some of the participants, they might have said what they thought I wanted to hear instead of giving genuine responses.

Assumptions

One assumption was that the Latino students enrolled in online learning were not getting as high of quality education and experience as students attending school in person. The research supported the learning gaps caused by the shutdown and only having online learning, so I determined that was how the students felt about online learning as well. Another assumption was that the students would recognize this deficit between online learning and face-to-face traditional school, and that would sway their opinion about online learning, risking them talking about what they have seen on the news versus what they experienced. Finally, I assumed that the participants took the study seriously and answered questions honestly.

Organization of the Study

The present study aimed to provide Latino middle school students an opportunity to share their lived experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Chapter 2 gives the reader a history of

the Latino learner, starting with court cases for integration up to the current state of Latino students in the United States. The chapter then describes the types of support, or social capital, that successful students require, as well as how students perceive themselves and their sense of belonging in middle school. Chapter 2 concludes with a description of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected student learning, the challenges students faced, and how Latino students have fared during the pandemic. Chapter 3 describes the phenomenological research design, the context of the study, how participants were chosen, and finally how data were collected and analyzed.

Summary

This chapter described the importance and relevancy of the current study and how it would help educators when schools need to shut down in the future, whether the shutdown is for a global crisis, staff shortages, or weather emergencies. Best practices for reaching and teaching students online, so that learning does not have to stop even though the schools may be closed, were introduced for future study. The chapter described how the current study was an opportunity for students who have been historically marginalized to provide their voices and experiences to scholars and practitioners studying the effects of online learning. Their voices were valuable, because as middle school Latino students, their perspectives have not been featured in scholarly literature, and as online learners during a pandemic, their experiences are new and unique.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

The review of the literature supports that the social capital and ecological framework of a student are instrumental in supporting their school engagement and academic progress (Ruiz, 2009). Students must feel a sense of belonging to be successful. Online learning provides students access to their teacher and peers, but we are in the process of understanding the emotional and academic toll that the physical separation has had on the students. The importance of researching the COVID-19 responses and how Latino middle school students reflected on their year of online learning provides important insights into educational experiences during this time.

A History of the Latino Learner

To fully understand the significance of this study in context, the historical and current status of the Latino population, demographic trends, and academic trends must be presented. According to the *Handbook of Texas*, until 1948, Mexican Americans and students with Spanish surnames were segregated from White schools in Texas (Leon, 2020). In 1947, the Ninth Circuit in California ruled that segregation of Mexican American children, who were considered Caucasian, was illegal, and that Mexican American children attending White schools would be beneficial because they would then learn English (*Mendez v. Westminster*, 1947). This ruling created momentum for desegregation in Texas. In 1948, in Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District, Judge Ben H. Rice ruled that segregation of Mexican American students was illegal. However, the 1948 ruling had loopholes that still made segregation possible, and it was not until the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s that Latino students had complete

equality. The passing of the Bilingual Act of 1968 was the first time the United States government formally recognized the language needs of English learners. Since that time, educational policymakers have attempted to make decisions to best serve an increasingly diverse population (Gándara & Aldana, 2014; Ruiz, 2009).

Gándara and Aldana (2014) asserted that Supreme Court decisions requiring public schools to create programs to support Latinos' native language caused Spanish-speaking students to be segregated from mainstream classes that have better instructional resources and that Latino students are actually "triply segregated: by ethnicity, by poverty, and by language" (Gándara & Aldana, 2014, p. 737). With the growing number of English learners in the United States, educational leaders would be wiser to institute programs that integrated English learners and English speakers rather than implementing programs that separated them, specifically: (a) dual language immersion, (b) International Baccalaureate programs, and (c) magnet programs (Gándara & Aldana, 2014).

On the other hand, the positive components of bilingual programs have been supported by an abundance of research. Hughes et al. (2015) studied students transitioning into middle school who had been enrolled in bilingual classes throughout elementary school. Students who transitioned to middle school and who were enrolled in bilingual classes in elementary school had a more positive trajectory than students who were not enrolled in the bilingual program. These results were attributed to bilingual students having a cohort of classmates and parents who have been more involved throughout elementary school, increasing the social capital and sense of belonging that they had within the school. The Latino students who were not in bilingual classes in elementary school did not have the cohort or social capital, causing a decline in

belonging and engagement with the transition to middle school, especially when ethnic congruence decreased in the transition. Bilingual education also increased the academic preparedness and college readiness of Latino students, and throughout secondary school (Garza-Reyna, 2019; Genesee et al., 2005; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

According to data from the Pew Research Center, from 2010 to 2021, the population of the United States grew by 23.1 million people, with Latinos accounting for 52% of that growth, which is a greater percentage than any other ethnic group (Krogstad, et al., 2022). In addition, the number of Latinos enrolling in college almost doubled between 2010 to 2021, from 2.9 million to 4.1 million, and in 2021, Latinos make up 19% of U.S. college students compared to 14% in 2010 (Krogstad, et al., 2022). The college dropout rate for Latinos has dropped dramatically over the past decade, and Latinos have the highest attendance in two-year schools, or community colleges, than any other race (Krogstad, 2016). However, despite increased enrollment, Latinos are graduating from college far behind Asian, White and Black students, citing family support needs and financial constraints keeping them from finishing their degree programs (Mora, 2022).

Social Capital

Social capital in an educational setting is defined as the amount of support and resources a student receives that will yield education benefits (Goldsmith, 2004). Family, peers, and the school system all belong to a child's microsystem according to the ecological system framework guiding this research study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The environment is crucial to their development.

Schools need to understand how social capital and the ecological frameworks influence major aspects of child development since school connections greatly influence a child's educational trajectory (Garcia & Chun, 2016; Meier, et al., 2018; Ordonez-Jasis, et al., 2016; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). A school system may be able to increase learning and achievement for at-risk students by increasing a student's social capital, whether that be through peer groups, extracurricular activities, increased parental involvement, or school support and mentoring programs (Santos & Collins, 2016). The following ecological factors will be examined below: extracurricular activities, parental involvement, and school support and mentoring programs.

Extracurricular Activities

Participation in extracurricular activities increases a student's sense of belongingness at school, especially between Latino and Black students (Brown & Evans, 2002; Espinoza, 2012). Furthermore, a sense of belongingness at school has a positive relationship that exists between reading and mathematics scores (Espinoza, 2012). Extracurricular activity participation leads to higher levels of educational attainment, less alcohol and drug use, a stronger social group of high-achieving friends, and a high level of civic engagement (Barber, et al., 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney & Vest, 2012).

Findings for at-risk students are even more striking. Participation in extracurricular activities has an even greater effect. When compared to other at-risk peers, at-risk students involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to drop out of high school, less likely to be arrested, more likely to earn a high income after high school, and less likely to be depressed (Camacho & Fuligni, 2015; Kitchens & Gormley,

2018; Mahoney, 2000). For middle school students, extracurricular activities are especially important. A considerable body of literature has shown that student engagement drops dramatically between elementary and middle school and then again between middle school and high school (Eller, 2013). Middle school students have unique needs that will be discussed later in this paper, but for middle school Latino at-risk students, extracurricular activities can have an enormous impact on their lives.

Unfortunately, Latino students are unlikely to participate in extracurricular activities, especially if they come from economically-disadvantaged families (Snellman et al., 2015). In addition to economic factors and accessibility issues, the greatest barrier to Latino students participating in extracurricular activities was parental awareness (Kitchens & Gormley, 2018). Researchers discovered that Latino parents were not as aware of the long-term benefits of their children participating in extracurricular activities as non-Latino parents.

Parental Involvement

Of all the significant predictors of achievement for students, parental involvement plays a significant role (Dotterer & Day, 2019; Hill et al., 2016; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2018). Parental involvement is the participation of parents in every aspect of their children's lives. In the school setting, parent involvement means being a partner in the child's education – participating in parent-teacher conferences, monitoring grades and course choices, supporting learning at home, monitoring their child's friendships and behavior, and advocating for the success of the child. Parent involvement can counteract any negative effects of community disadvantage and increase student achievement (Gordon, 2017).

May and Witherspoon (2019) suggested that parents with high educational aspirations and beliefs had children with the same types of aspirations, and those students were more likely to achieve their educational expectations. In their study about Mexican-American values and factors leading to prosocial behaviors, Knight et al. (2016) proposed that "across both gender and nativity, findings suggest that much of the socialization of the Mexican-American culture occurs within the family and that this ethnic socialization by the mother is linked to the adolescents' prosocial tendencies" (p. 1767). The prosocial behaviors allow students to be more invested in their education which can lead to material success and personal achievement. While the previous study focused on mothers, Fitzgerald et al. (2019) focused on Latino fathers of middle school students. They found that fathers who were supportive of their children's academic aspirations and who gave their children more decision-making strategies had the greatest influence on their children.

Latinos value close family ties, and even siblings and extended family members can have a great influence on Latino adolescents, helping them to value respect, have high expectations for themselves, and avoid getting into trouble. This familial support grouped with strong mentoring and teacher supports resulted in the highest achievement for students (Garcia-Reid et al., 2015). Although Latinos have close ties between parents and their children, parental involvement among Latino parents is low when compared with those of other ethnic backgrounds. Several factors contributed to this lack of involvement, including language barriers, migrant status, economic constraints that resulted in parents having to work more, or family dissolution (Jeynes, 2017). However,

it is up to the school to create a culturally responsive program that supports language differences and welcomes the parents into the school.

School Support and Mentoring Programs

Effective school support does not mean only supporting the child; parents must be supported as well, especially if those parents have barriers preventing them from becoming actively involved in the school, such as language barriers, fear, or accessibility issues. If parents feel supported, they will be involved, but if they feel that the school and teachers are not encouraging parent involvement, then the parents will have negative perceptions which lead to negative learning attitudes and poor performances from the students (Rivera & Li, 2019). Schools must have (a) staff who speaks the native language of the parents, (b) many events where parents are welcomed into the school, (c) frequent communication with the parents, and (d) school personnel who can get out into the community to meet parents in their own environments. All these methods help to bridge the gap and offer school support for all parents and students.

Another aspect of school support involves training teachers to be culturally responsive to a diverse classroom of students. Teachers need training on how to effectively teach English Learners, and they need to know that a lack of language does not equal a lack of cognitive ability. Teachers who design instruction based on a student’s language proficiency, and who attend professional training and workshops on differentiated instruction have a more positive impact and enhance their students’ learning achievement (Rivera & Li, 2019). Teachers gain knowledge of how to teach English learners, and they also gain more knowledge about their specific needs and how to be role models for them.

Research has consistently highlighted the importance of supportive and positive relationships between teachers and students, and that those relationships are one of the most powerful factors of academic success (Woolley et al., 2009). Students are labeled as “at-risk” by schools as early as pre-kindergarten because educators already know the factors that lead to students becoming at risk of being behind their peers and eventually dropping out of school. Because of these reasons, it is the responsibility of the school to set up systems and programs to support these students. Teachers need to be trained to avoid the traditional deficit model of thinking for at-risk students. Schools need to be structured so that students are supported by positive caring adults. This will then lead to students' increased academic achievement, avoidance of discipline incidents, and getting on a college-ready academic path (Garcia-Reid et al., 2015).

The amount of support that someone has in any situation is crucial to their success. Whether you are starting a new job, learning a new hobby, or transitioning to a new school environment, success depends heavily on the supports and resources you receive. Extracurricular activities, parental involvement, and support and mentoring are crucial in creating a feeling of pride, connectedness, and belonging for a student.

Student Perceptions and Belonging

The amount of social capital and support at home can greatly influence a student’s perception and belonging, especially in the adolescent years (Garcia & Chun, 2016; Meier, et al., 2018; Ordonez-Jasis, et al., 2016; Van Ryzin & Roseth, 2018). Hughes et al. (2015) studied 204 Latino students in bilingual education starting in Grade 1 and then for the next 9 years to gain insight into their mindsets. All participants were recruited from one urban and two small city districts in Texas. The researchers’ goal was to study

the academic outcomes and levels of student engagement and belonging as the Latino students transitioned into middle school, which was around Grade 8. Students completed several assessments before and after they transitioned. Teachers completed questionnaires about the students' classroom engagement, and students completed surveys about their own levels of school belonging. Along with the results from the questionnaires, the researchers determined that a major factor affecting Latino students' transition to middle school was the level of ethnic congruence. Hughes et al. (2015) defined ethnic congruence as "the proportion of a school's student body of the same ethnicity as a given student" (p. 445). His study revealed that people feel more comfortable when they are around people who look and act like them, regardless of ethnicity.

Similar to Hughes et al. (2015), Santos and Collins (2016) studied 436 Mexican-origin students in Arizona to measure the students' sense of belonging at school, focusing on how ethnic identity and school connectedness affected academic achievement. Students completed surveys about ethnic identity and school connectedness, and then their state assessment scores were analyzed and compared to their survey answers. The researchers identified a link between high achievement on the state assessments and students who considered themselves to have a strong connection to the school. If the school connectedness was strong, students performed well, even if they rated their ethnic identity as low. However, in situations with large Mexican populations, a student's high ethnic identity increased his or her school connectedness, leading to higher achievement. Santos and Collins (2016) attributed the high achievement to students feeling more positive about themselves as they relate to their peers, which caused them to feel more

positive toward the school. The researchers stated that students require healthy perceptions of themselves and their ethnicity to feel connected to a school. They recommended that educational stakeholders put systems into place to increase the students' perceptions of themselves so that they feel more secure, confident, and successful at school. Kerr (2014) asserted that this security and confidence led to greater risk-taking when choosing classes. Students took more advanced classes when they felt better supported and more confident; essentially when they had a more positive mindset and felt more successful and safer in their school environment (Kerr, 2014).

While Santos and Collins (2016) focused on the two factors of ethnic identity and school connectedness, Ruiz (2009) conducted a study to determine the influence of six predictors and how those predictors affected the academic achievement of Latino middle-school students. One hundred seventy-three Grade 7 students completed a self-report survey. They answered questions about their grades, perceptions of school, ethnic identity, and the amount of parental support they received. The six variables included demographic information, as well as questions on acculturation, parent involvement, employment status, school identification, and belonging. Ruiz (2009) concluded that the strongest correlation between Latino students and academic achievement stemmed from their sense of belonging and connectedness to the school and the amount of parental support they received. The researcher also determined that Latino students perceived themselves as more connected to a school if their culture was accepted and celebrated by the staff and school community. Ruiz (2009) referred to the relationship among a student's school, home, and family as ecological factors, and that schools should

intentionally create connections among those factors to increase the student's academic achievement.

The more students feel accepted and the more connected they feel toward their school, the greater success they will have. Latino students are more successful when they feel their culture is recognized and celebrated by the school. These strong connections between the students and the school resulted in higher academic achievement and positive mindsets for the students. Connections must be present, but the COVID-19 pandemic ended those physical connections, overnight in some instances, forcing schools to scramble to stay connected to their students.

COVID-19 Educational Response

In February 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) officially announced that public schools in the United States needed to start preparing for a possible shutdown to stop the spread of the new coronavirus (Messonnier, 2020). On March 11th, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic (Ghebreyesus, 2020), and within weeks, public schools in the United States closed, leaving local school leaders with the challenge of educating over 50 million students remotely. Plans of action promptly took shape to quickly and effectively serve students in a remote environment, with specific steps followed by schools across the country (Decker et al., 2020):

1. Plan to continue essential services for families in need.
2. Connect students and teachers online.
3. Deliver instruction and continue the learning.

The first step schools took was to support the millions of students who rely on school for meals. Schools have long followed Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which lists the following needs in order (Sullivan, 2019):

1. Physiological – food and water
2. Safety – security of body
3. Belonging – friendship, family
4. Esteem – self-esteem, confidence, achievement
5. Self-actualization – problem solving, creativity

Students must be fed, feel secure, and feel like they are supported before learning can happen.

As of the summer of 2021, more than three million students received meals through the National School Lunch Program (Isensee, 2020), so closing schools meant millions of kids were going to go hungry. By mid-March 2020, a large urban school district in southeast Texas opened 31 food distribution sites across the city, and citizens around the country came together to support their local food banks (Isensee, 2020). In addition, in March 2020, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) created an online portal to help people find food distribution centers, and the department relaxed its policies on food distribution, making it easier for school districts to pass out meals to parents (Swaby, 2020). The USDA proceeded to then make school lunches free for the 2020-2021 school year and allowed waivers for many regulations through the 2022 school year (Blad, 2021).

The next step was to determine how to reach students remotely, especially when the students may not have access to the internet or have an electronic device. Education

experts refer to students' inability to complete schoolwork at home because of a lack of internet as the "homework gap." Based on research conducted in 2017 and 2018—years before the coronavirus outbreak—this digital "homework gap" already affected somewhere between 8.5 to 12 million K-12 students (Litvinov, 2020). According to 2015 U.S. Census Bureau data, "some 15% of U.S. households with school-age children do not have a high-speed internet connection at home." School-aged children in lower-income households were especially likely to lack broadband access. Roughly one-third (35%) of households with children ages 6 to 17 and an annual income below $30,000 a year did not have a high-speed internet connection at home, compared with just 6% of such households earning $75,000 or more a year. These broadband gaps are particularly pronounced in Black and Hispanic households with school-aged children – especially those with low incomes (Auxier & Anderson, 2020). "Hispanic teens were especially likely to say they do not have access to a home computer: 18% said this, compared with 9% of White teens and 11% of Black teens" (Auxier & Anderson, 2020, para 8). Although school districts across the country tried to get as many devices to students as possible, "the homework gap" persisted because of the lack of access to the home internet.

Educational leaders know that U.S. students will have learning gaps. To help close those gaps and catch students up on the learning they lost between 2020 and 2021, Congress provided U.S. public schools with nearly $200 billion in COVID-19 relief funds. These funds helped to provide food, technology devices, summer enrichment, intervention programs, and more to address the loss of learning that students had suffered the past year (Ujifusa, 2021). However, despite the steps that educators took to get

students to learn online and the funds provided by the government, more than half of students and parents reported spending less time engaging with teachers, as well as working on their own, in an online learning environment when compared with learning face-to-face before the pandemic (Sparks, 2021). In addition, the loss of educational and instructional time was more pronounced for students in some income and racial groups than others (Sparks, 2021).

In March 2021, the CDC recommended a new operations strategy for public schools. They cited evidence that many schools had implemented prevention strategies and were able to safely have in-person instruction. The new strategy gave hope to millions of students and allowed more schools to open throughout the United States. For this study specifically, the location where the study will take place was open for in-person learning in September 2020, but parents were able to elect to have their students continue the online learning mode.

School districts across the country were able to provide meals, computers, and Wi-Fi to as many students as they could. The U.S. government also provided funds to help with these logistical tasks. However, even though many students had computers and internet access, a learning curve existed for the teachers who were not trained to teach online.

Experience of Teachers

Remote learning began in March 2020 as a strategy for teaching during the pandemic. For many, online learning continued through the 2020-2021 school year. The challenges to online learning were not only with the students at home. The majority of K-12 public school teachers had never taught students online, and they felt that their

education programs had not prepared them for teaching in an online environment. They also experienced longer work hours involved with online learning because of the preparation time – time to prepare the lessons, post the lessons online, deal with technical problems such as broken links or students with accessibility issues, and all of this on top of the actual instruction taking place during the day (Adams, 2020). Lastly, teachers felt disconnected from their students; they were not able to build the close relationships needed to push them, and students would often not show up leaving teachers with no way to contact them.

The International Society for Technology in Education, a nonprofit group that trains educators to use technology to accelerate teaching and learning, requires teachers who want to be certified as online educators to receive 30 hours of face-to-face and online training that can take up to nine weeks, plus six months to curate a portfolio (Adams, 2020). Once schools shut down in the spring of 2020, teachers were lucky if they had a week to prepare for online learning in general, much less having to account for the various learning styles and needs of their students:

> Studies of online learning suggest not only that students learn less in online environments, compared with traditional in-person learning, but that disadvantaged students learn the least. And that is true even when online teachers have experience and training with online teaching. Under the current emergency, most teachers will not have any experience at all with this approach. (Kamenetz, 2020, para 17).

Education experts have called our current state of distance learning the biggest education experiment in history, with effects that could last a generation (Kamenetz,

2020). The learning loss during the pandemic is widening the racial and economic gaps that educators and advocates have been working to close for decades.

During the 2020-2021 school year, school districts nationwide had students in-person, online, or in a hybrid model. In the online environment, many teachers were teaching multiple grade levels throughout the day, or they had up to 50 students or more in one online class (Schwartz, 2020). In some schools where students have been allowed back face-to-face, teachers were teaching in a hybrid model, where they taught students physically in the classroom at the same time as some students watching the lesson through a teleconferencing platform at home.

Our educational system has suffered because of the pandemic shutdown, but there were some positive aspects as well. The past year has led to tremendous growth in the use of technology and innovative programs for educators, students, and parents. They now know how to use videoconferencing tools, such as Zoom, and they can engage with various online learning management systems like Google Classroom and Canvas. In a survey of 855 educators by the EdWeek Research Center, 74 percent of them reported that they will integrate technology in a more meaningful way, especially since students now have more devices, such as Chromebooks, iPads, and laptops (Klein, 2021).

Teachers worked hard to become learners themselves and fostered ways to connect with their students online. They learned how to use video conferencing software and they learned how to use learning management systems. The next learning curve was for the students, most of whom had never participated in a video conference. The students were also used to physically interacting with their teachers and their classmates, so suddenly being forced to learn at home on their own created a huge challenge.

Challenges for Students

An Edweek survey conducted in the spring of 2020 revealed that student and teacher morale was down since our educational system relied on relationships and face-to-face interactions (Kurtz, 2020). Teachers in the survey said that most of their interactions with students were through email, which was a sharp contrast to the in-person relationships that students need to thrive. In-person relationships consist of the natural elements that allow people to feel comfortable, such as facial expressions and immediate feedback, which cannot be done through email.

By the end of 2020, half of the students in the United States were attending virtual-only schools, and tens of thousands of students were unaccounted for altogether, with students missing and kindergarten enrollment numbers dropping dramatically (Richards, 2020). Spector (2021) reported in his study of the 2019-2020 school year where it was found that the shutdown in March had caused the average student a third of a year to a full year's worth of reading progress, and about three-quarters of a year to more than a year's progress lost in math. Since a global shutdown was unprecedented in our lifetime, scholars have examined what happened to the thousands of students affected by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. Harris and Larsen (2019) tracked a fourth and fifth grade cohort of students affected by Hurricane Katrina and found that, on average, the students took two full school years, from the spring of 2006 to the spring of 2008, to academically recover. Just like with our current situation, the students faced lost learning time, social disruption, and even economic uncertainty.

Behavioral Health Impact

In addition to lost learning, the shutdown and online learning have had a behavioral health impact on our students caused by emotional strain. From April 2020 to October 2020, the proportion of mental health-related visits for children aged 5 to 11 and 12 to 17 years increased by approximately 25% and 31%, respectively, compared to data from the same period in 2019 (Leeb et al., 2020). According to a nationwide Gallup poll of 1,200 parents of students in kindergarten through Grade 12 in June 2020, 30% of parents reported that their child was experiencing emotional or mental harm (Calderon, 2020). Students have been able to stay upbeat, but only if they had a healthy support system, but unfortunately, "the children most hurt are those who were already disadvantaged by food or housing instability, domestic violence, unsafe neighborhoods, fragmented families or absent role models" (Richards, 2020, para 14). The American Academy of Pediatrics made waves in the spring of 2020 when they went against the guidance of government officials, announcing that students needed to return to in-school learning for healthy development and well-being (Jenco, 2020).

The situation was much direr for economically-disadvantaged students, students with special needs, and English learners (Richards, 2020). The United States has about five million students who are English learners, and about 26% of those English learners are Latino (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The loss of learning was more consequential because many of these students received extra interventions and individual attention from teachers, which was difficult in a remote learning environment.

The students experienced many challenges during online learning. Some of them did not have internet access, and some had emotional stress and strain caused by the

isolation of the pandemic. That emotional strain was heavier for students who were also burdened by economic stressors and language barriers. As stated in Chapter 1, Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States, which is why they are the focus of this study. This huge workforce in the future must be properly educated now, but they have been more impacted by the pandemic. A lack of resources and support at school and home has created even greater challenges for Latino English Learners.

Teaching English Learners

According to TEA, as of Spring 2019, Texas English learners made up 20% of the total student population, and of those students, 44% participated in a bilingual program and 52% participated in an English as a Second Language (ESL) Program. Spanish is the primary language of 895 of those English learners, and 78% of those were born in the United States (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The needs of English learners are so unique that teachers of ESL students in Texas are required to take a test to be certified to teach ESL students. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 recognized the needs of English learners and increased their accountability with more requirements on the English language proficiency assessment (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Furthermore, in 2018, the United States Department of Education issued even more guidelines for planning ESL programming, including bilingual education (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

The following is a list of the top ten research-based ESL instructional strategies identified through a meta-analysis of 61 studies between 1980 and 2004 (Irby et al., 2018):

1. Questioning Strategies – questions at different cognitive levels with wait time for responses;
2. Focusing Strategies – communicating the purpose of a lesson;
3. Manipulation Strategies – providing physical objects to touch;
4. Enhanced materials strategies – graphic organizers and other ways to adapt the language of the text provided to the student;
5. Assessment strategies – students can show their learning in a variety of ways;
6. Inquiry strategies – students talk and participate more during the learning;
7. Enhanced context strategies – teachers connect lessons to the students background knowledge and interests through the use of the physical surrounding;
8. Instructional technology strategies – incorporate technology such as video and audio clips;
9. Direct instruction – teacher gives explicit step-by-step instructions; and
10. Collaborative learning strategies – students work in collaborative groups.

This list of strategies has been proven effective in the classroom, and these strategies are part of the certification test to be able to teach students identified as English learners (Seidlitz & Perryman, 2011; Sousa, 2010; Vialpando, 2005). The challenge educators face lies in how to integrate these learning strategies in an online environment, especially when some of the students may lack devices or internet service.

The Middle School Learner

While English learners already face extra challenges because they are learning a new language, students in middle school also have challenges to overcome. Sarah-Jayne Blakemore (2012), a neuroscientist who has researched the adolescent brain, described the stage in life as follows: "adolescence is characterized by psychological changes in terms of identity, self-consciousness, and relationships with others. Compared with children, adolescents are more sociable, form more complex and hierarchical peer relationships, and are more sensitive to acceptance and rejection by peers (p. 112). Middle school is an integral part of a child's social development, and social recognition is important to them. Adolescents especially enjoy contributing to the community and thrive on group work, so working alone is boring and unengaging to them (Barshay, 2020).

Booth and Gerard (2011) studied seventh graders' perceptions of themselves and school at the beginning of the school year and then at the end. Students entered the seventh grade with positive feelings about school, but this euphoric feeling was lost by the end of the academic year. The decline in positive feelings came from increased tensions with peers and teachers, and the authors noted that a student's perception of school is greatly influenced by his or her relationship with the teachers. The researchers concluded that self-esteem and self-efficacy were linked to school connectedness. Likewise, Way et al. (2007) found in a longitudinal study of 1,451 young adolescents that middle school students' perceptions of school climate declined from 6th through 8th grade and that these declines were also associated with student declines in psychological and behavioral adjustment. Middle school students require social interaction for proper

brain and social development. When online learning takes away the relationships and school climate, a student's academic and social development can suffer, and school engagement can face significant declines.

Summary

The average middle school student experiences a significant decline in engagement and academic performance between Grades 6 and Grades 8 (Dotterer, et al., 2009; McGill et al., 2012). The middle school Latino students in this study were affected even more than the average middle school student. Some Latino students were still learning the English language, were considered economically disadvantaged, had less access to resources, or parents who could not help them with schoolwork. These students experienced the challenges of remote learning while also experiencing adolescent changes; they needed more social contact and relationships than they ever have before. In the current study, Latino students were the minority population in the school. A potentially discriminatory environment is damaging to a student's mental health, especially when the student has a strong ethnic identity, so these students need even more support on how to cope with these possible stressors (Torres & Santiago, 2018). Latino students need more support than other students do, but with the pandemic shutdown, the social aspects keeping them engaged in school were taken away.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This section describes the process the researcher followed to conduct a trustworthy and credible qualitative study about the experiences of Latino middle school students participating in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 3 includes how the study was designed, the purposeful sampling of participants, how the interviews were conducted, and how data were collected. Finally, the section describes how the researcher checked biases and remained faithful to the participants' meanings and experiences.

Research Design

The design for my study involved hermeneutic phenomenological research methods using in-depth interviews with students. This phenomenological research examined the lived experiences of several people and focused on what they had in common. The purpose was to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence," (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The phenomenon explored was the unique experiences of a group of middle school Latino students who participated in online learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), a review of phenomenological research studies involved a range of three to ten participants. I interviewed six participants because that was in the middle of Creswell's recommendation, although I did reach saturation after three participants.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was selected because I wanted to capture the lived experiences of Latino students through their own perspectives. They

experienced a phenomenon together, and I wanted to learn about that experience. This approach also complemented the Ecological Framework Theory because that theory described aspects of an individual's life that affected him or her and how those factors were also affected by the individual. A goal of this phenomenological research was to create meaning from the lived experiences of several individuals who experienced a common phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

In addition, the qualitative research design involved a naturalistic and interpretive approach to understanding the experience of a group of individuals. Creswell (2017) described a qualitative study as designed to explore a worldview using a theoretical lens to understand and interpret the meaning behind what was explored. The reason that a phenomenological design was most appropriate for the proposed study was that this methodology focused on the participants' experiences, perspectives, meanings, and views. In addition, the phenomenological design used an approach that had the participants in a real-world, or naturalistic, setting, so that their experiences unfolded naturally.

Context of the Study

The research site for this study was a suburban middle school in southeast Texas serving students in Grade 7 and Grade 8. The middle school was located in a semi-rural, semi-suburban school district that served approximately 13,000 students and covered 150 square miles. The middle school, or junior high, had a population of about 1,500 students. The demographic data was as follows: White (59%); Black (4%); Asian (1%), and Hispanic (33%). Of that population, 34 percent were designated economically disadvantaged, nine percent received special education services, and 14 percent were

considered English learners (EL). The feeder pattern for this junior high consisted of four elementary schools that served pre-kindergarten through Grade 4 students. Of these four schools, one was a Title I school, which was a school receiving federal funds based on having at least 40% of students who qualified for the free and reduced lunch program (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Starting with the 2018-2019 school year, the four elementary schools fed into an intermediate school that served Grades 5 and 6.

The junior high offered a variety of advanced classes and extracurricular activities. For Grade 8 STAAR Reading data, Table 1 displays a comparison of the performance of EL students and White students for the 2020-2021 school year. Schools in Texas typically received an A through F rating, but those ratings have been suspended for the last two years due to the pandemic. The 2018-2019 school year was the last year campuses received a letter rating where this junior high received a B, which was 89 out of 100.

Table 1

Grade 8 STAAR Reading Performance Data for 2020-2021

Performance Rate	ELL	White
Approaches Grade Level	49%	80%
Meets Grade Level	24%	54%
Masters Grade Level	9%	28%

Note. Adapted from *Texas Academic Performance Report*, by the Texas Education Agency, 2021. https://tea.texas.gov/

Although the school was performing well according to the overall state rating, Table 1 gives evidence of a large performance gap between EL students and White students. A gap always existed between EL students and White students, but according to data from TEA, the gap became wider throughout junior high and into high school.

Participant Selection

After receiving permission from the school district and Sam Houston State University (SHSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I worked with the district's digital learning coordinator (DLC) to gather a list of potential participants. The DLC retained all records that the district reported to TEA. For this study, this individual provided access to student placement information that was helpful for participant selection. The coordinator also had access to student contact information and all other records reported to the state, such as grades, discipline, and attendance. Participants were chosen according to the following criteria: (a) English learners as designated by the TEA, (b) similar socioeconomic backgrounds, (c) enrolled in online learning at some point between March 2020 and December 2020, and (d) they had been in the one school district for their entire educational careers. I excluded students who had moved away and then returned because I only wanted to include students who had lived their experiences in the same middle school setting. In keeping with the same school setting, the participants also attended the same elementary school. My recruitment plan followed a structured process to maximize potential participation in the study.

First, I sent over 20 students who met the above criteria a letter through their school email accounts using a secure system with a brief description of my study. This letter was also sent via email to the parents of these students. The recruitment letter was a template from SHSU and be found in the Appendices section of the study. In the letter, I communicated that I wanted to conduct one 60-minute interview with them where they would be able to describe their experience with online school. I also gave them my background information and credentials to gain their trust. Next, after a couple of weeks,

I sent a follow-up email to make sure they received the information. Once I heard back from between three and ten students, I then asked for an introductory meeting with the student and their parents in person or through Zoom, whichever method was preferred by the parents. At this introductory meeting, which no one elected to have, I had planned to present the students and parents with the SHSU Consent for Participation in Research. This document reviewed the purpose, procedures, and duration of the study as well as the reason why their child was chosen for the study. To protect the participants, they signed the consent with a chosen pseudonym that we decided upon together. I am the only person who had the master list of students and their pseudonyms. The files with the master list were password protected, and the list was in a password-protected Microsoft One Drive document on a password-protected personal computer. In addition, the Zoom recordings were stored on a protected and secured personal computer which only I had access to with a password. The last recruitment step was the 60-minute interview based on the schedules of the student and parent. At that time, I gave the introduction, and then the interviews began.

Instrumentation

The primary data source for this study was the responses from the six individual face-to-face and Zoom interviews with middle school Latino students. Open-ended questions were developed by the researcher with probing and follow-up questions also given to the participants. I developed the questions with input from mentors, colleagues, my own experience working with students, and from issues that were included in the literature review and theoretical framework. For example, I am working with the Theory of School Membership, so I asked students to share their level of connectedness to the

school and school staff, both in person and online. Working from the Theory of Social Capital, I asked the participants if they felt a sense of belonging and support in the online environment. Questions were written in age-appropriate language, so the students had a clear understanding of each question. Finally, I tried out the questions on a friend's middle school student who was not involved in the study to ensure that the questions were written in kid-friendly language and that he could understand what was being asked.

Creswell and Poth (2016) described a one-on-one interview as a social interaction based on conversation. The interview protocol began with questions to invite the subjects to open up and get comfortable followed by five to seven open-ended questions about their experiences with online learning compared to in-person learning (i.e., content questions). Probing questions were used to elicit more information, which was important since the participants were former middle school English learners and may have needed assistance communicating their complete thoughts and experiences. The questions were refined through pilot testing with educational colleagues. The interviews were transcribed and shared with the subject for member checking within a week of the interview and after I coded and interpreted the interviews. According to Seidman (2013), the purpose of member checking was to make sure the researcher has been accurate in their transcriptions and interpretations, and member checking ensured the participants did not feel vulnerable or misrepresented in any way. Supporting the well-being of the participant was especially important to my study because they were children.

Data Collection

Before beginning data collection, proper steps were taken to protect the participants' identities. Consents were distributed, explained, and signed by each participant and their parents using pseudonyms, with only the researcher knowing the true identities of each student and parent. Because the study involved minors, extra precautions were outlined for SHSU's IRB and the administrators of the middle school. For example, an extra precaution was for the parents to observe the interview or be within earshot to listen. For in-person interviews, the parents were listening from right outside the room. For the Zoom interview, I made sure to greet the parent at the beginning of the interview to ensure they were with the child. Another precaution was for the interview to take place during the most opportune time for the subject since they had stricter schedules as minors. District leaders were informed of the purpose of the study, how subjects were determined, and the structures that were in place to protect the subjects. The district leaders were informed because they provided the list of Latino middle school students who were online learners. All data gathered, including interviews and researcher notes, and journals, were coded with pseudonyms, and all recordings, transcripts, and notes were destroyed after the study concluded.

After IRB approval was granted, the school district's DLC collected a list of potential participants who met the criterion sampling specifics. Initial contact was made through email followed by an introductory meeting before each interview. As stated by Seidman (2013), the researcher discussed the study in person to avoid a 'no' that comes from too much pressure during an introduction. Meeting in person and taking the time to discuss the study communicated to the subjects that they were important and allowed the

researcher to gain more trust because of the time she dedicated to the subject. This first contact also began the relationship that must be built between the researcher and the family. Seidman referred to this initial visit as a "contact visit" because the purpose was to build trust.

Interviews

Students, with parents present as gatekeepers, participated in one individual 30 to 45-minute interview that was conducted at school or through Zoom. For the Zoom meeting, I greeted the parents and students at the beginning so that I knew they were present in the home at the time. The parents served solely as gatekeepers, and questions were only answered by the participant. Readers are guided to Appendix B for the interview questions used for this study. In-person and Zoom interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and Zoom interviews were also recorded using the Zoom recording option. All interviews were conducted in English and were transcribed using the transcription service Trint.

Role of the Researcher

My interest in this topic of study was influenced by my role as an educator in an elementary school with a majority of Latino students. I was also pursuing this topic because I am of Mexican descent and have been influenced by my parents' stories of opportunity gaps that they experienced. In addition, I have witnessed my former students' academic declines in middle school. My role as a researcher was to be as transparent as possible to the participants and make them as comfortable as I could. I went through the appropriate gatekeepers at school and in the students' homes. I wanted

to create quality open-ended questions to encourage participation and let the participants tell their stories.

Because I am using a hermeneutical process, I not only gathered the experiences of the participants, but I interpreted them as well. I researched the history of the Latino learner as well as the unique needs of middle school students and the factors that made them successful learners or not. This helped in the hermeneutic process because it was necessary to add a historical perspective in order to fully interpret the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Some bias that I brought to the study was a presumption that the students did not care enough in middle school since they were traditionally more heavily supported at the elementary level. Based on my own experiences with online learning, I came to the assumption that a disconnect existed between the students and the teachers. Also, having some background knowledge and previous relationships with the students and their families could have influenced the responses. Finally, I recognized that just by asking questions about the online learning experience, I could have influenced students to think differently about their own experiences.

To be mindful of my biases, I regularly used my reflection journal to keep track of any thoughts or ideas that came to mind. The journal helped me stay focused and reminded me to go back to the research questions. Also, the journal allowed me to organize my thoughts and remember information through the number of interviews I conducted. In addition, Saldaña (2021) explained that writing analytic memos, which were similar to journal entries researchers created, was a way to “dump your brain” and write down thoughts as they came to you about your study and the participants. For

example, if I was coding and something significant about the study came to mind, I stopped everything I was doing and wrote a memo so that I could reflect and analyze that data more effectively.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

When developing the research question, I had a mentor and colleagues serve as critical debriefers and read the question to give his or her opinions and suggestions. During interviews, I focused on learning the meaning of the subjects' experiences and not what meaning I brought to the phenomenon of online learning (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By gathering rich and thick descriptions, I was able to triangulate the data and reach saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I used a reflection journal to bracket my biases (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), and I used analytic memos to write down any thoughts from the moment they occurred (Saldaña, 2021). Creswell and Creswell (2017) described reflexivity as a researcher recording notes during research, reflecting on personal experiences, and then reflecting on how those experiences may affect the interpretation of the interviews. Being aware of personal experiences and biases, and charting those allowed me to further separate my own meaning from the participant's meaning.

Finally, I went through the process of member checking with the participants. Member checking involved me taking the final responses, descriptions, and codes back to the participants to verify their accuracy. This procedure allowed the participants an opportunity to comment on the findings and clarify any information I may have missed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Participants read the transcripts and my codes to provide feedback about how accurately their thoughts were presented. If a participant disagreed

with my interpretation, then we would have a productive conversation about the participant's true meaning. For this study, I did not hear any comments or receive any changes from the participants, but they were given the opportunity. I viewed checking data with the participant as a partnership, so the process of checking was collaborative. Since the participants are minors, it was important that they felt secure, and they must be represented truthfully so that the study does not affect them emotionally or negatively in any way.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed through the program Trint. The interview transcripts were analyzed in Microsoft Word using the comment feature to give first-cycle codes. I then used Excel for the second and third cycle codes of all the combined interviews before developing the meta-themes (Saldaña, 2021).

I maintained subjectivity in my interpretation by knowing that I always needed to go back to my research questions, theoretical framework, and methodology texts to consider what the participants' answers meant to them before applying the hermeneutic approach to creating meaning. I used my reflection journal to write out any biases and interpretations that I had and to track the hermeneutic circles as I went back and forth between each interview and the entire data to discover the phenomena as a whole (Laverty, 2003). I used analytic memos to chart my thoughts as they occurred. Once I had all of the information, I then began to connect the pieces and create the stories of each participant, and then the story of the participants as a whole in supporting the phenomenological study.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology for this study on the lived experiences of Latino students learning online during the 2020-2021 pandemic school year. The research design was hermeneutic phenomenology. Data collection consisted of one 60-minute interview with three to ten Latino online middle school students. All students identified as English learners and participated in online learning for at least one semester between the Fall of 2020 and Spring of 2021. The purpose of this study was to create a deeper understanding of the experiences of Latino middle school students who spent almost a year or more enrolled in online learning. The study can help school leaders and researchers learn the effectiveness of online learning and how we can better serve students who are learning online in the future.

CHAPTER IV

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine and describe the lived experiences of middle school Latino students who participated in online learning during the COVID-19 school shutdown. One interview was conducted with two girls and four boys each, giving those students their first opportunity ever to describe their experiences, how they felt, and how online learning has affected them even today. The interviews were coded into meta themes that will be described in this chapter. One overarching research question was explored in this study: What were the online learning experiences of Latino public middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Writing Approach

My findings and recommendations are written using a "confessional tale" model that incorporates reflexivity. A confessional tale uses a personal point of view, integrating my findings with my educational experience and culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In Chapter 3, in describing my role as a researcher, I described how I used a reflection journal as well as my experience as an educator and school leader to create meaning from the participants' experiences. In this chapter, I include some of my thoughts and interpretations as I describe the experience of each student. I use a first-person point of view in my descriptions and make personal comments on a few of the interview transcripts and quotes. Finally, in my findings, I include how my viewpoints have been transformed and influenced after learning about the experiences of the participants.

Demographics of The Participants

The following criteria were used to select the participants of this study: (a) English learners because their first language was Spanish, (b) similar socioeconomic backgrounds, (c) enrolled in online learning at some point between March 2020 and December 2021, and (d) they have been in the one school district for their entire educational careers. Table 2 shows demographic information about each participant in this study. Factors included in the table are whether the participant's family qualified for the federal free and reduced lunch program, the education level of their parents, and the number of children in the household. The above factors were important because they represented the opportunities available to the student. As stated in Chapter 2, the socioeconomic background of a child can be an important factor in their level of academic support and achievement, which also pertained to the education level of their parents. Finally, I included the number of siblings in the household, because after interviewing the students, it was evident that the number of kids in the house affected the participant's online learning experience.

Table 2

Demographics of Study Participants

Participant	Economically Disadvantaged	Parent Education Level	Number of Children in the Household
Jackie	Yes	High School Degree	5
Alexis	No	College Degree	3
Abraham	No	High School Degree	2
Leo	Yes	High School Degree	3
Angel	Yes	Some High School	4
Bryan	No	High School Degree	2

Summary of Procedures

On July 14, 2022, approval from the SHSU IRB was granted for this study. I began with an initial email invitation to 17 students who met my selection criteria and who participated in online learning in the Fall of 2020 when they would have been in eighth grade. This initial email was sent on July 25, 2022, but because it was summer, I only received one response at that time. School in this district started in mid-August, so I sent another email on August 10, 2022. Nine students responded to the August email, and I then contacted those students and their parents with a phone call. Four of those students translated the phone call and the contents of the waiver. Of those nine candidates, seven initially agreed to participate, but then that number fell to five. The literature on phenomenological methods recommended interviewing at least six participants until data saturation was reached. Because I was not able to get six Fall 2020 eighth graders, I decided to interview a sibling of an original participant. The sibling was in seventh grade in the Fall of 2020, so he was still close to my original participant selection criteria. I found that I reached saturation after interviewing three participants, but I continued to interview six participants because I wanted to keep exploring to ensure that a quality sample was represented.

Most of the parents of the participants decided that they would meet at a school near their homes for the interview. All participants lived within a 10-mile radius of each other, so this location was ideal. I interviewed two participants on August 27, 2022, and three on August 28, 2022. Because of the last-minute scheduled interview, I had to interview the final participant on September 4, 2022, through Zoom. For the in-person interviews, the parents waited in the hall while I interviewed the students next door in an

office with the door open. For the Zoom interview, the participant was in the kitchen, and his mother was present as well. All the participants and their parents were sent the interview questions and permission waivers through email ahead of the interview. I originally planned to meet the parents in person before the interview to further explain the study, but they all said that was not needed. Waivers were shared and signed before each interview began.

Each interview was about 40 minutes long. Differences in interview lengths were due to how outgoing and articulate each participant was, and whether they shared specific stories about events that happened during their time in online learning.

Student Profiles

Six Latino students were interviewed for this study, which included two girls and four boys. Every student came from a home where Spanish was the primary language, and they all attended the same elementary school together. Five of the students were in seventh grade when the initial shutdown happened and then spent at least half their eighth-grade year online. The sixth student was one year younger at the time. Table 2 in the previous section shows specifics about their background information, and this section describes each person in more detail.

Jackie is currently in ninth grade and describes herself as a high-achieving student who cares about her grades and enjoys school. In elementary school, she was on the honor roll, and participated in advanced courses since fifth grade. She is the second oldest of five children, both of her parents work to support the family, and they are both fluent in English. She describes herself as social and spends time with her friends outside of school. She is currently a trainer at the high school and is in the honor society. Jackie

stated that she does not consider herself a "computer person" and does not spend a lot of time on her phone.

Like Jackie, Alexis is also a high-achieving student who takes advanced classes. She is the middle child of three kids, and her mom stays at home to take care of everyone. Her parents both speak English and Spanish. She shared that she loves going to school, where she is involved in several clubs. She has lots of friends and is active on social media. However, she recalled that at the start of the pandemic, her family's Internet connection was not strong, so she did not spend a lot of time on the computer until she had to during online learning. During her first two semesters of quarantine and online learning, most of her social interactions were through texting on her phone. Although Alexis is not a shy person, she described herself as being shy in the online Zoom classes because she did not want to speak. Instead, she would use the chat feature to interact with the teacher instead of having to unmute and talk in front of everyone.

Abraham and Bryan are brothers and are the only siblings in their family. Being only one year apart in age, they are close to each other and like to spend several hours a day in online gaming, referring to themselves as "gamers." Both of their parents speak English and work full time, and they also have an adult cousin who lives with them. Abraham describes himself as shy and that he only has two close friends. He said they do not spend a lot of time physically together outside of school but that they play online games together every day. Bryan is more social than Abraham and enjoys hanging out with many friends at school. Like Abraham, he mostly socializes with his friends outside of school online. They each have their own computers, so they play online games every

day. They are enrolled in on-level classes and describe themselves as "okay" or "average" students.

Leo and Angel come from similar backgrounds. Their parents are first-generation immigrants, and their fathers work while their mothers stay at home to take care of the family. Their fathers speak some English while their mothers only speak Spanish. When the pandemic began, neither one of them had internet access or electronic devices, although they do have internet now and they were loaned laptops by the school district. Leo is the oldest of three kids, and he describes himself as funny and outgoing. He likes going to school because he gets to see his friends, and he also plays every day with his friends on his street, one of which is Angel. He also has a phone, so he enjoys playing on social media. He explained that school has always been hard for him, but that his parents always talk about the importance of school. He has had a few discipline incidents at school, mostly for being silly and playing in class.

Like Leo, Angel admits that he does not enjoy school. If he had to choose a favorite subject, it would be Science, and he does not like to read. He enjoys playing soccer, and one of the highlights of his week is when his family goes to church on Sundays because he gets to play soccer after the services while his mom volunteers serving lunch. Angel has two older brothers and one younger sister. He feels closer to his sister, who is two years younger, than he does to his brothers, who are four and five years older than him. Angel is close friends with Leo, but Angel describes himself as quiet and shy at school. He does not like to speak up in class, but with his friends, he is talkative and funny. He has a phone and likes to be on social media. His family has internet access and a laptop, but he uses his phone for everything. He also likes to hang out at his

friends' houses, and he likes to watch TV. This past summer, he started working with his dad, who lays concrete. He liked the experience and the people he worked with, but he did not like the heat and decided he does not want that job after he graduates high school.

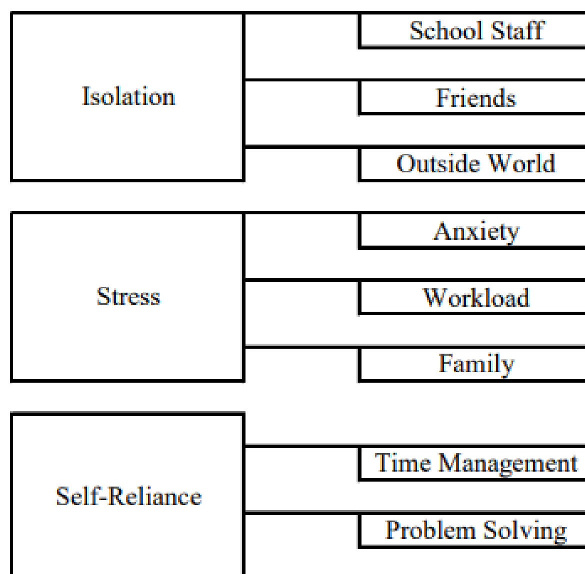
The participants and their subsequent interviews create three major themes with accompanying subthemes. The themes and subthemes will be described next. Summaries and direct quotes from students are also included as evidence of the themes.

Emergent Themes

Three major themes emerged from the data extracted from the individual interviews. These three themes were: (a) isolation, (b) stress, and (c) self-reliance. Within the theme of isolation, there were three subthemes: (a) isolation from school staff, (b) isolation from friends, and (c) isolation from the outside world. The theme of stress contained three subthemes: (a) workload, (b) anxiety, and (c) family. The subthemes for the theme of self-reliance were: (a) time management and (b) problem solving. The themes and subthemes are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Summary of Themes and Subthemes



Isolation

The theme of isolation emerged when participants discussed the government ordered shutdown and when they described their parents' decision to quarantine the family from the world. Several of the participants regularly attended church on Sundays and two attended churches on Wednesdays as well. Parties and family get-togethers were also important parts of their lives. They engaged in regular activities like shopping, going out to restaurants, and playing at their friends' homes. With the pandemic shutdown, all these activities came to an immediate halt, with no end in sight. The participants were isolated on three levels: (a) isolation from the school and school staff; (b) isolation from their friends; and (c) isolation from regular living activities, such as going to the store, the movies, or anywhere outside of their homes.

Most of the participants shared how they were initially excited to not have to go to school; however, when the reality of truly being in quarantine set in, they quickly

realized how terrible it was to not be able to go anywhere or see anyone. Each participant described how the isolation eventually began to take a mental and emotional toll on them. For example, Jackie compared her isolation to being a prisoner:

> I didn't like it because you're in the same environment for so long, you kind of get bored. I was not allowed to leave my house for like three months! It was like I was in jail. And then when you want to do things and they (parents) don't let you and you're like, we would get mad at each other a lot because we would be like, well, you're here all day. And so, it was fun to be with my family but then we would all be getting on each other's nerves.

Jackie's perception of isolation closely matched what Alexis experienced. Alexis recalled how she was isolated from school staff.

> I really like school and like really like talking to my teachers, like getting to know them and they get to know me. So, in the Zooms, they would just tell us what we were doing and then we would go do our homework. So, we never talked about anything, like they didn't know anything about me, and I didn't know like most of the people in my classes, like we never talked just for fun. It just was not fun at all.

While Alexis liked building relationships with school staff, Jackie resented being physically away from the teachers because she felt like she did not have as much academic support, "the teachers, like they were almost never there, and they would only like jump on and say, like, okay, this is what we're doing, and this is assignments you have to do. And then they would go off. So, like you didn't even have a chance to look at the assignment and like maybe ask questions if you had any."

Like Jackie, isolation from school staff was a point of frustration because many of the participants felt that they did not have a teacher they could easily contact for help. They described the Zoom classes as a place where the teacher told them how to find information instead of directly giving the information to them. They felt as though the Zooms were basically a quick check-in with the teacher and then once they logged out of the meeting, they were on their own to figure out the curriculum and assignments. Abraham shared that the isolation from school staff impacted how much he learned:

> Whenever my teachers were on Zoom calls, they were just sitting there and just explaining throughout the Zoom call, sharing the screen, basically. But in-person, it's like they're showing you a lesson on the board or showing you something in a video and physically telling you something. And I feel like it's more easier or relaxing to just like study and listen at in-person school than in online. In person, I raise my hand and ask questions, but I was always too quiet to do that online, so I would just try to figure things out on my own. And online there were technical difficulties as well as things that I didn't know about what the teachers were teaching.

The participants were also sad to be away from their friends. Although they could still socialize over the internet and with phone calls, the physical separation was difficult. Alexis described how she has had the same best friend since pre-kindergarten, and how strange and awful it was to not be able to hang out with her best friend or anyone anymore. Alexis stated, "with friends, we mostly did a lot of texting, but my mom didn't like me on my phone a lot because I had to be on the computer so much, so she like would only let me on it [the phone] sometimes, and I would get really mad about that."

Leo and Angel, who are neighbors and spend time together every day, had a hard time having to stay in the house. Jackie, Abraham, and Leo described how quarantining with their family led to resentment, and how the isolation led to increasing stress and anxiety for them. Jackie lamented having to miss the rest of her track season and missing her eighth-grade dance. Angel was sad to not be able to play soccer with his friends every Wednesday after his church classes, saying that missing out on these soccer nights was the worst part of the isolation for him.

Table 3 contains significant statements by the participants that support the theme of isolation.

Table 3

Significant Statements Supporting Theme One

Theme	Formulated Meaning	Examples of Significant Statements by Participants
Isolation	How disconnected the individual felt from the school staff.	We really didn't have time to like talk about anything. She (the teacher) would just be on the Zoom telling us what assignments we had to do that day and what videos to watch.
Isolation	How disconnected the individual felt from friends.	I've been friends with Myra since like Pre-K, but I was only allowed to text her and sometimes FaceTime. I didn't like that. Yeah, I think I was lonely.
Isolation	How disconnected the individual felt from the outside world (i.e., going to the movies, the store, church, etc.)	We couldn't go anywhere! When my mom would go to the store, she would come home and wash everything. It was like I was in jail or something.

Stress

Stress emerged as a theme when participants described the fear and anxiety that they felt as they watched the news and being in quarantine. They described how the news showed people dying all around the world, and one student described how the doctors in masks, gloves, and hoods terrified her. Leo vividly remembered when the NBA stopped a game in the middle of play because a player tested positive for COVID-19. All six participants shared that their family members were terrified of contracting the virus. Three participants, or half of the sample, lost a friend or family member to the COVID-19 virus. They were living under constant stress caused by what was happening in the world and what they were seeing on television and the internet every day. Alexis described her stress at home during this time as follows:

> My dad went to work, but like, he had to shower and stuff when he got home, and my mom would go to the store and they would all wear masks, and then she would wash everything and take a shower when she got home, so that was really scary for us to see. We were all really scared of getting sick. So, we weren't allowed to see anyone, and that was so hard. I did get really sad and depressed, and my mom would like check in with me and try to do fun stuff like games and stuff.

They also shared that they were worried about money because the news constantly discussed people losing their jobs. Jackie recalls the financial stress her families faced:

> My mom was unemployed for like a year because she didn't want to get us sick and they [the family she nannied for] didn't want her to maybe bring in something. And then there was a lot of like shortage of money, like we were

struggling. But it sort of took a big toll on their [her parents] mental health and everything.

Like Jackie, Leo remembers his family worrying about and discussing money during the shutdown:

I remember my mom was happy that my dad and my brothers were still doing some work for people, like cutting down trees and stuff and fixing cars to make money, but like, she was really scared of the virus, so she wouldn't let me do anything.

In addition to the stress that emerged from what was happening in the world, the participants had the additional stress of having to learn how to be a successful online learner when they had never experienced that situation before. Every participant described online learning as far more stressful than in-person learning, with greater workloads and less support from teachers. Jackie, who is normally a successful honor roll student, was surprised by the difficulty of the online learning environment:

Oh, it was so stressful online! Like, they would give you so much homework and like the length of two regular classes. So, like you had six classes of homework, and they were all like writing essays or like do this, do that. And it was in that short amount of time where you only had like 4 hours to do all those six classes or like you had to turn it in by 2:25. So it was kind of stressful to get all of that in because you obviously didn't want to be late. The workload was so much more than regular school because in school we can do things along with the teacher and then turn it in, but here you had everything on your own, and like, so much more because of the essays and not being able to ask for help right then and there. And

> then there were some days when we didn't have time to cover everything, so then we would have double the homework the next day. It was awful!

Leo and Angel did not have internet access at home when the shutdown began in the spring of 2020, but they were up and running by the fall semester when they were officially enrolled in the online school. They were loaned laptops by the school so that they could be prepared; however, nothing could prepare them for the stress of online learning.

Unlike Jackie, Alexis, Abraham, and Bryan, Leo and Angel were not able to get help from their families. Leo's overwhelming stress caused him to shut down:

> I hated it. I stopped going to the Zooms after a while, but then they called my mom and she got mad at me. So I got back on, but I would not turn on my camera and I would just type my name in the chat for attendance. It was so boring, and like, the teachers just would sit there and talk and then we had to do everything all by ourselves, and working in Canvas and stuff, and it was hard. Like, I feel like the teachers didn't even matter because they would just like tell us to go watch the video and then give us hours of homework, and I didn't know what I was doing. Oh, but sometimes they would put like a PowerPoint in Canvas with notes, so I did use that, but I ended up failing some of the classes because I didn't know what to do and then they would give us so much to do in like just one day. I called one of my aunts, and she could help me sometimes, but it was kind of embarrassing being on the phone with her to try to explain my questions, so I didn't do that a lot. I didn't have anyone at home helping me, and the teachers said I could email them, but everything was just so hard.

It is evident that Leo was experiencing a severe disconnect from school. Although his teachers were present in the Zoom classes, he was not feeling a personal connection to them. When he stated that the "teacher didn't matter," he meant that the teacher was only a being that delivered an assignment and not a real person that he had a relationship with. Because he felt this disconnect and isolation, he gave up on his work.

Angel also struggled in the online learning environment and took the same route as Leo, "Nobody was helping me. I just kind of got like mad and I guess I was sad, I don't know, it was weird. I stopped showing up to the Zooms and I was failing the classes, but like, I just didn't care about anything, you know. Like, everything was so weird and I didn't care."

Finally, four out of six participants shared that their family members caused them additional stress because they were spending too much time together. Jackie described how she would pretend to be on Zoom meetings to get some time away from her family:

> A lot of times, I would just be in my room with a sign that said "Zoom meeting don't come in" on my door even if I wasn't in a class. I talked to my friends on the phone and through FaceTime, and then the rest of the time, it was just me and my family. It was like, really really rough. I love them, but it was hard. I am usually a happy person, but after a while, I would wake up really mad and be mad on the Zooms, and then I would like take it out on my family because they were always there. Then my mom would get mad, and then we would all be mad. It was horrible, so I guess I didn't handle my emotions very well.

Jackie described a situation with her little sisters that still makes her feel guilty to this day. "I have two little sisters, and they were like, really little, like two and three, and

they would be too loud when I was in class, and I would yell at them, and they didn't understand why I was mad, and like, I still feel bad about that."

The stress everyone was already feeling from the fears of the virus was exasperated by the workload that they experienced with the online learning. First, they did not feel that they had a lot of direct instruction from the teachers, so they did not have a clear grasp on the content. Secondly, they were stressed because many of the assignments took much more time to complete than if they had been physically in school. Lastly, the online schedule of classes and the deadlines they had daily led to them experiencing significant amounts of stress. Two of the participants simply gave up because the demands were too hard, and the other four had to be resourceful to keep up with the assignments. Angel described how his parents caused him even more stress when he was already feeling so overwhelmed by school and failing his classes, "The school called my mom, and I remember my mom and dad got really mad at me, and they even said they would take away my phone if I didn't start working. But I was mad because it was really hard and like they couldn't help me."

When asked about his emotional state at the time, Abraham shared that he did feel extra stress, but what was odd to him was how tired and irritable he would often feel.

> I had to wake up early like I do now for school, and I would feel tired because, I mean, I wouldn't be going anywhere. But it was a different feeling of tired, like, man, I have to do all this work while I'm at home. Like, I wasn't going anywhere because of quarantine. I wake up when I get to school now, but I would be at home on the computer and just be tired. And like, I would feel like impatient and mad that I had to be doing this every single day.

After Abraham's interview, I wrote in my reflection journal a descriptive account on how his face expressed his emotional state. Throughout the interview, he was upbeat and happy to talk, but when he described how he felt logging onto his Zoom classes after months, his entire demeanor changed. His brow furrowed and his voice level lowered. I could tell that he was trying to express something heavy that had been weighing on him. His lack of energy and irritability are signs of depression, and the isolation and online learning was affecting his mental health. I wrote in my journal that his joking around about sleeping and staying in his pajamas may have been masking some of the emotional strain he endured during his year of isolation.

Table 4 contains significant statements by the participants that support the theme of stress.

Table 4

Significant Statements Supporting Theme Two

Theme	Formulated Meaning	Examples of Significant Statements by Participants
Stress	Stress due to anxiety and worry	We had lots of relatives who got really sick and we lost one due to COVID. My mom was unemployed for like a year because she didn't want to get sick and there was a shortage of money, like we were struggling. It took a big toll on their mental health and everything.
Stress	Stress due to the individual's coursework	We had all this work, and like, the teachers said to email them for help, but sometimes they wouldn't email me back in time, or sometimes they wouldn't email back, and then I still didn't understand, and then the homework was due by the end of the day. And we had lots of teachers giving us lots of work that was due fast and it was hard and I didn't know what to do.
Stress	Emotions felt from being only around their family for so long and	Me and my brother would fight and like start to get on each other's nerves. Like, everyone was getting on my nerves. All I could do was hang out outside, and sometimes my mom would let me ride my bike but I couldn't talk to anyone. I would just like start feeling angry and like irritated. It was like I was a prisoner.

Self-Reliance

When I interviewed each participant, they talked at great length about how hard online learning was, and how they were a lot less happy and more stressed during that time than they were when they were physically in school. However, as I reflected after

each interview, I saw a silver lining to what the participants experienced, which was self-reliance. The theme of self-reliance emerged when the participants described having to figure out how to be successful on their own. For example, they had to show up to several Zoom meetings each day on time; they had to visit websites like YouTube for help with understanding their content; and they had to figure out how to work with Canvas, their online learning platform where assignments were posted and where they had to upload assignments and videos. They even had to learn how to better regulate their own emotions when fear, stress, and isolation began to take their toll.

> Jackie: The teachers had certain office hour times where they would be sitting on the Zoom and you could go into the Zoom and they would help you, but like, sometimes their office hours were when I had another class, so I had to Google a lot of stuff and YouTube was really good for me, too. Some of my friends were having a hard time, so we would help each other, too, and call each other to try to figure stuff out.

Bryan shared his frustration about his teachers not having enough time to respond to him and having to look at the notes online to solve his own problems.

> Most of the time you had to self-teach because most of the time even if you asked help from them [the teachers], like how they say if you need any help, just ask me in an email. Sometimes they wouldn't even respond back until like the next two or three days, so I had to go to the notes because sometimes the PowerPoints had good notes.

Even Leo, who did not have help at home because of the language barrier, worked up the courage to get help from a family member.

> I didn't know what to do and then they would give us so much to do in like just one day. I called one of my aunts, and she could help me sometimes, but it was kind of embarrassing being on the phone with her to try to explain my questions.

Table 5 contains significant statements by the participants that support the theme of self-reliance.

Table 5

Significant Statements Supporting Theme Three

Theme	Formulated Meaning	Examples of Significant Statements by Participants
Self-reliance	Participants having to show up to each class on time and manage their workload	I decided to set alarms on my phone and that helped a lot. And then I learned, like, what assignments I needed to do like right then and then what I could do later. And then, this is kind of funny, but even made this little calendar, and I would write when stuff was due on there.
Self-reliance	Participants needing to learn online programs, find resources to learn content, and rely on themselves to solve problems.	I never used Canvas a lot, but then I figured it out and I learned to Google stuff and there were some good videos on YouTube that helped, and then I would call friends and that was kind of fun because we would figure stuff out together. I think I read more when I was working online than I would have read if I was in school because you had to like read about how to figure out something and then do the work on your own.

Benefits of Online Learning

When asked of each participant to share something they liked about online learning. Leo, Angel, and Alexis could not find any benefits, and Alexis even shared that her time in online learning "was the worst year and I got really depressed." However, the other three participants did find some benefits to online learning. Abraham and Bryan shared that they liked the extra time they got to spend with their families, and that it was nice to sleep more and stay in pajamas all day. Jackie reflected that she enjoyed the opportunities to pace herself, "I think the only positive thing was that I got my own time to work on things. So yes, there was a time limit, but there were days where I wasn't feeling rushed so I could take my time and make sure it was right before submitting it. But I think that is the only positive thing. Everything else was bad."

Returning to Regular School

I am including the stories the participants shared describing their experiences when they were finally able to return to regular in-person school because their enthusiasm highlights the difficulties they had to overcome to finally get to return to normalcy. By describing their return, they also described several activities and social events that they missed out on while learning online. When Jackie returned, she found that she had missed out on some extracurricular opportunities:

> During the first semester it was basketball tryouts, like at the end of the first semester. And since I couldn't go to school, they cut me from the team. And then when I came back in person I just, you know, I was just in athletics, but I wasn't like doing basketball or anything like that. So, I would just go, we would run. But I did do track at school, but then I hurt my knee. I think it was that whole

> resting time that I didn't do anything. So, then I hurt my knee and we like got it checked and everything and I had to take a year off, and I wasn't able to join any of the clubs or like do sports and it was horrible.

When Alexis went back to school, she felt like she was playing catch-up, academically and socially. She shared:

> When I came back to school, I felt so weird, and like, I had to catch up with everyone else, like I felt like they learned a lot more than me, and I didn't feel as smart. And I still had my friends, but there were new people in the group that I didn't know, so that was kind of weird, but everything is fine now. I was lucky that we were all starting new at the high school because I think it would have been hard if I was the only one starting something new, but like, high school was new for everyone.

Leo, who did not describe himself as someone who enjoyed school before the pandemic, was shocked to discover that he missed in-person school:

> I never thought I would be begging to go to school (he laughs). But I did, I begged my mom to let me go. My dad was fine with it, but my mom was so worried. So, I had to wear a mask, but at least I was happy to not have to log on to those stupid Zooms, man. But the funny thing was that I was so happy to be back that my grades got better. I guess I didn't see how good I had it, you know, like I didn't like school, but like, not going to school and doing the online thing was worse than going to school. And I was so happy to just be able to see my friends again. Some of them teased me for like being scared and being online, but they were just kidding, and it was nice to be back.

Similar to Leo, Angel, who always said he did not enjoy school, was elated to be back, "I was so excited even though my mom was not happy, but I didn't care. I was ready to see my friends and stuff. I was happy to go back to school."

Bryan and Abraham were just happy to finally be out of their house. They discussed how they enjoyed the extra time with their parents, but they were ready to interact with other people out in the world and at school. Abraham described his excitement when his parents finally let them get back to normal.

> Me and my brother were always like, we like going to school. We missed going in person. But my parents kept saying no, but then they brought it up when the vaccines started coming out and things weren't so scary, and they were like, okay, you're going back to school the last nine weeks. And then my mom saw that our grades were dropping, so then they did let us go back to school and then we were like, we were happy. Yeah, we were sick of being in the same place for so long.
>
> Bryan: It was really stressful, and I felt so nervous because like I had been stuck at my house and on the computer for so long. I was so nervous and scared, and I'm not like that at all. But like you see everyone that wasn't online, you see them all in person again and you're like, oh my God, I forgot what you looked like! So, then I saw them and I saw all my friends and I was really happy. It was really exciting. And in class, I was so happy to see the teachers and talk to them and like raise my hand.

Personal Reflection

I have included my personal reflection as a researcher in keeping with the confessional tale style. This allows me to better explain my thinking as I create meaning from the participants experiences. As I reflected on each interview and made notes in my journal, my first thought was that I was surprised at how willing and excited the participants were to discuss their experiences. I assumed that students in that age range would be more apathetic or not want to talk about themselves as much. I was struck by how they seemed to want to unload what had happened, and it was evident that no one had ever asked them to share their thoughts and feelings on the experience. I believe they wanted to share because it was an experience that greatly affected their lives, and they recognized the significance and uniqueness of the phenomenon.

Based on the literature review and my own experience with online learning, I expected to hear about the isolation, stress, and anxiety. What surprised me was the theme of self-reliance, and that most of the participants were willing to figure things out on their own. I do not think they themselves realized the resilience and self-reliance that was required for them to be online learners, especially those who had to stay online for most of the year. However, that was a benefit and something that made them grow as individuals and learners. They had to develop and use critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and this is something that will hopefully carry on with them for the rest of their lives. When I shared the transcripts with the participants for member checking, I shared with them my insight about their self-reliance. When I said this, each participant had an “a-ha” moment. They had not realized this benefit of online learning, and I told

them that they should be proud of themselves for getting through it and figuring out so many concepts on their own. They seemed happy and proud of themselves as well.

Summary

In this chapter, I detailed the procedures, analysis, and results of six individual interviews to answer the research question: What were the online learning experiences of Latino public middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic? The six participants shared their stories, and three themes emerged based on their experience: (a) isolation, (b) stress, and (c) self-reliance. Chapter V provides a summary and discussion of the findings, as well as a comparison of the findings to the theoretical framework and review of the literature. Lastly, recommendations for further research and practice are discussed in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of Latino middle school students who were online learners during the COVID-19 shutdown. I chose this topic for three reasons. First, according to the research, the Latino population in the United States is increasing rapidly, and because of language barriers and other factors, Latino students are struggling to keep up with their peers of different ethnicities (Delgado & Stoll, 2015; Gándara & Aldana, 2014; Hughes et al., 2015; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Salazar et al., 2008). Education leaders are continuously looking for resources and strategies to support the growing Latino population.

Second, I am the principal of a majority Latino campus, and I have witnessed many successful Latino students in elementary school become unsuccessful when they move into middle school. The middle school population interests me because I want to know what makes the Latino students fall off course. I want to see what the major factors are that connect a student to the school.

Finally, as an educator and school leader, I am interested in what works and what does not in an online learning environment. Several factors cause schools to shut down, such as severe weather or emergencies. If we can determine a quality online learning environment, then as long as we have the infrastructure, learning does not have to stop just because the kids are not physically in school. We have the capabilities for online learning, but we need to know what strategies will work with the students, especially

English Learners or students with similar backgrounds that require more support than "regular" student. Therefore, my study was designed to hear from this specific population and to learn directly from those students to answer my questions.

Context

This study collected the experiences of six Latino middle school students who were online learners during the spring of 2020 and for a portion of the 2020-2021 school year. The students shared similar educational and social backgrounds, and they attended the same middle school in a suburban southeast Texas school district. The purpose was to give the students an opportunity to share their specific experiences of online learning. During my research about students learning online during the pandemic, I did not find any studies that were directly from the students' experiences. A few news articles had students discuss what their day was like online learning during the pandemic, but no studies existed about the lived experiences of online learners in any grade and from any ethnicity. As stated in my literature review, Latino middle school students have unique needs, so I based my study on that population.

The COVID-19 school shutdown was a historic event, and I believe the educational ramifications could last for decades. However, countless situations cause schools to shut down. Natural disasters such as hurricanes, snowstorms, and floods can keep kids away from schools. India has made worldwide news because it has closed schools due to hazardous air pollution (Mehta, 2022). In the fall of 2022, the University of Idaho offered remote learning in response to the horrific murder of four students (Green, 2022). As of this writing, the United States is facing a severe nationwide teacher

shortage, and the only choice for some school districts has been to fill vacancies with virtual teachers (Klein, 2022).

Online learning programs have also increased in popularity over the last decade (Koksal, 2020). In my state, the Texas Education Agency offers the Texas Virtual Schools Network Online Schools Program, which provides free, full-time, online instruction to students in Grades 3-12 (Texas Education Agency, 2023). Just as researchers have studied best practices in the traditional educational setting for the past decade, we must now shift our research into best practices for the online educational setting. In addition, decades of research have been dedicated to finding answers on how to reach our most vulnerable students, and that is why I chose to interview Latino students. These students are considered at-risk because of their language needs or socio-economic status.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, I will summarize my findings according to my research question: What were the online learning experiences of Latino public middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic? I asked the students questions in adolescent-friendly language and took notes on their demeanor during the interview when I asked certain questions.

The major themes discovered through my research were isolation, stress, and self-reliance. The isolation for the students was unique because they were forced into quarantine by the events of the world. Their parents chose to keep them away from school out of fear of COVID-19, so they were also prevented from doing anything normal, like going to the store, to the movies, or even to visit family and friends. The

isolation brought on by the pandemic was a unique situation. In a normal situation of online learning, the students would not be isolated from social events or friends, but we should pay attention to the isolation they felt from school. Half of the students made comments about how they were not as motivated to learn because of (a) the isolation from school staff, (b) not having a relationship with the teacher, and (c) the teacher not being accessible to them. They also missed opportunities to enjoy events at school like sports, clubs, and dances. I learned that although students are learning online, they still needed a network of support and activities to make them feel connected to school; otherwise, they lost the motivation to want to learn.

Lacking social activities also caused a downturn in the participants' mental health. I think that because of their age, they could not put into words how they were feeling, but I saw pain flash on some of their faces as they described their mindsets at the time. Alexis was able to share that she felt depressed. Jackie described herself as getting uncharacteristically angry, and a few of the male participants shared that they often felt weird, mad, or annoyed. I asked them how they felt returning to school because their enthusiasm upon returning reflected how miserable they were with at-home learning. However, I found that getting back to school did not magically solve their problems. Some were behind academically or missed out on being on a team or in an organization.

Finally, the last major theme that was a surprise to both the participants and me was self-reliance. These students had to figure out so many things on their own or find someone who could help them. Leo and Angel stuck out because they had the least amount of support at home because of a language barrier and their parents' lack of knowledge. Despite those detriments, they still tried calling friends and emailing

teachers for help. I asked Leo if he had asked a teacher for help in person, and he said not very often, so the fact that he reached out for help was a big step for him. All of the students discussed using Google and YouTube to find answers, and also setting timers for themselves to stay organized with their schedules. When learning in school, you have dozens of school staff to guide you and make sure you are staying where you are supposed to be, and you have a bell schedule to keep you on track. At home, the participants had to be organized and have urgency on their own without an adult giving them reminders of deadlines.

Discussion of Findings as Related to the Review of Literature

The review of the literature contained in Chapter II lacked strategies for specifically supporting English Learners in an online learning environment. In addition, it lacked longitudinal data on students who spent a majority of time in an online learning environment and how that affected their education and lives beyond high school. Finally, because the COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented global event, the literature about the effects of the shutdown on students and schools is currently being developed. However, numerous studies have been conducted to determine how to best support English Learners in a traditional learning environment, and much of that work can be translated into the online learning environment.

Social Capital

Based on the literature, we know that a strong amount of social capital in an educational setting yields education benefits (Goldsmith, 2004). With this knowledge, school leaders and teachers can take steps in online learning to support students. Instead of simply delivering the instruction, teachers, counselors, or other school staff must

deliberately work to cultivate the relationships with the online learners. They must spend time with them outside of discussing instruction, and this can be done in an online environment. In addition, Latino students feel a greater sense of school belonging when they have a strong network of friends, which can result in higher academic achievement (Delgado et al., 2015). The friendships were particularly important for students in marginalized groups, such as at-risk Latino learners. In an online environment, social activities can be facilitated to allow students get face time with their peers outside of an instructional environment. This will also increase the students' self-perception and belonging. When students feel more positive about themselves and their social situation in how they relate to their peers, they had more academic success and felt more positive about school (Santos & Collins, 2016). Some participants in the study took it upon themselves to contact friends, either for help with work or to socialize. If the schools could tap into that socialization, then the kids would have a better association with the school.

Behavioral Health Impact

From April 2020 to October 2020, the proportion of mental health-related visits for children aged 5 to 11 and 12 to 17 years increased by approximately 25% and 31%, respectively, compared to data from the same period in 2019 (Leeb et al., 2020). Although the participants in this study did not experience mental health issues so severe that they had to visit a medical office, they all suffered from some type of mental distress that manifested through anxiety, depression, and anger. Medical professionals recognized the need for socialization and normalcy for the students. In 2020, the American Academy of Pediatrics made the controversial decision to announce that

students needed to return to in-person learning for healthy development and well-being (Jenco, 2020.)

In addition, special populations, such as those with special needs, economically-disadvantaged students, and English Learners have the potential to suffer more from mental strain because they usually receive more supports, interventions, and attention from the teachers (Richards, 2020.) In an online environment, it is more difficult to receive the extra interventions and attention, but it is not impossible. In this study, Leo and Angel, who are economically disadvantaged English Learners who have extra learning needs, suffered the most because of the lack of support they received. They were angry and depressed, and then they felt the complete opposite when they were able to go back to school. As in interviewed them, I could see their mood shift when they discussed the difficulties of online learning, and I hope that any trauma or learning gaps they experienced do not affect them in the future.

Teaching English Learners

A wealth of literature has been written about best practices for teaching English Learners. In Chapter II, I listed the top ten research-based strategies for teaching English Learners (Irby et al., 2018). Out of those ten, only two of them would be particularly challenging in an online learning environment, which is collaborative learning strategies. From my own experience, principals in my district found that putting kids in Zoom chat rooms was not the most productive use of time. The other strategy that would not work with online learning is the manipulation strategy, which allows students to physically touch items. However, the other strategies such as communicating the purpose of the lesson, have the students talk and participate, connecting the lesson to prior knowledge,

and giving them direct instruction can all be completed in an online environment. The participants only seemed to receive direct instruction, and not any of the other strategies that are geared toward English Learners, and this could be a major reason as to why they did not like online learning as much as in-person learning.

Discussion of Findings as Related to the Conceptual Frameworks

The major conceptual frameworks in this study were the theory of social capital (Coleman, 1988), and the theory of school membership (Goodenow, 1993). The theory of social capital pertains to the amounts of support the participants receive within their ecological system, which includes their relationships with school staff, parents, and the overall school system. (Garcia-Reid et al., 2015; Goodenow, 1993; Hagborg, 1998). Those relationships refer to the people the students can rely on and trust. Within the school system, these people are usually teachers, coaches, counselors, and administrators.

Coleman (1998) divided the social capital theory into three aspects, which are trustworthiness, information flow, and norms and sanctions. As stated above, trustworthiness describes who students can depend on and who will advocate for them. In this study, the students experienced a break in the trust they had with the school system. Instead of school staff being people they could rely on, all of them described their teachers mostly being present to deliver information. The relationship to build that trust was severed in the online environment. In addition, the students were not involved in extracurricular activities. Several studies point to extracurricular activities such as sports, band, and clubs as critical when it comes to students feeling connected to the school and feeling like members of the school community (Camacho & Fuligni, 2015; Kitchens & Gormley, 2018; Mahoney, 2000). Much of that connectedness comes with

the trusting relationship the student has with a coach, activity sponsor, or counselor. In the online learning environment, these relationships were severed, which caused the trustworthiness aspect of social capital to also be cut off. Without these relationships, the students did not feel like members of the school community. In addition, during quarantine, most of the participants has strained relationships with their parents because of the proximity, and a few of them described their parents getting upset with them when they were not performing adequately online. Angel recalled how his parents were mad at him for not doing his work, and at the same time, he also felt that he did not have an adult at school he could rely on for help. Trustworthiness was nonexistent in his world, and that led him to be unsuccessful with online learning.

The second aspect of Coleman's social capital theory is information flow, which is how the students get reliable information and who gives it to them, which is usually teachers and counselors at school. With online learning, the parents played a significant role with information flow because they were the only adults present in the participants' lives during the pandemic. Although the students received information from the teachers during Zoom meetings and in their online learning management system, the key term in this aspect is reliable information. Most of the students felt that the information communicated by their teachers was not adequate to be a successful learner. They expressed frustration with how the information was communicated to them. Each student described situations where they would show up for class and only see the teacher for a few minutes while she went over the assignments in Canvas. They repeatedly felt that instead of teaching the content, the teachers were directing them to resources and videos where they could learn the content on their own. Jackie shared the story of being in a

Zoom class and watching the teacher as she also taught students in person, so the teacher's attention was mostly directed toward the kids physically in the classroom. In addition, they had no other person from the school who could give them information. Their only connection to the school was the teacher, no counselors, coaches, or other advisors. The lack of reliable information flow created frustration in the students, and some even felt animosity toward the teachers and the school system. This frustration was exacerbated for the students who also could not get reliable information from their parents due to language or educational barriers.

The final aspect in Coleman's theory of social capital is norms and sanctions. Norms and sanctions describe the rules and expectations of the community in which the student lives and operates. This aspect is about what behaviors and activities are normal in a community, as well as what the community values. During the pandemic, all norms and sanctions within our communities disappeared. Almost every community in the world drastically changed their normal way of operating. Having to quarantine and isolate caused the norms and sanctions in the participants' communities to disappear. They were literally forced into an environment that was unlike anything they had ever experienced, and a real fear of getting sick and dying was also now part of their community. Despite this dramatic change, each participant was fortunate enough to have their immediate family for support, which was the only thing in their lives that stayed the same during the pandemic. However, even that wore on them because they were trapped in their homes with the same people for months.

The participants in this study were bankrupt of social capital. Their lifelines connecting them to school and making them feel like members of the school community

were gone. Even though the pandemic was still going strong, every participant went back to in-person school before the 2020-2021 school year ended because they could not tolerate that life and educational style any longer. The students with the least amount of social capital in the home went back first, but even those with a strong ecological framework were not far behind them. We can all learn valuable lessons for the future of online learning from what these students experienced.

Implications for School and District Leaders

Just as teachers need an abundance of training to be successful in the traditional school setting, teachers also need training to be an online teacher. In the spring of 2020, when schools were abruptly closed, there was simply no time for training. Understanding that thorough training was not possible, my own district only required teachers to do weekly check-ins with students, while the district curriculum office pushed out basic assignments to cut down on learning loss. However, in the fall of 2020 as schools reopened, one teacher from each grade level was designated as the online teacher.

Looking back now, these teachers only received training on the technical requirements, such as how to work within a learning management system (LMS) like Canvas, how to become a Zoom expert, and how to adapt assignments that could be uploaded into the LMS. The teachers were not trained on how to emotionally connect to online learners or taught what to do if a student was not keeping up with the curriculum. In addition, they were not taught how to look for signs of distress through a computer lens, or ways to reach out to kids who were not physically with them. The participants in this study never received a phone call from school staff to check in on how they were

doing. Their only exposure to school staff was the teachers giving them information and then the teachers calling their parents if they were not completing assignments.

School and district leaders could have enacted a type of emergency response, having counselors and other mentors checking in with the kids. Instead of calling their parents and, as Angel saw it, “getting him in trouble,” someone from the school could have called and talked to him to see what was going on in his life and why he was struggling. The children needed guidance, far beyond a Zoom meeting with a teacher giving them assignments. School and district leaders, me included, put a lot of that work on the parents to do. We assumed that the parents could help them learn and keep them on track. I know that in my school and district, online learner needs took a back seat to the students who were in person.

I had so much pressure running the in-person school and trying to support the teachers that I did not think much about the online learners. I do remember thinking that if the parents chose to keep them online then it was the parents’ responsibility to supplement where we did not have the time and resources to do so. As the year progressed, and most students came back in person, I recalled almost resenting the parents of the students who remained online. I remember thinking how hard that year was for all of us, especially the teachers, and that I did not have time to worry about the online kids. If they wanted a real education, they could simply come back to school. I did not have time for, as Jackie put it, “those weird online kids.”

Now that I have completed this study and looked at the situation through the eyes of the students, I am ashamed for thinking that their education was less important and required less of my time than their in-person peers. By sitting down to really listen to

each of their stories, I know that their issues and needs were as real as anyone else's. I have learned that they were probably suffering more than the kids who were at school in person dealing with masks and distancing. In addition, the fear that their families felt was real, and many of them had friends and relatives who died from the virus. That fear grouped with the isolation and stress was overwhelming for the participants.

School and district leaders can take the following steps to ensure that online learners receive the same quality education and care as in-person learners:

1. Provide teachers with adequate training on how to work the technological aspects of online learning as well pedagogical skills for teaching online learners. More resources are being developed for teaching online, such as the book *Connecting with Students Online* (2020) by Jennifer Serravallo, who is a leading expert in literacy in the United States. The book covers topics including relationships, engagement, and direct instruction in the online environment.
2. If possible, schedule teachers to only teach in one environment at a time and not require them to teach online learners and in-person learners at the same time. According to the study participants, being on a Zoom meeting at the same time as in-person students was especially embarrassing.
3. Just as in-person classes have a morning meeting or advisory period, school leaders can schedule and designate a time where the teachers or other school personnel check in with the students. Morning meetings can establish a climate of trust, make students feel significant, encourage

collaboration, and support social, emotional, and academic learning (Dabbs, 2013).

4. Leaders can provide teachers a time to conference with parents as they normally would, establishing a strong relationship with them in order to support the child at home.
5. To support extracurricular activities, school leaders can set up social visits and outings, similar to how homeschool networks collaborate. Certain activity days can be offered throughout the year as an option for online learners.
6. Provide training and support for parents to help their kids at home. Provide training on the learning management system and have a website of curriculum resources that describe the essential learning standards for each unit of study so parents know what their kids are supposed to be learning.

As a school leader, my biggest takeaway has been that online learning needs are just as important as in-person learning needs. Teachers need training on curriculum and instructional delivery in the online setting, but they also need training on mental health and the social emotional needs of online learners. This is especially important because the impact of isolation and loneliness can be so dangerous. In addition, training is needed for ways to support more vulnerable populations, like at-risk English Learners. Every child is equally important, regardless of how they receive instruction.

Implications for Online Teachers

All the participants reported that they needed more face time with their teacher. Because of the unique situation of the pandemic, the participants' school was not staffed appropriately to have extra teachers to serve in-person and online learners separately, so many teachers taught both types of students at once. Jackie shared that she was so embarrassed when she saw that some of her classes also had in-person students. She was on the Zoom meeting with about 15 other virtual students watching the teacher from a laptop while the teacher instructed the rest of the class, and she felt bad that the teacher had to teach both groups of students at the same time. I repeatedly heard from the participants that they wanted to know their teachers and wanted the teachers to know them. To create stronger connections with students, teachers could try the following strategies:

1. As stated above, enact a short morning meeting sessions to get students focused and ready for the day. A challenge will be to have the students participate, but video clips, games, and fun chat activities can be used to get the kids motivated.
2. Contact parents for positive reports to build a trusting relationship at the beginning of the year. Also, show parents ways they can support learning at home and help learn how to navigate the learning management system.
3. Have dedicated office hours where an online session is always open at a certain time so students know they can log in and get help each day.
4. Use surveys and other means to find out more about their students, their interests, what their learning environment is at home, and any other

information to form a strong and trusting bond. Aponte (2020) discussed how trauma can affect children's and adolescents' brains, and that they need to develop strong and stable relationships to cope with that trauma. The better the teacher knows the students and their habits, the better they can see signs of distress in the child.

Implications for Parents of Online Learners

Strong parent involvement was evident with all six of my participants. Since online learning is most likely not the way the parents were taught, they will need training on how the systems work. As stated above, it is the responsibility of the district and campus leaders to engage with parents and provide the training.

In addition, the district and campus leaders must also thoroughly educate parents on the pros and cons of the online learning environment.

All six of the students shared that they felt they learned much less online than they did in person, and I wonder if the parents would still keep their kids out of school knowing that their learning could slow.

The parents must also be accessible to the teachers and vigilant in watching what their kids are doing. Angel shared that after a teacher contacted his mom about his lack of progress, his mom made him attend his virtual classes in the kitchen so that she could watch him. Regardless of a language barrier, Angel's mom was determined to help with his success. Parents must know that online learning is more than just putting the kids on the computer, and that the parents must always be present.

Finally, before having their kids become online learners, even without the fear of the virus, parents must always be aware of the social and emotional risks associated with

isolation. The school counselor can play a major role in educating parents about the risks of loneliness and about the signs of anxiety and depression. School leaders can organize meetings throughout the year, in person or online, to educate parents about the curriculum and also about the social emotional needs of their kids. In a normal situation, a student would not be quarantined, but there could still be risks associated with spending time away from peers and a variety of social interactions that happen at school (Richards, 2020). With the online learning environment, loneliness is a serious risk, and feeling disconnected from social groups and other communities can have serious affects, especially for a young person (Walsh, 2021).

Finally, just as the teachers can have an open Zoom for office hours, the counselor can provide a similar time where parents know he or she is available to answer any questions. Websites with academic and social emotional resources can be created for the parents. Depending on the number of students, parent cohorts can also be created by the school leaders so the parents can rely on each other for support.

Implications for Policymakers

Policymakers could benefit from studies like this where the students have an opportunity to speak for themselves. Relying on quantitative data and the opinion of the experts is always needed, but the voices of those who will be most impacted must be heard. When I began to prepare for my interviews, I was nervous about how articulate the students would be. However, I was immediately impressed by how outspoken and eager they were to share their stories. It became clear that the students we study do not often get to tell their own stories. From the vast amount of research I read for this study,

I saw mostly quantitative data like statistics, scores, and overarching deductions. The student voices were missing.

The following are recommendations for policymakers to consider as online learning becomes more prevalent in our education system:

1. In each state, provide a network of online teachers that districts can utilize to specifically serve online learners. This would alleviate the local school districts from having to find and pay teachers. One online teacher could serve a classroom of students who live anywhere in the state at the same time.
2. Allocate funds to serve the social emotional needs of the students. This would allow district to hire more school counselors or contract with social services. As seen with the participants in this study and the research, social emotional needs have drastically increased, and schools need help serving their kids.
3. Similar to the network of online teachers, create a network of online counselors and other social workers that can counsel with parents and students virtually.
4. Just as the Texas Education Agency has a website dedicated to Parent Resources, policymakers can also create a website of resources for online learning.

Implications for Mental Health Practitioners

For this study, I am classifying school counselors, school psychologists, and any other social workers who work with students as mental health practitioners. My six participants fared well compared to students from articles I have read where some students suffered from severe depression and required hospital visits (Calderon, 2020).

However, they all showed signs of some type of mental stress, from feeling angry, sad, and as they described, weird. A lot of research has been done in the past few years about adolescent mental health in general and mental health related to the pandemic (Aponte, 2020; Asmundson, 2020; Calderon, 2020; Leeb et al., 2020). Abraham shared that he started getting down because he did the same thing every day, and he eventually did not get out of bed for his classes. After returning to in-person school, Leo contracted COVID-19 and had to go back to online classes, and when he heard the news, he described it as his “worst nightmare.”

Based on what I learned from the students, they needed a break from the same routine they were stuck in and the same people they were with every day. As stated in the school leaders section above, school leaders can create meetings and other opportunities for mental health practitioners could educate parents of online learners and the learners themselves on signs of mental and emotional stress. For example, Jackie still feels guilty about getting angry at her little sisters and yelling at her family. If her parents had known this behavior was more than teenage angst, they could have intervened. Mental health practitioners can also help parents find ways to counteract the loneliness and isolation that online learners can experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this phenomenological study, the six participants had no choice but to enroll in online learning. They were either made to be online learners by their parents or they made the decision with their parents out of fear of catching the coronavirus. Either way, online learning was the only option for them in 2020 to 2021. Also, a unique situation with online learning was presented because much of the world was in quarantine or

taking extra precautions out of fear of the virus. Taking these unique situations into account, the suggested studies are as follows:

1. A study focused on the same population, at-risk middle school Latino students who are enrolled in online learning, but free from the fear of COVID-19. The students are in online school, but they live normal social lives that we take for granted, like going to the store, going to restaurants, and spending time with friends and family. I am interested to see how the themes of isolation, stress, and self-reliance would factor in when the students are not quarantined in addition to learning online.
2. The participants spoke extensively about the lack of support from teachers, so a possible study would be to collect the lived experiences of the teachers who had to teach online during the pandemic. Like the students, the teachers did not choose or prepare to be in an online learning environment, and as online learning becomes more popular, we need to learn what the teachers require to be successful in an online learning environment.
3. A longitudinal study that tracks experiences and quantitative data for students who were online learners during their formative middle school years and how that experience affects them for years to come. I would like to see my specific population followed since they already have a disadvantage of being labeled as at-risk versus students who have a more robust support system. According to the Education Week article about virtual teachers filling vacancies, the higher-risk schools have the biggest shortages, so we need to track the students from those environments.

4. As more students shift to online learning, I wonder about the social and emotional effects of those learners. The high school experience is a rite of passage in our culture, and it is where adolescents learn social norms, build meaningful relationships, and learn how to problem-solve and interact with others. If a growing number of students are passing in these experiences, what will that look like when they join the workforce out in the real world?

Conclusion

This study gave middle school students an opportunity to share their experiences in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were students of similar background, labeled by the state as at-risk English Learners. The participants of this study seemed relieved and excited to share their stories with me, and it felt as though they were having a sort of release. They were able to reflect on what they had experienced and see the importance of that moment in our history. Through our dialogue, they also realized that they had shown perseverance and self-reliance in working through the challenges of online learning.

Online learning is growing more popular each year, and with events like inclement weather, emergencies, and teacher shortages, online learning for the general population of students is here to stay. School leaders and policymakers have seen that learning does not have to stop just because the physical school is closed. By learning from the students themselves and the needs they have, we can be better prepared to educate them in an online setting.

Three major themes emerged from the six participants in this study. The theme of isolation, which included isolation from school staff, from friends, and from the outside

world. The second theme of stress included stress from the school workload, stress from being in quarantine with only their family members with whom to interact, and the anxiety from the pandemic and any other factors in the participant's life. Finally, the theme of self-reliance emerged as the participants had to adapt to their new way of learning. They were required to manage their own time and problem solve more than they would have with the traditional in-person environment.

REFERENCES

Adams, C. (2020). Coronavirus ‘confusion’: Teachers had little training for how to do online classes. *USA Today*. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/04/17/coronavirus-teachers-online-class-school-closures/2972529001/

Aponte, E. M. (2020). Trauma-informed strategies to support complexly traumatized adolescents in schools in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Theory in Action, 13*(3), 124-139. https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.2040

Asmundson, J. G. (2020). *COVID stress syndrome: 5 ways the pandemic is affecting mental health.* The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/covid-stress-syndrome-5-ways-the-pandemic-is-affecting-mental-health-147413

Aud, S., Hussar, W., Planty, M., Snyder, T., Bianco, K., Fox, M. A., ... & Drake, L. (2010). The condition of education 2010. NCES 2010-028. *National Center for Education Statistics.*

Auxier, B. & Anderson, M., (2020). As schools close due to the coronavirus, some U.S. students face a digital ‘homework gap.’ *Pew Research Center*, *16*, 1-8. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/16/as-schools-close-due-to-the-coronavirus-some-u-s-students-face-a-digital-homework-gap/

Barber, B. L., Stone, M. R., Hunt, J. E., & Eccles, J. S. (2005). Benefits of activity participation: The roles of identity affirmation and peer group norm sharing. In *Organized activities as contexts of development* (pp. 197-222). Psychology Press.

Barshay, J. (2020). *Why the preteen years are a critical period for brain development.* The Hechinger Report. https://hechingerreport.org/why-the-preteen-years-are-a-critical-period-for-brain-development/

Blad, E. (2021). The pandemic brought universal free school meals. Will they stay? *Education Week, 40*(35), 13. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-pandemic-brought-universal-free-school-meals-will-they-stay/2021/06

Blakemore, S.J. (2012). Development of the social brain in adolescence. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, 105*(3): 111-116. https://doi.org/10.1258/jrsm.2011.110221

Bigman, M., & Mitchell, J. C. (2020, September). *Teaching online in 2020: Experiments, empathy, discovery* [Conference paper, 156-161]. 2020 IEEE Learning with MOOCS (LWMOOCS), Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala. https://doi.org/10.1109/LWMOOCS50143.2020.9234318

Booth, M. Z., & Gerard, J. M. (2011). Self-esteem and academic achievement: A comparative study of adolescent students in England and the United States. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 41*(5), 629-648. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2011.566688

Borg, S., Combs, J. P., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Bustamante, R. M. (2011). Hispanic student access to Advanced Placement courses. *Enrollment Management Journal, 5(3)*, 12-37.

Borman, G. D., Rozek, C. S., Pyne, J., & Hanselman, P. (2019). Reappraising academic and social adversity improves middle school students' academic achievement,

behavior, and well-being. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116*(33), 16286-16291. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1820317116

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.

Brown, R., & Evans, W. P. (2002). Extracurricular activity and ethnicity: Creating greater school connection among diverse student populations. *Urban Education, 37*(1), 41-58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085902371004

Calderon, V.J. (2020). U.S. parents say COVID-19 harming child's mental health. *Gallup*. https://news.gallup.com/poll/312605/parents-say-covid-harming-child-mental-health.aspx

Camacho, D. E., & Fuligni, A. J. (2015). Extracurricular participation among adolescents from immigrant families. *Journal of youth and adolescence, 44*, 1251-1262.

Castro-Schilo, L., Ferrer, E., Hernández, M. M., & Conger, R. D. (2016). Developmental outcomes of school attachment among students of Mexican origin. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 26*(4), 753-768.

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology, 94,* 95-120.

Crean, H. F. (2004). Social support, conflict, major life stressors, and adaptive coping strategies in Latino middle school students: An integrative model. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 19*(6), 657–676. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558403260018

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Dabbs, L. (2013*). The power of the morning meeting: 5 steps toward changing your classroom and school*. Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/blog/morning-meeting-changing-classroom-culture-lisa-dabbs

Dahl, R. E., Allen, N. B., Wilbrecht, L., & Suleiman, A. B. (2018). Importance of investing in adolescence from a developmental science perspective. *Nature, 554*(7693), 441-450. https://doi.org/10.1038/nature25770

Davis, L. P., & Museus, S. D. (2019). *Identifying and disrupting deficit thinking*. National Center for Institutional Diversity. https://medium.com/national-center-for-institutional-diversity/identifying-and-disrupting-deficit-thinking-cbc6da326995

Decker, S., Peele, H., & Riser-Kositsky, M. (2020). The coronavirus spring: The historic closing of U.S. schools (a timeline). *Education Week.* https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-coronavirus-spring-the-historic-closing-of-u-s-schools-a-timeline/2020/07

Delgado v Bastrop Independent School District. (1948).

Delgado, E. A., & Stoll, L. C. (2015). Beyond the Black-White test score gap: Latinos' early school experiences and literacy outcomes. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 14*(4), 261-274. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2014.1000540

Delgado, M. Y., Ettekal, A. V., Simpkins, S. D., & Schaefer, D. R. (2016). How do my friends matter? Examining Latino adolescents' friendships, school belonging, and academic achievement. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 45,* 1110-1125. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0341-x

Dotterer, A. M., & Day, E. (2019). Parental knowledge discrepancies: Examining the roles of warmth and self-disclosure. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 48*, 459–468. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0926-2

Dotterer, A. M., & Lowe, K. (2015). Perceived discrimination, parenting, and academic adjustment among racial/ethnic minority adolescents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 41*, 71–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2015.08.003

Dotterer, A. M., McHale, S. M., & Crouter, A. C. (2009). The development and correlates of academic interests from childhood through adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 101,* 509–519. https://doi.org/10.1037/ a0013987

Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student council, volunteering, basketball, or marching band: What kind of extracurricular involvement matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research 14* (1), 10–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558499141003

Eller, D. (2013). Poll finds students less engaged over time. *USA Today* https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/01/07/poll-students-less-engaged-over-time/1566102/

Espinoza, J. A. (2012). *School sponsored activities, sense of belongingness, and performance factors among Hispanic students*. (Publication No. 3520988) [Doctoral dissertation, Sam Houston State University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

FitzGerald, A. M., White, G., & Quiñones, S. (2019). Estar pendiente: Exploring the school engagement of involved Latino fathers. *Journal of School Leadership, 29*(4), 274-294. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052684619845701

Fitzpatrick, K. M., Harris, C., Drawve, G. (2020). Fear of COVID-19 and the mental health consequences in America. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 12*(1) 17-21. https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000924

Gándara, P. C., & Aldana, U. S. (2014). Who's segregated now? Latinos, language, and the future of integrated schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 50*(5), 735-748. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X14549957

Gao, N., Hill, L., & Lafortune, J. (2021). Are students spending enough time on school during the pandemic? *Public Policy Institute of California*. https://www.ppic.org/blog/are-students-spending-enough-time-on-school-during-the-pandemic/

Garcia, C., & Chun, H. (2016). Culturally responsive teaching and teacher expectations for Latino middle school students. *Journal of Latina/o Psychology, 4*(3), 173-187. https://doi.org/10.1037/lat0000061

Garcia-Reid, P., Peterson, C. H., & Reid, R. J. (2015). Parent and teacher support among Latino immigrant youth: Effects of school engagement and school trouble avoidance. *Education and Urban Society, 47*(3), 328-343. https://doi.org/10/1177/0013124513495278

Garza-Reyna, G. L. (2017). The academic preparedness of Latino students in dual language and transitional bilingual education programs. *Journal of Latinos in Education, 18*(4), 340-348. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1394858

Genesee, F., Lindholm-Leary, K., Saunders, W., & Christian, D. (2005). English language learners in U.S. schools: An overview of research findings. *Journal of*

Education for Students Placed at Risk, 10(4), 363–385. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1004_2

Ghebreyesus, T. A. (2020). *WHO director-general's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19.* World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020

Goldsmith, P. A. (2004). Schools' racial mix, students' optimism, and the Black-White and Latino-White achievement gaps. *Sociology of Education, 77*(2), 121-147. https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070407700202

Gonzalez, L. M., Borders, L. D., Hines, E. M., Villalba, J. A., & Henderson, A. (2013). Parental involvement in children's education: Considerations for school counselors working with Latino immigrant families. *Professional School Counseling, 16*(3), 185-193. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X1701600303

Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools, 30*(1), 79-90. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X

Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education, 62*(1), 60–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1993.9943831

Gordon, M. S. (2017). Community disadvantage and academic achievement among Hispanic adolescents: The role of familism. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 26*, 3303-3311. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0845-y

Green, S. (2022, November 22). *We will remain flexible through the end of the semester* [Presidential Memo]. University of Idaho. https://www.uidaho.edu/communications

Hagborg, W. J. (1998). An investigation of a brief measure of school membership. *Adolescence, 33*(130), 461–468.

Halwani, N., (2017). Visual aids and multimedia in second language acquisition. *English Language Teacher, 10*(6), 53-59. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n6p53

Harris, D. N., & Larsen, M. F. (2019). *The identification of schooling preferences: Methods and evidence from post-Katrina New Orleans*. Education Research Alliance for New Orleans. https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/Harris-Larsen-How-Parents-Choose-2019-07-05.pdf

Hayes, D., Blake, J. J., Darensbourg, A., & Castillo, L. G. (2015). Examining the academic achievement of Latino adolescents: The role of parent and peer beliefs and behaviors. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 35*(2), 141–161. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431614530806

Hill, N., Witherspoon, D.P, & Bartz, D. (2016). Parental involvement in education during middle school: Perspectives of ethnically diverse parents, teachers, and students. *The Journal of Educational Research, 111*(1), 12-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2016.1190910

Hoffman, A. J., Agi, A. C., Rivas-Drake, D., & Jagers, R. J. (2019). Peer support development among Black American and Latinx adolescents: The role of ethnic–racial centrality. *Developmental Psychology, 55*(12), 2637–2648. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000829

Hughes, J. N., Im, M., Kwok, O. M., Cham, H., & West, S. G. (2015). Latino students' transition to middle school: Role of bilingual education and school ethnic context. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 25*(3), 443-458. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12142

Inhelder, B., & Piaget, J. (1999). *The growth of logical thinking from childhood to adolescence: An essay on the construction of formal operational structures* (Vol. 22). Psychology Press.

Isensee, L. (2020). *When Texas schools close, how do vulnerable kids get their school lunch?* Houston Public Media. https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/education/2020/03/16/363636/when-texas-schools-close-how-do-vulnerable-kids-get-their-school-lunch/

Jenco, J. (2020). *Study: COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated hardships for low-income, minority families*. American Academy of Pediatrics. https://publications.aap.org/aapnews/news/13838?autologincheck=redirected

Jeynes, W. H., (2017). A meta-analysis: The relationship between parental involvement and Latino student outcomes. *Education and Urban Society, 49*(1), 4-28. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124516630596

Kamenetz, A. (2020). *The biggest distance-learning experiment in history: Week one*. National Public Radio. https://www.npr.org/2020/03/26/821921575/the-biggest-distance-learning-experiment-in-history-week-one

Kerr, R. (2014). “Advanced classes? They’re only for White kids”: How one Kansas school is changing the face of honors and Advanced Placement courses. *Action in Teacher Education*, *36*(5-6), 480-489. https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2014.977748

Kitchens, K., & Gormley, W. (2018). The Hispanic extracurricular gap. *Social Science Quarterly, 99*(5), 1776-1790. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12543

Klein, A. (2021). ‘A year of tremendous growth.’ How the pandemic forced teachers to master technology. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/technology/a-year-of-tremendous-growth-how-the-pandemic-forced-teachers-to-master-technology/2021/04

Klein, A. (2022). Using virtual teachers to fill vacancies: Smart solution or big mistake? *Education Week.* https://www.edweek.org/leadership/using-virtual-teachers-to-fill-vacancies-smart-solution-or-big-mistake/2022/05

Knight, G. P., Gustavo, C., Mahrer, N. E., & Davis, A. N. (2016). The socialization of culturally related values and prosocial tendencies among Mexican-American adolescents. *Child Development, 87*(6), 1758-1771. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12634

Koksal, I. (2020). The rise of online learning. *Forbes.* https://www.forbes.com/sites/ilkerkoksal/2020/05/02/the-rise-of-online-learning/?sh=29b6e72b72f3

Kono, K. G., & Taylor, S. (2021). Using an ethos of care to bridge the digital divide: Exploring faculty narratives during a global pandemic. *Online Learning, 25*(1), 151-165. https://doi.org/10.24059/ olj.v25i1.2484

Kurtz, H. (2020). National survey tracks impact of coronavirus on schools: 10 key findings. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/national-survey-tracks-impact-of-coronavirus-on-schools-10-key-findings/2020/04

Krogstad, J. M. (2016). *Five facts about Latinos and education*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/28/5-facts-about-latinos-and-education/

Krogstad, J. M., Passel, J. S., & Noe-Bustamante, L. (2022). *Key facts about U.S. Latinos for national Hispanic heritage month.* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/23/key-facts-about-u-s-latinos-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/

Kuhn, D. (2009). Adolescent thinking. In Lerner, R. M, & Steinberg, L., *Handbook of adolescent psychology*: *Individual bases of adolescent development* (pp. 152–186). John Wiley & Sons Inc. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy001007

Ladson-Billings, G. (2007). Pushing past the achievement gap: An essay on the language of deficit. *The Journal of Negro Education, 76*(3), 316-323.

Laverty, S. M. (2003). Hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology: A comparison of historical and methodological considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(3), 21-35. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690300200303

Leeb, R. T., Bitsko, R. H., Radhakrishnan, L., Martinez, P., Njai, R., & Holland, K. M. (2020). Mental health–related emergency department visits among children aged <18 years during the COVID-19 pandemic-United States, January 1-October 17, 2020. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, 69*(45), 1675-1680. https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6945a3

Leon, A. (2020). *Mexican Americans*. Texas State Historical Association Handbook of Texas. https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/mexican-americans

Lerner, R. M., & Steinberg, L. (2009). The scientific study of adolescent development: Historical and contemporary perspectives. In Lerner, R. M, & Steinberg, L., *Handbook of adolescent psychology*: *Individual bases of adolescent development* (pp. 3–14). John Wiley & Sons Inc. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy001002

Li, J., Zhan, D., Zhou, Y., & Gao, X. (2021). Loneliness and problematic mobile phone use among adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic: The roles of escape motivation and self-control. *Science Direct, 118*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2021.106857

Litvinov, A. (2020). *Coronavirus brings 'Homework Gap' to the forefront*. National Education Association. https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/coronavirus-brings-homework-gap-forefront

Mahoney, J. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development*, *71*, 502–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00160

Mahoney, J., & Vest, A. (2012). The over-scheduling hypothesis revisited: Intensity of organized activity participation during adolescence and young adult outcomes. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 22*, 409–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00808.x

May, E. M., & Witherspoon, D. P. (2019). Maintaining and attaining educational expectations: A two-cohort longitudinal study of Hispanic youth. *Developmental Psychology, 55*(12), 2649-2664. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000820

McGill, R. K., Hughes, D., Alicea, S. & Way, N. (2012). Academic adjustment across middle school: The role of public regard in parenting. *Developmental Psychology, 48*(4), 1003-1018. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026006

Meier, A., Hartmann, B. S. & Larson, R. (2018). A quarter century of participation in school-based extracurricular activities: Inequalities by race, class, gender, and age? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *47*, 1299–1316. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0838-1

Mendez v. Westminster School District, 64 F. Supp. 544 (S.D. Cal. 1946)

Messonnier, N (2020). *Transcript for the CDC telebriefing update on COVID-19*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/t0225-cdc-telebriefing-covid-19.html

Mehta, T. (2022). New Delhi wrestles with ‘hazardous’ air pollution, primary schools shut. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-delhi-shuts-primary-schools-air-quality-deteriorates-2022-11-04/

Mora, L. (2022). *Hispanic enrollment reaches new high at four-year colleges in the U.S., but affordability remains an obstacle.* Pew Research Center.

https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/10/07/hispanic-enrollment-reaches-new-high-at-four-year-colleges-in-the-u-s-but-affordability-remains-an-obstacle/

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

National Center for Education Statistics (2022). *English Learners in public schools.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgf/english-learners

Niehaus, K., Irvin, M. J., & Rogelberg, S. (2016). School connectedness and valuing as predictors of high school completion and postsecondary attendance among Latino youth. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 44*, 54-67. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2016.02.003

Noe-Bustamante, L., Lopez, M. H., & Krogstad, J. M. (2020). *U.S. Hispanic population surpassed 60 million in 2019, but growth has slowed.* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/07/u-s-hispanic-population-surpassed-60-million-in-2019-but-growth-has-slowed/

Nordengren, C. (2021). *Climate change will drive major changes in student learning needs*. EdSource. https://edsource.org/2021/climate-change-will-drive-major-changes-in-student-learning-needs/662744

Olszewski-Kubilius, P. (2018). The role of the family in talent development. In Pfeiffer, S. I., *Handbook of giftedness in children: Psychoeducational theory, research, and best practices* (pp. 129-147). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77004-8_9

Ordonez-Jasis, R., Herrera, G., Dunsmore, K., & Ochoa, C. (2016). Communities of caring: Developing curriculum that engages Latino/a students' diverse literacy

practices. *Journal of Latinos in Education, 15*(4), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2015.1134538

Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research, 70*(3), 323–367. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070003323

Paredes, R. A., (2019). *The state of Latino education* [Conference session]. Texas Association of Chicanos in Higher Education. https://www.tache.org/

Perry, J. C., & Lavins-Merillat, B. D. (2018). Self-esteem and school belongingness: A cross-lagged panel study among urban youth. *Professional School Counseling, 22*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X19826575

Ream, R. K., & Rumberger, R. W. (2008). Student engagement, peer social capital, and school dropout among Mexican American and non-Latino White students. *Sociology of Education, 81*(2), 109-139. https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070808100201

Reeves, J. (2004). "Like everybody else": Equalizing educational opportunity for English language learners. *TESOL Quarterly, 38*, 43–66. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588258

Richards, E. (2020). Kids' mental health can struggle during online school. Here's how teachers are planning ahead. *USA Today.* https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/07/31/covid-online-school-kids-mental-health-teachers/5529846002/

Rivera, H., & Li, J. T. (2019). Hispanic parents' involvement and teachers' empowerment as pathways to Hispanic English learners' academic performance.

Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, *41*(2), 214-230. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986319834931

Ruiz, Y. (2009). Predictors of academic achievement for Latino middle schoolers. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 19*(4), 419-433. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911350902869409

Salazar, M., Bornstein-Gomez, M., Mercado, S., Martinez, L. M., Ortega, D. M., Somoza, O., ... & Leon, A. (2008). Agenda Latina: The state of Latinos 2008: Defining an agenda for the future. *University of Denver Latino Center for Community Engagement and Scholarship.*

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage.

Santos, C. E., & Collins, M. A., (2016). Ethnic identity, school connectedness, and achievement in standardized tests among Mexican-origin youth. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 22*(3), 447-452. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000065

Sawchuk, S. & Samuels, C.A. (2020). Where are they? Students go missing in shift to remote classes. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/where-are-they-students-go-missing-in-shift-to-remote-classes/2020/04

Schwartz, L. (2020). *Helpful online resources for teaching English language learners*. Edutopia. https://www.edutopia.org/article/helpful-online-resources-teaching-ells

Seidlitz, J., Perryman, B. (2011). *7 steps to a language-rich interactive classroom: Research based strategies for engaging all students*. Seidlitz Education.

Seidman, I. (2013). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. Teacher College Press.

Serravallo, J. (2020). *Connecting with students online: Strategies for remote teaching and learning*. Heinemann.

Snellman, K., Silva, J. M., & Putnam, R. D. (2015). Inequity outside the classroom: Growing class differences in participation in extracurricular activities. *Voices in Urban Education, 40*, 7-14.

Sousa, D. A. (2010). *How the ELL brain learns*. Corwin Press.

Sparks, S. D. (2021). How much real learning time are students losing during the pandemic? *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-much-real-learning-time-are-students-losing-during-the-pandemic/2021/02

Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997) A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youths. *Harvard Educational Review, 67,* 1-41. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.67.1.140676g74018u73k

Stein, M., Federspiel, A., Koenig, T., Wirth, M., Strik, W., Wiest, R., ... & Dierks, T. (2012). Structural plasticity in the language system related to increased second language proficiency. *Cortex, 48*(4), 458-465. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2010.10.007

Streit, C., Carlo, G., Knight, G. P., White, R. M., & Maiya, S. (2021). Relations among parenting, culture, and prosocial behaviors in US Mexican youth: An integrative socialization approach. *Child Development, 92*(4), 383-397. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13550

Swaby, A. (2020). *Texas schools get ok to give free meals to parents when kids aren't present.* The Texas Tribune. https://www.texastribune.org/2020/03/25/texas-schools-ask-give-free-meals-parents-when-kids-arent-present/

Sullivan, E. (2019). S*elf-actualization*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/science/self-actualization

TeachThought (2021). *The definition of remote learning: What is remote learning*. TeachThought. https://www.teachthought.com/learning/what-is-remote-learning/

Texas Education Agency (2019). *English learners in Texas: Fact sheet #1*. https://www.txel.org/media/jvehnvgp/fact-sheet-1-7-15-20-final.pdf

Texas Education Agency (2021). *Texas Academic Performance Report*. https://tea.texas.gov/

Texas Education Agency (2023). *Texas Virtual School Network-Online Schools Program*. https://tea.texas.gov/academics/learning-support-and-programs/texas-virtual-school-network/texas-virtual-school-network-online-schools-program

Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority student's long-term academic achievement*. Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED475048.pdf

Toness, B. V. & Gecker, J. Online schools put U.S. kids behind. Some adults have regrets. *Associated Press*. https://apnews.com/article/online-school-covid-learning-loss-7c162ec1b4ce4d5219d5210aaac8f1ae

Torres, S. A., & Santiago, C. D. (2018). Stress and cultural resilience among low-income Latino adolescents: Impact on daily mood. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 24*(2), 209–220. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000179

Ujifusa, A. (2021). The political spotlight on schools' COVID relief money isn't going away. *Education Week*. https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/the-political-spotlight-on-schools-covid-relief-money-isnt-going-away/2021/11

Van Ryzin, M. J., & Roseth, C. J. (2018). Cooperative learning in middle school: A means to improve peer relations and reduce victimization bullying, and related outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 110*(8), 1192-1201. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000265

Vialpando, J. (2005). Instructional Practices, Strategies, and Techniques. In Vialpando, J., Yedlin, J., Linse C., Harrington M., & Cannon G. (Eds.), *Educating English language learners: Implementing instructional practices* (pp. 29-82). National Council of La Raza.

Voight, A., Hanson, T., O'Malley, M., & Adekanye, L. (2015). The racial school climate gap: Within-school disparities in students' experiences of safety, support, and connectedness. *American journal of community psychology, 56*, 252-267. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9751-x

Walsh, C. (2021). *Young adults hardest hit by loneliness during pandemic.* The Harvard Gazette. https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/02/young-adults-teens-loneliness-mental-health-coronavirus-covid-pandemic/

Way, N., Reddy, R., & Rhodes, J. (2007). Students' perceptions of school climate during the middle school years: Associations with trajectories of psychological and behavioral adjustment. *American Journal of Psychology, 40*, 194-213. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-007-9143-y

Wentzel, K. R., Donlan, A., & Morrison, D. (2012). Peer relationships and social motivational processes. In A. M. Ryan & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships and adjustment at school* (pp. 79–105). IAP Information Age Publishing.

Woolley, M.E., Kol, K.L., & Bowen, G.L. (2009). The social context of school success for Latino middle school students: Direct and indirect influences of teachers, family, and friends. *American Psychological Association, 29*(1), 43-70. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1177/0272431608324478

World Health Organization (2022a). *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard*. https://covid19.who.int/?mapFilter=deaths

World Health Organization (2022b). *Rapidly escalating COVID-19 cases amid reduced virus surveillance forecasts a challenging autumn and winter in the WHO European Region.* https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/19-07-2022-rapidly-escalating-covid-19-cases-amid-reduced-virus-surveillance-forecasts-a-challenging-autumn-and-winter-in-the-who-european-region

Yoder, P. J. (2020). Examining three narratives of U.S. history in the historical perspectives of middle school (emergent) bilingual students. *The Journal of Social Studies Research 45*(3), 167-180. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jssr.2020.10.001

APPENDIX A

Research Question:

What were the online learning experiences of Latino public middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-Questions:

1. Think back to before the pandemic. How did you feel about school? Were you involved in any activities, teams, or clubs? What was your social life like?
2. What did you like most about in-person school? What did you like least? – Theoretical Framework
3. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect your life? How is your life today?
4. because of the pandemic?
5. What challenges did your family immediately face with the school shutdown orders in March 2020? What challenges did you personally experience because of the school shutdown?
6. Tell me about what it was like to learn online when school first shut down. Now tell me what online learning has been like for you this year.
7. What kind of support did your teachers or other school staff give you while you were in online learning? – Theoretical Framework
8. Think back to how you feel physically going to school and how you feel getting onto the computer for online learning. How do you feel when you go to school in person? How do you feel when you are on the computer doing online learning? – Theoretical Framework

9. I want to learn more about the good and bad experiences you had with online learning. First, tell me about good experiences you had with online learning. Now tell me about the negative experiences you had with online learning.
10. Which do you like better, in-person school or online school? Why?
11. What else would you like to tell me about your experience with online learning that I have not asked you about?

APPENDIX B

Sam Houston State University

Consent for Participation in Research

KEY INFORMATION FOR EXPERIENCE WITH ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study about your experiences with online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. You have been asked to participate in the research because you spent the 2020-2021 or 2021-2022 school year enrolled in online learning.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE, PROCEDURES, AND DURATION OF THE STUDY?-

The purpose of this study is to gain information about your experience with online learning during your eighth-grade year. You will complete one 60-minute interview with the researcher answering questions about your experience with online learning. The interview will then be transcribed, and the you will have an opportunity to read the transcripts and clarify any of the communication.

By doing this study, we hope to hear and understand your experience with online learning, and also how connected you felt to the school and to your teachers. Your participation in this research will last about 90 minutes.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Your participation will help researchers gain insight into the lived experiences of middle school Latino students experience school virtually. Your participation will help school leaders understand what you experienced while you were an online learner. You will have the opportunity to talk about your life during online learning.

For a complete description of benefits, refer to the Detailed Consent.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

You might choose not to volunteer for this study if you are not comfortable being audio recorded or answering questions about your learning experience.

For a complete description of risks, refer to the Detailed Consent. If you are not comfortable with a face-to-face interview, you can also be interviewed through an online Zoom meeting that would be recorded.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you chose not to volunteer.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

The person in charge of this study is Dion Rivera, a student at the Sam Houston State University Department of Education. Dr. Ricardo Montelongo is the faculty sponsor. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study, her contact information is: Dion Rivera, --. Dr. Montelongo can be contacted at --. If you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

Sam Houston State University

Consent for Participation in Research

DETAILED CONSENT ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF LATINO PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Why am I being asked?

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study about the online learning experiences of Latino students during the COVID-19 pandemic conducted by Dion Rivera, student in the Department of Education at Sam Houston State University. You have been asked to participate in the research because you participated online learning during the 2020-2021 or 2021-2022 school year. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the research.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled, and the subject may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled.

Why is this research being done?

Your participation will help researchers gain insight into the lived experiences of middle school Latino students experience school virtually. Your participation will help school leaders understand what you experienced while you were an online learner. You will have the opportunity to talk about your life during online learning. Your participation will also help school leaders know what is and is not working as teachers try to connect to and educate students who are not physically in the classroom. Finally, your participation will give you an avenue to share your story with educational leaders so that future students will benefit from any changes that may happen based on what we learn from you.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this research is to gain information about the experiences of middle school students who were enrolled in online school instead of face-to-face school during eighth grade. Researchers want to know what can be improved or changed based on your personal experience. Participants will complete one 60-minute interview in your home with your parents present or through a Zoom meeting, again, with parents present. The interview will then be transcribed, and participants will have the opportunity to review the transcript.

By doing this study, we hope to learn about your experience learning online. Your participation in this research will last about 90 minutes.

What procedures are involved?

If you agree to be in this research, we would ask you to do the following things:

Meet with the researcher for a brief, less than 30 minutes, meeting for introductions and to meet the parents and participant.

Meet with the researcher for one 60-minute interview and then review the interview transcript.

What are the potential risks and discomforts?

The amount of risk introduced in the research is less than that faced in ordinary life.

Are there benefits to taking part in the research?

Participation in research will allow school leaders to determine the best strategies for teaching Latino middle school students in an online learning environment. School leaders will discover how you felt during online learning, they will discover how much you felt you learned, and they will discover how connected you felt to the school and your teachers while you learned virtually. You will have the opportunity to share your opinions about your experience.

What other options are there?

You may choose not to volunteer for this study due to a lack of time or interest, or if you are not comfortable with being audio recorded. If you cannot participate in a face-to-face interview, you can participate through a recorded Zoom meeting. Parents will be present at all meetings with the researcher.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

The only people who will know that you are a research participant are members of the research team. No information about you, or provided by you during the research will be disclosed to others without your written permission, except:

- if necessary to protect your rights or welfare (for example, if you are injured and need emergency care or when the SHSU Protection of Human Subjects monitors the research or consent process); or
- if required by law.

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. For audiotape recordings of you will be used for educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised.
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Finally, pseudonyms will be used instead of your real name.

AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING RELEASE CONSENT

As part of this project, an audio/video recording will be made of you during your participation in this research project for transcription purposes only. The recording will be saved on a password protected computer. This is completely voluntary. In any use of the audio/video recording, your name will not be identified. A pseudonym will be assigned to your transcript to increase privacy. Once the audio recording has been transcribed, you will have an opportunity to review the transcript of the interview and make any changes you feel are necessary. The audio recording will be destroyed when the transcript is finalized. Transcripts will be kept for a period of 3 years then destroyed. You may request to stop the recording at any time or to erase any portion of your recording.

☐ I consent to participate in the audio/video recording activities.

☐ I do not wish to participate in the audio/video recording activities.

What if I am injured as a result of my participation?

In the event of injury related to this research study, you should contact your physician or the University Health Center. However, you or your third-party payer, if any, will be responsible for payment of this treatment. There is no compensation and/or payment for medical treatment from Sam Houston State University for any injury you have from participating in this research, except as may by required of the University by law. If you feel you have been injured, you may contact the researcher, Dion Rivera at --.

What are the costs for participating in this research?

There are no costs for participating in this study.

Will I be reimbursed for any of my expenses or paid for my participation in this research?

You will not have any expenses participating in this study.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The researcher conducting this study is Dion Rivera. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at:.

What are my rights as a research subject?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs –or e-mail at --

You may choose not to participate or to stop your participation in this research at any time. Your decision whether to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled, and the subject may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled.

Agreement to Participate

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research.

Consent: I have read and understand the above information, and I willingly consent to participate in this study. I understand that if I should have any questions about my rights as a research subject, I can contact PI's name at PI's contact phone or by email at PI's email address. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Your name (printed): ________________________________

Signature: ______________________________ Date: __________________

APPENDIX C

Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX

PARENT PERMISSION FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF LATINO PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dion Rivera, student at Sam Houston State University – Principal Investigator and Dr. Ricardo Montelongo – Faculty Sponsor, from the Educational Leaders Department at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) are conducting a research study.

Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because they are a Latino student who participated in online learning during their eighth-grade year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Your child's participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of the study is to learn about your child's experience while participating in online learning. School leaders can learn how to best serve students in an online learning environment by hearing your child's experience and opinions. Your child's knowledge will help future students who learn online.

What will happen if my child takes part in this research study?

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, we would ask him/her to:

- Meet with you and the researcher for a brief introduciton so you can become familiar with each other.
- Participate in one 60-minute interview that you will supervise in your home or place of choice.
- Agree to be audio recorded for a face-to-face interview or agree to a recorded Zoom interview.
- Read over the transcipt of the recording and suggest any changes or clarifications

How long will my child be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about 90 minutes.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that my child can expect from this study?

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts.

Are there any potential benefits to my child if he or she participates?

Your child may benefit from the study by getting the opportunity to express their feelings and opinions about their online learning experience. They will be able to reflect and process any feelings they have about their experience.

The results of the research may help school leaders improve upon their practices and strategies with students who learn online. The online learning experience for all students can progress because of your child's help.

Will information about my child's participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify your child will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using pseudonyms instead of real names, and all recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password protected personal computer. Only the researcher will have access to the password and data.

What are my and my child's rights if he or she takes part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want your child to be in this study, and you may withdraw your permission and discontinue your child's participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you or your child, and no loss of benefits to which you or your child were otherwise entitled.
- Your child may refuse to answer any questions that he/she does not want to answer and still remain in the study.
- Your decision whether or not to permit your child to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Sam Houston State University or your child's public school. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

  If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact: Dion Rivera at -- or at --. You can also contact Dr. Ricardo Montelongo at --.

- **SHSU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP):**

  If you have questions about your child's rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call -, Research Compliance Administrator.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN

____
Name of Child

____
Name of Parent or Legal Guardian

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian	Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

Name of Person Obtaining Consent	Contact Number
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent	Date

APPENDIX D

Introductory Email to the Student

Hello (Student Name),

My name is Dion Rivera, and I am the principal of an elementary school. I am also a student at Sam Houston State University, and I am doing a research study to learn about the experiences of Latino middle school students who participated in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am emailing you because you were an online learner during that time. I am also interested in interviewing Latino students because of my own background and the background of the majority of the students at my school.

I would like to interview you for about an hour and ask you questions about your time in online learning. I will ask you basic questions such as what you like or dislike about online learning, what kinds of support you had from teachers, and if you felt like you learned more or less during online learning compared to in-person school.

The interviews will take place with your parents permission and with them with you. We can meet at your home or wherever your family feels comfortable. We can also do the interview through a Zoom meeting.

Your participation will be anonymous, and you will help teachers and principals improve online learning so that future students will have a positive experience.

If you are interested in participating and if you have any questions, you can respond to this email or call or text me at --. I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Dion Rivera

APPENDIX E

Follow-Up Email

Hello (Student Name),

I am following up on an email that I sent you a week ago about participating in my research study about the online learning experiences of Latino middle school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hearing about your experience will help future online learners because we will learn from you about what worked and what did not work while you were learning virtually.

You can contact me through this email or phone at --. I am looking forward to learning about your online school experience.

Thank you,

Dion Rivera

APPENDIX F

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Date: Jul 14, 2022 5:22:11 PM CDT
TO:
FROM: SHSU IRB
PROJECT TITLE: Online Learning Experiences of Latino Public Middle School Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic
PROTOCOL #: IRB-2022-117
SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial
ACTION: Approved
DECISION DATE: July 14, 2022
EXPIRATION DATE: July 14, 2023
FULL EXPEDITED REVIEW JUSTIFICATION: §46.111 Criteria for IRB approval of research (Subpart A) & §46.404 Research not involving greater than minimal risk (Subpart D)
OPPORTUNITY TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK: To access the survey, click here. It only takes 10 minutes of your time and is voluntary. The results will be used internally to make improvements to the IRB application and/or process.
Your feedback will be most appreciated.

Greetings,

The above-referenced submission has been reviewed by the IRB and it has been Approved. This decision expires on July 14, 2023. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. You may initiate your project. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Since Cayuse IRB does not currently possess the ability to provide a "stamp of approval" on any recruitment or consent documentation, it is the strong recommendation of this office to please include the following approval language in the footer of those recruitment and consent documents: IRB-2022-117/July 14, 2022/July 14, 2023.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Modifications: Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please submit a Modification Submission through Cayuse IRB for this procedure.

Incidents: All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please submit an Incident Submission through Cayuse IRB for this procedure. All Department of Health and Human Services and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Renewals: Based on the risks, this project requires renewal reviews by this committee on an annual basis. Please submit a Renewal Submission through Cayuse IRB for this procedure. Your documentation for renewal must be received with sufficient time for review and updated approval before the expiration date of July 14, 2023.

Closures: When you have completed the project, a Closure Submission must be submitted through Cayuse IRB in order to close the project file.

Please note that all research records should be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact the Sharla Miles at 936-294-4875 or irb@shsu.edu. Please include your protocol number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,
SHSU Institutional Review Board

VITA

Dionicia Angelica Rivera

Educational History

Doctor of Education (Ed.D) Educational Leadership, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX. 2023.

Master of Education (M.Ed) Educational Leadership, Lamar University, Beaumont, TX, 2010.

Master of Arts (M.A.) English, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX, 2005.

Bachelor of Journalist (B.J.) Broadcast Journalism, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, 2003.

Professional Experience

Cedric C. Smith Elementary School, Principal

Cedric C. Smith Elementary School, Assistant Principal

Magnolia Elementary School, Teacher

Presentations

Rivera, D. (2022, June). School Improvement Through Family Engagement. Session presented at the annual TEPSA Conference in Round Rock, TX.

Rivera, D., (2021, July). RTI Q&A Panel Discussion presented virtually through ESC Region 6.

Rivera, D., (2021, February). Using Video Reflection to Drive Campus Learning. Webinar presented through the Sibme Coach Replay show.

Rivera, D. (2020, June). School Improvement Through Family Engagement. Virtual session presented at the Sibme Better Together Summit.

Rivera, D. (2020, February). Experiences of Latino Middle School Students. Doctoral research presented at the Southwest Educational Research Association Conference in Arlington, TX.

Rivera, D. (2020, February). School Improvement Through Family Engagement. Session presented at the annual Raise Your Hand Texas Symposium in San Antonio, TX.

Rivera, D., Roman, L. (2019, July). Sibme Missions and Micro-PD. Webinar presented through the Sibme platform hosted by Jarod Bormann.

Rivera, D. (2019, February). The Power of Family Partnerships. Session presented at the annual Raise Your Hand Texas Symposium in Austin, TX.

Rivera, D. (2019, January). How Principals Are Using Video to Affect Student Success. Webinar presented through the Sibme platform.

Rivera, D., Roman, L. (2019, June). A Practical Guide to Creating a High-Performing School: Tools You Can Use Now. Workshop presented at the annual conference of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA) in Austin, TX.

Rivera, D., Roman, L. (2018, June). A Practical Guide to Creating a High-Performing School: Tools You Can Use Now. Workshop presented at the annual conference of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA) in Austin, TX.

Rivera, D., (2015, July). Magnolia I.S.D. Leadership Retreat. Speech presented to the district leaders, directors, and administrators.

Rivera, D., (2014, August). Magnolia I.S.D. Convocation. Speech presented to the teachers and staff of Magnolia I.S.D.

Awards

Raise Your Hand Texas Scholarship Recipient to the Harvard Graduate School of Education Leadership Program – Harvard University, Summer 2017

Magnolia ISD and Region 6 Teacher of the Year – 2014 – 2015

Mickelson Exxon Mobile Teachers Academy Scholarship Recipient – 2015

Magnolia Education Foundation Grant Recipient – 2010, 2014, 2015

Campus Teacher of the Year – 2009 – 2010