The Pandemic Divide

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COVID-19 and Educational Disparities

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The Mexican Room was a segregated space for the instruction of Mexican immigrant and Mexican American school-aged children attending school during the first half of the twentieth century in Arizona, Texas, and Southern California (Ruiz 2001; Valencia 2005). The Mexican Room was sometimes located within a school and at times was built as a separate structure and referred to as the Mexican School. There were no laws that allowed for segregation; nonetheless, school districts unlawfully established these spaces, often to uphold notions of white racial superiority even as Mexicans were considered white under the law (Powers and Patton 2008). The Mexican Room was a site of racial subordination and a place of great isolation, where children of Mexican descent languished academically under the guise of receiving specialized instruction delivered by poorly prepared teachers. These segregated spaces were prevalent in part to appease the demands of white parents (Gándara and Orfield 2010) but mostly as part of a larger web of discriminatory practices against Mexicans and Mexican Americans, practices that were also enacted in California and Texas (Powers 2008). The 1951 Gonzales v. Sheely court decision ended the Mexican Rooms in Arizona. Noting the deleterious effects segregation had on students’ learning of English as well as on their sense of self, the justices wrote: “The methods of segregation prevalent in the respondent school district foster antagonisms in
the children and suggest inferiority among them where none exists” (Gándara and Orfield 2010, 3).

We evoke this construct of the Mexican Room (Gándara and Orfield 2010) to capture Latino\(^1\) English Learners’ and their parents’ experiences as they navigate children’s remote learning at the intersection of English-language learning, the use of virtual technologies, and COVID-19. From the onset of shelter-in-place orders in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and extending beyond that, and even as educators quickly adapted and continue to adapt, Latinx English Learners (ELS)\(^2\) have, nonetheless, been in a de facto virtual Mexican Room.

Marta Sánchez and Melania DiPietro are two educators of Mexican descent, each with a long history of working in educational settings with Latinx immigrant families. The first author has thirty years of experience in early childhood education, bilingual education, reading instruction within bilingual education, Latinx immigrant family literacy, and Latinx family support in urban and rural areas. She is also a professor at a comprehensive regional university and conducts research in local and transnational spaces with Latinx families and teachers. The second author has thirty years of experience as an English as a Second Language resource staff. Throughout the years, we have engaged in conversations about the education of Latinx children, the relationship schools establish with their parents, the work conditions that Latinx parents experience, how these impact family life, and the general precarity Latinx parents face as brown, laboring bodies in the geographies of the New Latino South, whether they are undocumented immigrants, documented immigrants, or citizens.

Leslie Babinski, Steven J. Amendum, Steven Knotek, and Marta Sánchez have collaborated on two studies funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, the first of which was a pilot study called Developing Consultation and Collaboration Skills (DCCS): English as a Second Language (ESL) and Classroom Teachers Working Together with Students and Families (Babinski et al. 2018). They are now conducting an efficacy trial to test the DCCS teacher professional development program for impacts on teachers and students. Babinski, Amendum, Knotek, and Sánchez have a long trajectory of conducting research individually, together, and as part of other research teams. All teach at the university level.

We come together to outline the state of affairs for Latinx families in the southeastern United States in times of COVID-19, and to situate what is happening within the broader experiences of the Latinx community in the United States, using a sociohistorical approach to understand the struggle and current inequities in the education of Latinx children and how these are further exacerbated by COVID-19. We make no claim that the impacts are unique to Latinx

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\(^{1}\) Latino refers to individuals or groups of individuals who share a common cultural or ethnic heritage.

\(^{2}\) ELS refers to English Learners who are Spanish speakers who are learning English as a second language.
children and their families; it would be impossible to ascertain this without studying all the children and families of the world. We do seek to highlight the ways in which Latinx children, their families, and teachers are navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, what lessons their experiences teach us, and what the policy implications are moving forward.

We draw from multiple texts that include COVID-19-related literature on Latinx immigrants and Latinx school-aged children, brief histories of Latinx education in US public schools, the first and second author’s experiences with families of K-5 Latinx students in the southeastern United States, lessons learned by other programs that have publicly reported on these, studies conducted by the authors, and preliminary DCCS survey data with Latinx parents of kindergarten and first grade children. These diverse texts begin to define the context and offer distinct perspectives that should be considered when seeking to draft policy. We discuss the intersections of aspiration and precarity to understand the unique positioning of Latinx children in schools; we examine how a global pandemic emerges as an actor in the resegmentation of Latinx children through the establishment of a virtual Mexican Room; and we point to possible ways out.

**The Broader Context**

**Latinx Children and Their Parents**

COVID-19 has had a disparate impact on immigrant communities, and especially on Latinx immigrants (Cano et al. 2020), who tend to be essential workers without essential protections. Latinx immigrants disproportionately work in retail and service industries where they have greater exposure to the public. These jobs cannot be carried out from home, the consequences of which are that only 16.2 percent of Hispanics can work from home (Gould and Shierholz 2020). Not speaking English is associated with a higher risk of COVID-19 infection (Rodriguez-Diaz et al. 2020; Rozenfeld et al. 2020). Latinos report lacking health insurance, having mistrust of the medical profession, and having no access to paid leave (Cano, Snow, and Anderson 2020). Moore and colleagues (2021) found that individuals who live in multigenerational homes and in communities with high concentrations of foreign-born noncitizens and food-service workers are at increased risk of contracting COVID-19. Perhaps, consequently, their COVID-19-related deaths are 2.3 times higher than that of whites (CDC 2021), and while Latinos may represent 18.5 percent of the US population (US Census Bureau 2020), they have a higher rate of infection than Asians, blacks, and whites, similar to that of the indigenous community (CDC 2021). In the early stages of the pandemic, Latinx had more confirmed cases in proportion
to the percentage they represent of the total US population. In North Carolina, for example, Cano, Snow, and Anderson (2020) report that while Latinos represent 10 percent of the state’s population, they accounted for 45 percent of coronavirus cases in that state. This pattern held in forty-two states and Washington, DC. In the other eight states, the number of confirmed cases among Latinos was “more than four times greater than any other group” (Godoy and Wood 2020, para. 9). Latinos continue to have higher infection and mortality rates than most of the population (Wood 2020). Risk of exposure to the virus is also present because of household occupancy density (Rodriguez-Diaz et al. 2020). Finally, many Latinx immigrants experience a higher incidence of pre-existing health conditions, like diabetes (Cano et al. 2020), which can make having COVID-19 worse.

Many Latinx adults work in jobs designated as essential. Essential workers who are undocumented are vulnerable not only to becoming infected because of the frontline jobs they have, but because they are unlikely to have health insurance and also may not seek to be vaccinated or receive medical attention for fear of being detained or deported (Cano et al. 2020; Goodman 2020). According to the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy, undocumented immigrants contributed $11.7 billion in local and state taxes (Goodman 2020), and they fuel two economies: the US economy with the purchases they make, the taxes they pay, and the cheap labor they supply; and their homeland’s economy with the remittances they send. Mexico, for instance, received 34 billion dollars in remittances in 2018 (World Bank 2019, April 8). However, their contribution does not translate into individual or group access to basic healthcare. These families toil and see only modest gains in their quality of life and a limited ability to provide their children with twenty-first-century learning tools, such as computers and household internet access.

In 2005, the Pew Research Center issued a report on changing demographics in the southeastern United States, highlighting the exponential growth of the Latinx population in the 1990–2000 decade in six southern states: Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The report dubbed these “the New Latino South,” recognizing that the six states had become new settlement sites for internal migration of Latinos from other states and for immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Ethnographer Enrique Murillo was among the early chroniclers of these migrations (1996–1998) and was able to isolate Siler City, North Carolina, as one of the first southeastern settlement sites for immigrants from Mexico. Drawn to the area’s poultry farms, this migration was quickly followed by Mexican migration to the southeastern hog, turkey, and chicken processing farms. The fast-paced linework at these
farms requires that one stand almost shoulder to shoulder with fellow workers as hogs and chickens are butchered to prepare them for the family-size packaging available at the grocery store. While declared essential workers during COVID-19, animal processing line workers were hardly cherished by their employers. Many workers spoke about the fear of being fired if they took a sick day, and those who filled in for absent coworkers were not adequately compensated for the extra work. The work has long-term sequelae, such as joint pain and pain resulting from repetitive movements and working in rooms where the temperature must be kept low. A 2018 Guardian investigative report found that there are two amputations a week among workers in US meat processing plants. Risk of injury rises as plants increase speed time on the line without increasing the number of line employees (Wasley, Cook, and Jones 2018). The Latinx immigrant parents with whom Melania DiPietro has had extensive contact for three decades work in these plants and worry about working in such close proximity with others in a COVID-19 context but fear speaking to their supervisors about it. They also fear becoming sick, as this would mean missing workdays and possibly losing their job as a result.

Moreover, for many Latinx immigrant parents in the New Latino South, their skin color and language make them hypervisible in rural geographies, and for some, their immigration status is a daily worry. In a 2017 study that the first two authors undertook, a mother narrated how the local sheriff would park outside the trailer park where she lived and stop her on her way to the grocery store. He would ask for her driver’s license, which she could not furnish. The state she lived in did not issue driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants. The sheriff would ticket her regularly, and she would then pay the fine. Through these encounters, she accumulated approximately $700 worth of fines that she was paying monthly. The mother said, “Sé que jamás me van a deportar porque le ganan dinero cada vez que me multan y me dan el ticket” (I know that they will never deport me, because they make money every time they fine me and give me a ticket).

Further defining the immigrant experience in the southeastern United States is immigration code 287g. Code 287g allows for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, to enter into a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with local sheriff’s offices so that sheriffs can act as de facto ICE agents and have the ability to detect, detain, and deport undocumented immigrants. Many counties within the states that constitute the New Latino South received funding to implement 287g. This allowed sheriffs to set up checkpoints on highway exit ramps and on any road in their jurisdiction. Latino parents in a study in the same southeastern region of the country (Knotek and Sánchez 2017) reported that sheriffs
would station themselves on roads commonly used by parents to get to their children’s school. In many counties, 287g was defunded, but because of MOAs that are still in force with local sheriffs, the possibility of being detained and deported continues to concern Latinx immigrants in the southeast.

**LABORING ALONE TOGETHER**

It is in these contexts that Latinx immigrant parents and their children navigate toward their aspirations. COVID-19’s arrival introduced greater vulnerability to Latinx immigrant parents and their emergent bilingual children. A public panel presentation with Latina immigrant mothers convened by a regional nonprofit revealed that amid the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, Latina mothers remained focused on supporting their children’s education at home even as they faced challenges with technology and their inability to help their children with the unfamiliar content of the assignments. The mothers made two observations not yet brought up by any of the literature or survey research: (1) their children missed their peers; and (2) the pandemic will go on, which has consequences for their children when all of the adults in the household reassume a regular work schedule and return to their worksites. DiPietro, in her work with Latinx ELS, provides evidence to support the mothers’ claims about children missing their peers. It is not only within a social dimension that children look for the company of their peers; for Latinx ELS, their peers help unlock meaning during the school day. Peers can be asked in a quick sidebar what the teacher said or be asked to translate a key word. Peers can help ELS complete an assignment successfully. For Latinx ELS, their bilingual peers are an indispensable resource that facilitates their learning and emerging sense of belonging. In a separate public discussion facilitated by school and government leaders about COVID-19 and bilingual children from distinct ethnic backgrounds, a call was made to fulfill the federal mandate to provide translation at all parent meetings and establish internet access as a universal right for all, “like water” (Center for Applied Linguistics 2021). These conversations with the Latinx and other immigrant communities and educators signaled the importance of having policies and practices that prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable.

**LATINX ELS, THEIR TEACHERS, AND SCHOOLING**

As Latinx immigrant parents labor in precarious situations, their children labor in virtual spaces where the communication is not circular but unidirectional, bereft of native language support, either from the teaching staff or from peers, and they are unable to navigate or access necessary technologies because of lack of hardware and internet access. In this virtual Mexican Room, Latinx ELS are
unable to ask a bilingual peer for help to orient them to the learning task, an action they would be able to take in a face-to-face context.

Of the 50.2 million students enrolled in public schools, 13.6 million (27 percent) are Hispanic of the EL population (National Center for Education Statistics 2018). As Latinx emergent bilinguals or emergent multilinguals—as is the case with indigenous children from Latin American countries, who arrive to US schools speaking Spanish and an indigenous language—the students are academically vulnerable. These students are vulnerable not because of their linguistic abilities, but because of a lack of teacher preparation and support to teach students with this more complex student profile. The instructional mismatch can have significant consequences: Latinx students can experience loss of the home language, thus severing their connection to family, culture, and knowledge (Hinton 2015; Valenzuela 1999; Fillmore 1991).

Despite the continuous growth of the Latinx emergent bilingual student population and other ELs in public schools, US educators are not receiving adequate training, professional development, or support to teach this population. Teacher preparation programs often do not require future teachers to have any formal preparation in teaching linguistically diverse students, and while federal law explicitly states that school districts must provide professional development to all school personnel working with ELs (ECS 2014, para. 5), thirty-two states have zero certification requirements for general classroom teachers in the teaching of emergent bilinguals, or ELs. The result is that teachers may be entering classrooms with little to no formal education on how to teach and support ELs while ELs continue to grow as a student group. Because the majority of US ELs are Hispanic, policy decisions in preservice teacher education programs and in-service teacher professional development disproportionately impact Latinx ELs. COVID-19 exacerbates an already problematic reality for Latinx families and their school-aged children, a reality that can reverberate into the future. It is not uncommon to hear teachers and researchers refer to the “lost cohort” when speaking about students who may simply not be able to catch up after schooling became virtual to comply with COVID-19 protocols.

**Latinx Education in the United States: A History of Struggle and Triumph and Struggle and Loss**

COVID-19 has revealed the long-standing marginalization of Latinx families and the sustained effort to subordinate Latinx immigrants through immigration, labor, and education policies and practices, and to disenfranchise them from
our healthcare system because of their immigration status, dynamics that have characterized the US-Latin American relationship. Schooling has been a primary site of Latinx struggle, a place where Latinx education in the United States has been a process of substantive gains and equally substantive losses. This phenomenon represents one of the urgent social and educational equity issues in the country, and this moment of living and learning through a global pandemic is exposing many of the historical vulnerabilities that remain to be addressed. The impact of systemic and structural inequalities for Latinx families and their children contributes to creating the conditions that generate the Mexican Room.

All actors—administrators, teachers, parents, and students—are ensnared by the Mexican Room’s arrival to the New Latino South and face the challenge of dismantling it. These inequities are not new; for example, a 2019 report indicated that the Latino family faced a digital divide because of either not having access to the internet or having limited access to the internet (Cano, Garcia, and Thompson 2020). In a nationally representative survey conducted with Latinx families (Latino Decisions 2020), families reported not having access or the necessary supports to access the internet for their children’s remote instruction and learning. Disruptions in communication with teachers and having to navigate diverse web applications and learning management systems, as well as encountering broken links, were noted by survey respondents as barriers to their children’s participation in remote learning. Indeed, DiPietro has found that Latinx immigrant parents mostly have access to the internet on their cell phones, and their children have to wait until their parents come home in the evening from work in order to connect to the school-based applications and assignments.

The long struggle for education and language rights among Latinx families is characterized by three cross-cutting themes: (1) Latinx parents were key actors in agitating for transformation; (2) a “rights” discourse was advanced through Latinx parents’ struggle; and (3) their actions achieved the pathbreaking changes they sought. The following court cases are a series of negotiations of educational rights at the intersection of race, language, ethnicity, aspirations, and precarity.

In these court cases, Latinx parents resisted efforts to segregate their children on the basis of color; argued against schools’ claims that they wanted to alleviate overcrowded schools by constructing new schools to which only children of Mexican descent would be assigned; and rejected schools’ claims that they sought to address the special needs of children of Mexican descent, such as learning English. In all instances, Latinx parents found the support of the
courts and secured a better model of education for their children. These lessons matter when schools have not yet reliably transitioned to successful virtual course delivery to Latinx ELLs.

**Struggle and Triumph**

From 1931 to 1951 three desegregation court cases resulted in improved education for children of Mexican descent and Mexican American children and progressively challenged the “separate but equal” doctrine. In all three cases, parents were the impetus for change. The Lemon Grove Incident of 1931, *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946), and *Gonzales v. Sheely* (1951) involved the school district seeking to require Mexican immigrant and Mexican American children to enroll in Mexican Schools: schools within the United States in the same general locale of the schools the children were already attending. In other cases, students were relegated to the Mexican Room. Phenotype (*Mendez v. Westminster*), ethnicity (all three cases), deficit discourses, and racism (all three cases) played roles in the segregation of Mexican immigrant and Mexican American children.

The Lemon Grove Incident of 1931 in San Diego, California, resulted in the country’s first school desegregation case: *Roberto Alvarez v. The Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District*. The parents’ legal action was galvanized by the school principal’s action of barring Mexican and Mexican American students from entering Lemon Grove Elementary School in January 1931. The students were redirected to the Mexican School that supposedly had been built for them. The children and the parents refused, sought legal recourse, and won (Madrid 2008).

*Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) is about Silvia Mendez, a Mexican American student who, upon the start of the school year in Westminster County, was told she had to attend the Mexican School. Her parents refused to comply. The Mendez case is important for several reasons. First, unlike the Lemon Grove incident, the Mendez plaintiffs did not argue that the Mexican School was inferior; instead they argued against the practice of segregation, thus challenging the doctrine of “separate but equal” (Blanco 2010, 2; Wallace 2013). The triumph of Mendez was a triumph over historical segregation, first legislated to segregate blacks in 1854 (Wallace 2013, 125), followed by *Ward v. Flood* (1874), which established the right for all Californians to receive a public education but maintained separate facilities for groups by race, which was considered legal to do (Wallace 2013, 126). Finally, Mendez was viewed as a “dry run” for *Brown v. Board of Education* (Wallace 2013, 128). Jared Wallace warns not to...
overstate the role of *Mendez* in the success of *Brown*. *Brown* is the result of unprecedented massive civil uprising in search of racial justice; however, the case does symbolize ethnic and racial unity. Maria Blanco (2010) highlights “the important crossover between different ethnic and racial groups who came together to argue in favor of desegregation” (2).

Porfirio Gonzales and the Latinx parents of three hundred children who attended schools in Tolleson Elementary School District in Arizona sued the board of trustees and the principal, arguing that the school district broke the law when segregating children of Mexican descent, because there was no law requiring Latinx children to be segregated (Valencia 2005). That is, *Gonzales v. Sheely* (1951) did not challenge the doctrine of separate but equal; the parents simply cited unlawfulness. This is in contrast to the 1925 case in Arizona of Adolfo “Babe” Romo, who sued two school districts on behalf of his children. Romo cited racism and the misclassification of his children as being “colored,” a racial designation referring to black children and which, he argued, should not be applicable to children of Mexican descent (Valencia 2008). Jeanne Powers and Lirio Patton (2008) point out how segregation invariably meant an inferior education for children. For example, there were no reliable assessments of children’s English language development or for reassignment out of the Mexican Schools, when at the same time, the rationale for segregating children of Mexican descent through placement in the Mexican Schools was so that they might be taught English more intensively. The courts ruled in favor of the parents, declaring that the segregation of children of Mexican descent was unconstitutional.

**Advancing a Rights Discourse through Latinx Parent Struggle for Educational Equity**

The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was an outcome of the broader civil rights movement that recruited not only Latinx parents to its vision but also other groups who sought to have their children’s language rights guaranteed through school-based bilingual education programs (Cervantes-Soon et al. 2017). The Bilingual Education Act was not about becoming competitive global polyglot citizens or enhancing cognitive functioning through bilingualism. Rather, it was about basic civil rights—rights won through peaceful resistance and collective mobilization.

In subsequent years, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) represented a loss of gains made in previous decades, specifically because it ushered in nativist language policies emphasizing English language learning only rather
than continuing the civil rights ethos inscribed in the Bilingual Act of 1968. The commitment of honoring children’s right to both the language of the home and English was replaced by English immersion—also known as the “sink or swim” model—and English as a second language models of English language instruction, both considered to be among the weakest forms of second language learning. As English established itself as a global language and the world’s lingua franca, achieving a hegemonic status, monolingual English speakers were established as the new desirable citizens. The Bilingual Education Act came to an end and was replaced by the No Child Left Behind Act, which officially sought to improve teacher quality and student outcomes through curricular reforms and standardized testing (Mangual Figueroa 2013). Also, officially, Title III of NCLB establishes English as the language of instruction. In practice, for ELS, NCLB accelerated leaving the home language behind and relying on standardized curricula to teach and standardized tests to assess student and school progress, including ELS. Standardization of curricula and testing in schooling has long been studied, and we have learned that standardized tests are inscribed with gender, racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic bias. In an NCLB context, school districts can opt to omit children with special needs and ELS—not to avoid subjecting these students to biased tests, but to keep the school’s overall achievement scores high.

Under NCLB, school districts use student testing data in problematic ways. Some states grade schools based on these data, using an A-F system. The outcomes can be punitive, as schools face state intervention if they do not make progress, as measured by these test scores. At the same time, there is no consideration for underfunded schools and schools with disproportionate numbers of early career or uncertified teachers, as is the case in schools with high African American and Latino student populations (Au 2004).

NCLB has also been criticized for ranking teachers as “highly qualified” simply for passing “a computer exam to receive their professional teaching credentials” (Au 2004, para. 3), even as the federal definition is that teachers must have a bachelor’s degree, be certified, and demonstrate content knowledge through coursework and testing (Au 2004). NCLB also violates basic principles of social justice in requiring ELS who have just entered ESL or other English language instruction programs to be tested (Gándara and Baca 2008). NCLB’s implicit English-only mandate; its lack of strong, additive models of language instruction; and its use of standardized curricula and standardized testing with nonwhite, bilingual and multilingual children create an acute academic disadvantage for Latinx ELS and an academic advantage for monolingual whites, thus perpetuating historical US racial and ethnic hierarchies. It is with this understanding
that NCLB is seen as a threat and is detrimental to Latinx academic and social advancement.

It is important to remember that language is a vast epistemological, ontological, and social resource that connects us to family, culture, history, and ways of thinking and being. To willfully create the conditions that facilitate and expedite the loss of language constitutes deculturalization (Fillmore 1991; Spring 2016) and creates precarity for children and adults in a country that historically has engaged in both their exploitation as cheap labor and their expulsion as undocumented workers. The unique positioning of Latinx immigrant children is that their bilingualism will keep them connected to their heritage but also connect their family linguistically to English-dominant spaces. In a crisis like COVID-19, language disarticulations can feel disorienting, threatening, and violent. To deny a child any of their languages is epistemological violence and can render them unable to be that vital link for their family. This understanding of the Latinx immigrant child is that they can intervene in cultural and social processes through linguistic and cultural knowledge and help the family and others navigate new languages, cultures, societies, practices, and expectations (Faulstich Orellana 2009). Latinx parents and their children now enter another era of struggle for educational equity.

How Are Parents of Latino English Learners Faring in the COVID-19 Pandemic?
As part of a larger survey, Latinx immigrant parents of K-1 English learners responded to a series of questions about remote learning in times of COVID-19. The questions asked were designed to require a narrative response. Fifty-one of ninety-one parents from seventeen elementary schools within one school district responded. Although not all parents answered the questions about remote learning and COVID-19, those who did provide a snapshot of how Latinx parents of young ELs were faring as they navigated remote learning with their children.

The fifty-one respondents were thirty Mexican parents, eight Honduran parents, four Guatemalan parents, four El Salvadoran parents, two parents from the Dominican Republic, one Colombian parent, one parent from Spain, and one parent from Venezuela. The questions examined three areas: access to hardware and apps, ease of use and access (e.g., reliable connectivity), and teacher presence and support. Parents emphasized an appreciation for the school’s efforts to provide each child with a computer. They expressed frustration with the hardware—four parents noted that they did not receive their child’s computer...
until two weeks after remote learning sessions had started—with the malfunctioning passcodes, and with the lack of teacher presence (via videos or written posts) to help students and parents navigate the assignments.

Three more themes emerged from parents’ responses: a sense of gratitude toward the school or the teacher; a disposition of thoughtful involvement in their children’s education as evidenced by requests for more scaffolds or services to support their children; and the role of siblings in teaching, learning, and serving as a bridge between the parents’ Spanish-language dominance and the siblings’ English-language dominance.

One parent expressed frustration with the process and loss of essential and valuable educational supports for her child with special needs, but she nevertheless was maintaining a positive attitude about the challenge she was facing together with her son. Appealing to collective, collaborative action, she said that “in talking with other parents, this was frustrating for everybody. They [school personnel] should do a video to help. He needs help with speech therapy. There has not been support for children who have a speech problem as is my son’s case. He used to receive services before. It has been a new challenge for all of us, but if all collaborate, together, we will achieve it.”

Other responses indicated that remote learning could be disrupted by a number of factors: illness in the family, a parent not understanding how to help the child because of language differences, lack of connectivity, an access code not working that then prevented the child from accessing academic content, unreliable internet service, a complicated login process, and having to be at work when the child needed help with academic content. While many parents thanked teachers for their efforts, they also noted that more teacher support was needed to ensure their children’s successful completion of assignments. Five parents experienced problems with internet connectivity, with the connection failing or being slow. Accessing the platforms was also a challenge, as one parent said in a comment that was representative of five more comments that described problems with the access codes: “There was a problem with my girl’s codes. At the beginning, she could enter but after a week, the code was bad, and she couldn’t enter it anymore.”

**PARENT FRUSTRATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Parents said they felt disappointed that they could not help their children because they had to work, and others made recommendations, such as providing children with downloadable, printable forms so that children could have something “tangible” that would allow the parent “to be able to see what their
day will be like.” Other parents advocated for themselves and their child(ren). They wrote how difficult it was, as someone who does not read English, to navigate the online learning system including logging into the system, and then navigating other areas. One parent pointed out that no interpreters were available, which is required by law. She asked, “So how is this being resolved in an online forum?” Additionally, one parent gave a strong critique of the delivery mode, calling out a low-quality approach, she wrote, “This new way of learning is very limited, of very little use if they only send homework to children.” Finally, one parent offered this cogent observation: “Parents are not teachers. It was difficult to help with homework in the afternoon. Hard after my work to help with remote learning. For him, he didn’t understand what was being explained to him and there were too many children connected. For me, the connection, they should have sent text.”

The comments merit serious consideration. The parent above is highlighting the significant difference between being a teacher and being a parent. In recognizing this, she is also recognizing the professionalism of teachers. She made comments about the order of things—perhaps parents should not be asked to engage in a cognitively demanding task immediately after work. She also discussed how class size matters online in the same way it would matter in face-to-face instruction. She advocates for her son. She implies that he needed another explanation, another scaffold in order to understand what was expected of him, revealing a formal understanding of how learning happens. Finally, she recommends the use of text messages to connect. This comment requires follow-up questioning of the parent to determine whether she was referring to WhatsApp, for example, an extraordinarily popular text messaging service among Latinx parents, but her comment is clear about her preference for the use of texts for communication.

In spite of frustrations, many parents thanked the school for the computers and for the teachers’ efforts to motivate their children to be interested in learning, as well as for the teachers’ broader help and support. Other respondents thanked teachers for their kindness and patience.

Survey Summary

The parents who responded to the survey point the way toward the improvement of remote learning. In their feedback, they offered specific examples of the ways in which the current approaches to education remain challenging and how some of these could be improved. The parents explained how malfunctioning codes shut them out of being able to use the computer, and they reminded
teachers and the school that the staff who support parent involvement and student learning in a face-to-face context are also needed in a remote learning context (e.g., interpreter, speech therapist). At least three parents introduced the idea of how important siblings are as English language brokers, helping younger siblings with assignment instructions and helping them read the texts. Parents asked teachers not to leave them or their children behind as they navigated the technology to access the academic content. Finally, in sharing how they felt sadness, guilt, or a sense of failure for not being able to help their child either because they were tired from a long day of work, did not have an interpreter to support their participation, or were at work, these parents could help schools reconceptualize the distribution of personnel and how to support Latinx parents so that they are successful supporting their children’s online learning.

Accompanying Latinx Families as They Navigate COVID-19: A View from the Field

ESTABLISHING LINES OF COMMUNICATION
The arrival of COVID-19 has made virtual communication essential to facilitating the delivery of education to students around the world. Virtual tools allow educators to be in direct contact with their students for the purposes of instruction; however, for this approach to teaching and learning to be effective, or at least for it to be possible to some degree, all actors (e.g., teachers, parents, caregivers, students, principals) in the processes of schooling must be involved, trained, and have access to all tools. We focus this discussion on the experiences of Latinx K-5 students for whom English is a new or developing language and who are enrolled in schools in the southeastern United States. We draw from the lived experience of the second author, who has affiliations as English as second language support staff in area schools (where the first and second author conducted research from 2017–2019). We highlight the differential impacts that the Latinx community is experiencing in times of COVID-19 and acknowledge that these occur within school districts that have made and continue to make extraordinary efforts to equip families with the needed tools so that the students can continue their education in virtual spaces.

In the aftermath of COVID-19’s emergence in North Carolina, schools surveyed parents and personnel about the curriculum delivery options that were under consideration. Each county offered various possibilities similar to those that were proposed around the country: face-to-face classes only (option A), online synchronous classes only (option B), and a hybrid option with 50 percent face-to-face classes and 50 percent remote classes (option C). In many cases, schools
polled families and teachers and they elected to start classes remotely (option B). An orientation to the “new normal” proceeded, followed by the distribution of materials and digital devices (e.g., iPads, Chromebooks, laptops, and MacBooks). These were assigned to students according to grade level and in consideration of each school’s preferred technologies. The schools assessed the students’ ability to access and use the applications within the digital devices. The array included StateEdCloud, Google Mail, Google Meet, Class Dojo, IStation, and other applications. The setup involved the tedious process of having schools create student accounts so that through these applications students could be in remote contact with their teachers in a multitude of ways. These efforts were undergirded by a sincere commitment to fulfill the state’s obligation to its youngest citizens of providing a free K-12 education. In the context of the pandemic, as with other state efforts related to public goods such as the delivery of healthcare, the process was fraught with challenges that included technical glitches and logistical difficulties gathering and distributing the apparatuses.

Under option B (online synchronous classes only), policymakers overlooked what this choice entailed and for whom this option might not work at all. That is, the degree to which option B could serve as an adequate substitute for face-to-face instruction was contingent upon a family’s access to the internet; a students’ fluency in English; the family’s broader English-language resources; the students’, parents’, and/or caregivers’ ability to navigate the hardware and various applications; the presence and knowledge of an adult or more competent peer to help the student; the teacher’s fluency with these applications; the teacher’s ability to differentiate instruction according to student need in a virtual format where they might or might not be able to structure peer interactions or intervene directly to support a student and groups of students; and the ability of the child to complete tasks with little adult support. For Latinx ELs and for those whose immigrant parents may also not be fluent in English, the challenges felt insurmountable. In many cases, parents had to work during the day and had to leave their children with caregivers. Suddenly caregivers, many of whom were Latinx immigrants with diverse levels of English-language knowledge, were now responsible for overseeing connectivity, guaranteeing students logged in to their remote classes, and responding to children’s questions. In many cases, caregivers had multiple children in their care, each from different families, and each at different grade levels, levels of English-language acquisition, and levels of digital literacy. Many Latinx ELs were and continue to be in the care of people who have not had experience with or exposure to the specific technologies of schooling, such as Google Classroom and the StateEdCloud.
site, nor have the caregivers received any instruction or support from anyone on how these sites work. Unlike teachers who receive ongoing professional development and students who would have received instruction on how to use virtual technologies (as time allowed for it), parents and caregivers are not prepared for this role. Yet parenting and caregiving now included ensuring that the student was connected during the hours that each teacher offered instruction. Caregivers had to understand how to guide the student to check assignments and homework that had been sent to the teacher in order to receive a grade.

Many caregivers simply lacked the means to provide this support. For instance, caregivers (and families of students) may not have internet access at home or the possibility of providing transportation to take students to a site that offered a free WiFi connection to students. The connectivity and use of applications for virtual teaching and learning revealed a formidable challenge: Latinx students were not receiving assistance with their assignments and homework at home, because their parents worked in essential businesses. The parents in the school districts under discussion lived in a harsh reality. They worked in such business, places like the hog, chicken, and turkey factories, and they continued to go to work because of economic reasons. As members of the lower echelons of the socioeconomic class, they could not simply stop working or work from home. Their family economy was then further affected, under option B, by having to pay someone to care for one or more students in the same family.

A small percentage of students (the more fortunate ones) may have had access to digital devices at home—devices purchased, often with great sacrifice, by parents so that the children had the hardware to access the internet. The less fortunate, however, who in many cases were Latino students, were overlooked. To some degree these schools provided digital devices that were integrated with the programs and applications necessary to begin to open the portals of communication with the teachers in the different classes to which the students had to connect, so that they could receive the education that by law they needed to receive—an education that is, hopefully, of quality. But not each and every student could truly access a digital device. In some cases, especially when families had more than one child receiving some type of virtual education, the school lacked sufficient digital devices to provide one to each student at home. Such a scenario led to another situation in which schools provided only a certain number of digital devices per family to be shared among siblings. This situation had consequences: students had to connect at different times with teachers, and teachers had to plan live classes at times that did not conflict with siblings’ schedules, a titanic task for teachers in terms of creating schedules and planning.
THE PERFECT TRIANGLE OF EDUCATION

It is important to consider that education has three parts that make up the “education triangle”: students, teachers, and parents. Quality of education cannot be possible if the triangle is unequally balanced, or if one leg of the triangle is unable to properly support the others. Recently, teachers have had to be trained even more to provide the education that our students need. They must continue to train, through online courses, to make remote classes accessible and understandable and to meet the standards required by the state and board of education. They train and, through remote classes, in turn train the students.

Forgotten in this picture are the parents. Remote classes are taken at home, and it is at home where, instead, the support of the teacher has to be provided by the parents. Here, the parents’ roles will go beyond those of providers and guardians to those of active participants in the classes that their children receive through remote teaching. Parents then face the situation that they are the only ones who have not received previous training on how to use the tools and digital devices that they have received from the school. In this way, giving digital devices to a parent who does not have an internet connection is like giving them a car without gasoline in it. Also, teachers and students are trained to understand how to use the different applications, devices, programs, and so on, but parents are not. To continue the metaphor, the situation results in parents having cars without gasoline that they, moreover, cannot use because they do not know how to drive.

A QUALITY EDUCATION?

The arrival of COVID-19 was the impulse for initiating a new way of providing elementary education or remote education that many educators were also not accustomed to implementing. Remote education emerges as a challenge for all, and it can, in some cases, be experienced by Latinx ELS as a “silent and passive” and isolating process—like being in the historical Mexican Room.

The difference between face-to-face teaching and remote learning is vast. On the one hand we have the scenario in which an ELL student arrives for the first time at a school in the United States without knowing English or is at a beginning level of English language learning. This student has the opportunity to integrate into a classroom and can receive the support of the teacher, new classmates, and direct English as a second language services through its different modalities. These opportunities differ from remote or digital classes, where the student is seated in front of a monitor or screen where all the information, either synchronous or asynchronous, is provided by the ed-
ucator completely in English; the student and parents find themselves in total silence unable to understand or know what to respond to in front of a screen where a group of students and their teachers speak completely in English. An education is being offered, but Latinx ESLs sit in total silence with a lack of understanding.

**THE BRIDGES TOWARD UNITY**

There is a new form of communication between Spanish-speaking teachers, students, and parents that COVID-19 has brought about. COVID-19 highlighted the importance of ESL personnel, the school receptionist, and translators in serving as bilingual support. These key members of the school community have become the bridges toward unity that make the triangle of education possible by providing a network of support. ESL educators, for example, have gone above and beyond the line of duty in one way or another, all with the purpose of offering students and parents the support they deserve, opening the lines of connection between each and every one of the members that make up the school staff to make it possible to approximate a quality education. In schools with a high percentage of Latinx students, the active participation of these staff is “overloaded” by having to support teachers in contacting Latinx students and to communicate with parents. Latinx staff are taxed with giving families training in the use of digital devices as well as instruction on how to use the different applications. In the midst of the shift to digital technologies, the ESL teacher must continue planning and creating lessons for ESLs and provide the necessary content and scaffolds for English language learning and development. The bilingual personnel go beyond the established schedule by having to contact parents after they arrive home from their jobs; receive calls from students and parents who do not understand how to connect with the teacher because the digital device presents a problem; explain assignments and homework from different classes; and make occasional home visits—taking all necessary measures to avoid direct contact with families—to help parents who need guidance and support in the use of digital devices and applications.

Although the scenarios created by the COVID-19 pandemic could not have been imagined, the events of this era have revealed the lack of preparation to provide and receive education; the lack of training with and understanding of the use of digital devices and their various applications; and the reality that language knowledge makes education go through a “test” in which great inequality in learning regionally and nationally is being revealed. It is only as a community that we can dismantle the Mexican Room.
Conclusion and Implications

We examined histories of Latinx education evoking the Mexican Room to heed a warning about how remote learning can be detrimental to emergent bilingual students who rely heavily on bilingual peers for information about the social practices of language use and for translation and clarification of learning tasks. We sounded a similar alarm for their parents, who have a disproportionate classification as essential workers and who, in the geographies of the New Latino South, may face working conditions that put them in daily peril, creating precarity and risk in the era of COVID-19. We pointed to emerging studies on COVID-19 that consider the impacts on Latinx populations and to a chronology of how COVID-19 unfolded in a public school of the southeastern United States in which the transition from a pre-COVID-19 set of agreements about schooling had to be set aside as the world shifted into a COVID-19 reality. Finally, we examined emerging survey data of Latinx parent respondents. These narratives all suggest that, again, Latinx parents are leading transformations in their children's schooling through their assertions about the shortcomings in remote learning, and they signal that their children's learning profiles are more complex and thus require appropriate supports—making suggestions about pedagogy and how to meet special needs. They offer ideas on how to support Latinx parent involvement, reminding schools to include interpreters in the remote learning environment. As they have done throughout history, Latinx parents assume their role in transforming their children's formal learning environments, rejecting the segregation and isolation of the Mexican Room.

Latina/o/x parents, educators, and public servants have made insightful observations that begin to set policy recommendations for providing a higher quality education to Latina/o/x ELS. Latino parents have pointed out the complex learning profile that bilingual children bring to the classroom and the implication this has for sustaining language supports (e.g., interpretation and translation) in virtual learning environments; structuring peer interactions so that Latinx ELS can interact with bilingual peers for academic support; providing school support to Latinx EL students and parents around the use of hardware, software, and access to the internet; and not interrupting the specialized services that children with special needs receive. Public servants have called for universal access to technology for all students (Valade et al. 2021). David Valade, a language acquisition specialist at the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, has also amplified parent voices by calling for on-demand interpreters, as federal law mandates but rarely guarantees. Valade and colleagues (2021) notes that providing language interpretation must be a priority in schools in recognition of the need to support families: “We need
to reach out to our families, be able to speak their languages, have cultural brok-
ers. We cannot rely on the kindness of staff; we need to do this professionally. We need to bridge that gap; it is a community—we are all together. We are not isolated from others.”

Fordham University professor Diana Rodríguez, participating in that same forum, put forth a framework for schools and communities to ensure that lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic are not lost. She notes that coordi-
nation, collaboration, communication, and continuity are critical to improving services for ELS and their families. Coordination must include understanding family needs and availability with regard to family members’ work schedules; moreover, it implies having effective communication, of which interpretation services and providing continuous support to parents of ELS are essential components. Continuity of services should include a one-on-one support line as well as a bilingual homework hotline. Effective models have emerged. For example, Hannah Gill at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill prepared undergraduate students with some knowledge of Spanish to tutor Latinx elementary school–aged students by phone and on online platforms. An instant waiting list emerged as information on this program reached the Latino community.

Extrapolating from what teachers and parents have observed during remote teaching and learning is that students may need mental-health support as they return to the physical classroom. Latinx ELS, as well as other students, may have experienced the loss of family members, prolonged food insecurity, and isolation. The loss of structure and social life that school can offer may have had a profound impact on K-5 students, and teachers, social workers, parents, and the entire school community will want to be vigilant and proactive. Federal law on school-based interpretation services must be followed and school leaders (e.g., superintendents, parents, and principals) must agitate for adequate funding and aggressively hire bilingual staff and interpreters. Schools must offer parent workshops on the use of technology, potentially partnering with universities that offer degrees in instructional technology, and they must use these resources to develop e-learning modules in multiple languages for parents and caregivers. Schools must agitate for lush federal funding to develop or improve disaster-preparedness plans that include partnerships with healthcare providers, foodbanks and local/corporate grocers, mental-health specialists, and bilingual volunteers to formulate community responses to local problems. Schools must consider the distinct student profiles among their student populations and include in their disaster-response plans specific contingencies and interventions to support student groups according to their unique needs and strengths.
The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the critical interaction with EL teaching and learning and a renewal of commitments made long ago with ELs and their families and teachers. Any sufficient response will (at least) require proposing equity-focused policy and practices, such as universal access to technology, equitable education for children with complex learning profiles, support for parents through on-demand interpretation, similar supports for their children with online homework hotlines, and one-to-one academic support. The message has been that education, like health, cannot be a by-product of privilege. To make such an education a reality will require a reimagining of the community we constitute, and through that, an emphatic rejection of the re-emergence and permanence of the Mexican Room.

NOTES

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1. It is now common to use Latinx as a nonbinary designation of the Latino community. Following the decision of the Latina/o/x Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, we use Latina, Latino, Latinx and Latina/o/x interchangeably to recognize both binary and nonbinary gender identification and the distinct areas of research that Latina/o/x researchers and others undertake (e.g., Chicana feminist research, Latino masculinities research, Latinx Trans research, etc.).

2. English Learners (ELs) is the federal designation for students whose home language is not English and, therefore, must learn English while they learn academic content in English (Education Commission of the States [ECS] 2014). English as a Second Language (ESL) is the English-language instructional program most bilingual school children are enrolled in; some may be enrolled in dual language programs, which require a balanced population of monolingual English speakers and emergent bilingual students, and all students learn both English and the dominant second language simultaneously. Finally, some ELs may be enrolled in bilingual programs, in which children academically develop their home language as they are introduced to and develop English. Dual language and some bilingual programs are considered additive programs because they add a second language through the academic instruction of literacy and academic content in both languages, while ESL programs are considered subtractive because they do not engage or develop students’ home language academically, resulting in language loss of that language.

3. Hispanic is a federal designation; Latina/o/x are designations used by the community, media and in academic writing. Latina/o/x is inclusive of individuals and nations in which Spanish is not spoken (e.g., Brazil, Haiti) but that are geopolitically linked to Latin America. We use Hispanic when the source cited uses this term.
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