Navigating the Educational Needs of Rural Multilingual Students During the Pandemic: Parents' Experiences and Perspectives

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Abstract

This article reports the preliminary results of a multiple case study that investigated how, during the Spring 2020 and the following school year, old and new areas of EL educational inequity revealed themselves in two rural school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data presented here focuses on multilingual immigrant/refugee parents of ELs and how they navigated school closures and virtual learning. The selected schools/districts were located in pandemic hotspots where ELs' families experienced particularly high health risks due to work settings, were characterized by increasingly superdiverse educational realities, and presented unique histories of place-based language education policy development encompassing a wide range of EL programs. The study contributes to the often overlooked research subfield of EL rural education and attempts to give voice to the frequently silenced or ignored voices of parents of ELs. The findings show the multi-layered struggles rural ELs' parents faced during the pandemic and their resiliency vis-à-vis what schools provided to support them. The study can inform future emergency and daily local and state EL educational policies and teacher education and professional development programs.

Keywords: *multilingual learners, equity, rural, dual language, COVID-19, parents*

Introduction

As educational institutions all over the world shut down in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, US schools made enormous efforts to respond rapidly to meet the multi-layered needs of their students and families. According to the World Health Organization and leading US health and educational officials, the drastic closure of schools across the country was necessary to reduce the transmission of the COVID-19 virus and, ultimately, decrease mortality rates. However, closing schools in the US resulted in an unforeseen impact on low income children's and family's food security, affordable access to childcare for families with working parents, children's social emotional well being, and, as importantly, students' equitable access to education (Abuhammad, 2020).

Initial efforts made by US schools and collaborating organizations focused on reducing food insecurity for low-income children to make sure they kept receiving free breakfast and lunch from the schools and provided learning opportunities to all students. In rural areas of the US, where the food processing and agriculture industries have transformed many towns into new immigration

destinations in the last two decades (Maki, Zong, & Batalova, 2018), physical and financial wellness quickly became endangered for those working in essential food industry positions. Reflecting the national overrepresentation of minorities as frontline workers (Kerwin & Warren, 2020) who were disproportionately exposed to the virus in the workplace (Kindy, 2020), rural Latino and other immigrant and refugee families found themselves in a particularly vulnerable position (Vargas & Sanchez, 2020) in terms of unemployment and financial instability, as well as exposure to the virus. By March 2020, at least 203 meatpacking workers had died and another 42,534 tested positive for the novel coronavirus in 494 meat plants (Kindy, 2020). In May 2020, half of the pandemic hot-spots in the rural Midwestern US were linked to meat processing plants (Lakhani, 2020). Carrillo & Ipsen (2021) conducted a study of COVID-19 communities spread within meatpacking communities, showing the spread rates a at approximately 110%-150% higher COVID-19 transmission rates and minority populations were more intensely affected, with approximately 80% of confirmed cases in the meat-packing plants being people of color.

In educational settings, the school closure in the initial pandemic phase and intermittent school reopenings at later stages placed new demands on already struggling low-income immigrant and refugee families, where 47% of immigrant-origin children were already living in poverty prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sugarman and Lazarin, 2020). Because of the sudden shift to remote learning, as members of immigrant and refugee families with unique learning needs, ELs were predicted to experience larger learning losses than higher income student communities (Sattin Baja, Boix-Mansilla & Strom, 2020). Within the EL population, rural ELs were considered at even higher vulnerability due to the fact that, reflecting international patterns (Yang, Zhu, & MacLeod, 2018), rural disparity in the US is one of the most prominent factors driving educational inequities (Aguilera & Nightingale-Lee, 2020). As rural school populations generally experience unequal access to technology for lack of or unreliable access to the internet, the complete shift to remote learning was expected to play a very negative role on ELs' learning outcomes.

In light of the increased vulnerability of rural ELs and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rathman, 2020), this article reports the preliminary findings of two multi-method qualitative case studies specifically focused on ELs' access to instruction for ELs in two rural school districts located in COVID-19 hot-spots. The study reports the perspectives of ELs' parents in two districts with an established tradition of EL services. Specifically, the article unveils ELs' parents' struggles and resiliencies during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and how rural schools were able to mobilize resources to serve immigrant/refugee parents of ELs. The study contributes to the research subfield of EL rural education--typically overlooked in educational policies practices and programs--and provides findings that can inform future emergency and daily local and state EL educational policies, teacher education, and professional development programs toward providing equitable education to vulnerable EL students and their families. It also serves as a source of as schools continue to navigate unfinished learning and intermittent quarantines and closures due to the continued impact of COVID-19 on schools since their reopening in August 2021 (Zhang et al., 2021).

Multilingual/EL Learners in Rural Educational Settings

In the last twenty years, with the growth of manufacturing, meatpacking, and farming industries, US rural areas have become new immigration destinations attracting workers from all over the world (Albarracin, 2016; Fogle & Moser, 2017; Miratfab, 2016; Moser, Nguyen, & Williams, 2018) giving rise to a fast-growing number of ELs in rural school districts (Hoover et al.,

2019). Between 2000 and 2010, multilingual immigrant and refugee families contributed to an increase of minority populations in rural areas that accounted for 83 percent of the nonmetropolitan population gain and 1.8 million more minorities in rural areas (Johnson, 2012). This meant that nearly 500,000 ELs students out of 4.7 million (10.4 percent) were residing in rural settings (NCES, 2016) and often concentrated in high percentages in rural school districts where large industries were (re)located (Shavers, 2009).

Nearly 5 million public school students are ELs, making up about 10 percent of the K-12 population, including in states and districts that were not previously common immigrant destinations (NCES, 2019). In the last twenty years, multilingual immigrant students and families have been increasingly relocating across the rural US creating superdiverse (Vertotec, 2007) educational spaces in new destination sites. This surge of Multilingual Learners has dramatically shifted rural school demographics requiring school districts to rethink their educational policies and practices in profound ways. As of 2020, it is estimated that there are approximately 600,000 ELs attending rural schools in the United States (Coady, 2020).

Rural districts have been historically at a disadvantage when compared to their urban and suburban counterparts in their effort to provide equitable services to their students (Zhang, Li, & Xue, 2015; Kreck, 2014). ELs, mostly low-income students of color, confront well-known systemic educational obstacles in addition to language barriers (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Decades of studies have evidenced how low income ELs of color--especially Latino-- represent one of the most marginalized student groups in US schools, suffering from structural inequities such as poverty, residential segregation, and racialized anti-immigrant sentiments (Poza, 2016). This translates educationally into attendance of underfunded schools, racial tracking, watered down curricula, and biased assessment. In addition, ELs also suffer low access to evidence-based programs and highly qualified EL/Bilingual teachers that effectively provide comprehensible content-based instruction (Coady, 2020). Research spanning more than forty years has identified high-impact pedagogies, sociocultural foundations, and equity-based policies for bilingual learners to close the opportunity gaps between Multilingual Learners and their monolingual peers. Dynamic programs that reach students provide multifaceted, comprehensible input through methods that capitalize on student agency and oracy. They utilize highly qualified teachers, especially those that are bilingual, targeted, content and literacy based instruction, and grade-appropriate elevation over programs that remediate ELs (multilingual learners). While we know that Dual Language and inclusive program models are the most successful programs, we continue to see the majority of ELs, especially those in rural programs, receiving pull-out instruction with a remedial focus and inappropriate or biased assessments (Arias, 2020; Cummins, 2010). During the pandemic, the opportunity gaps existing through poor program models became even more clear. Due to the lack of access to technology and native-language instruction, most multilingual learners received basic remediation, and often times that was lacking due to internet connectivity goals. Even students in Dual Language programs suffered because they couldn't access appropriate language practice with qualified teachers in the target language (Arias, 2020).

While multilingual learners living in rural areas appear to experience similar obstacles to educational equity than those residing in urban and suburban demographics, the limited research specifically focused on rural ELs show that rural schools disadvantages for ELs are compounded by regional isolation, lack of funding and resources specifically devoted to ELs, high turnover of educators, difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified EL/Bilingual educators and lower teacher salaries (Johnson & Strange, 2007). In addition, studies show that teachers feel they lack of specific preparation for working with ELs' language learning needs and their families (Coady, Harper, &

DeJong, 2015), are distant from professional networks, and are not always "receptive to participating to PD related to EL instruction" (Coady et al., 2019, p. 44). Coady (2020) indicated that the fear of deportation is acutely high in rural areas, oftentimes leading to a fear of accepting targeted or extra educational services (Coady, 2020). However, research also shows that rural schools can create the conditions for sustained teacher-driven equitable language education reform (Paciotto & Delany, 2011) and for innovative ways of successfully engaging with multilingual families (Coady, 2019).

Despite the fact that educational research remains disproportionately focused on urban and suburban education, in light of the fact that almost half of the all school districts in the US are classified as rural (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017) and one-third of all public schools are located in rural areas (Ayers, 2011), federal agencies have increased their attention toward rural education. However, research efforts have been primarily devoted to the needs of rural students such as student achievement and assessment, teacher preparation, and access to higher education, while little rural education research has been centered on ELs and "intersectionality of rurality and EL education has not emerged as a subfield of education research in ways that could inform current policies and practices to improve education for and the social and emotional well-being of rural EL students and families" (Coady, 2020).

There is some evidence that rural ELs experience similar obstacles to educational equity as suburban and urban Els—all mostly low-income students of color—who confront well-known systemic educational obstacles in addition to language barriers (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The limited research focused on rural ELs shows that rural educational settings pose particular challenges to ELs and their families (Rathman, 2020; Lee & Hawkins, 2015), where traditional obstacles are compounded by regional isolation, lack of funding and resources specifically devoted to ELs, high turnover of educators, difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified EL educators, and lower teacher salaries (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Some studies show that rural teachers feel they lack specific preparation for working with ELs' language learning needs and their families (Hansen-Thomas et al., 2016; Coady, Harper, & DeJong, 2015), are distant from professional networks, are not always "receptive to participating to PD related to EL instruction" (Coady et al., 2019, p. 44), and are less likely to use students' first language for language and literacy development.

On the other hand, a small set of case studies of well-established rural EL programs show that rural schools can create the conditions for sustained teacher-driven equitable language education reform (Paciotto & Delany, 2011) and for innovative ways of successfully engaging with multilingual families (Coady, 2019). However, greater engagement in EL rural education research is needed to reduce the invisibility of the rural EL populations (Ruecker, 2016) and inform educational policies addressing the need of ELs (Chiccarelli & Beesley, 2017) toward equitable education in new rural destination sites. Scholars (Coady, 2020; Coady, 2019; Phillips & Cuervo, 2015; Roberts & Green, 2013) have been calling for researchers to reimagine current conceptual and operational definitions of "rural" and "rurality." These have been informed by rural-disadvantage and urban-advantage binary frameworks, static census categories, and "traditional rural imaginaries" (Corbett, 2015) "often 'othered' in comparison to a metropolitan norm" (Phillips & Cuervo, 2015, 1). The traditional view of rurality and rural education ignores recent and profound demographic changes, the impact of globalization forces, and the intensified interdependence between urban and rural spaces (Lichter & Ziliak, 2017). These factors have transformed rural education settings so that rural education efforts need to work toward "defining and describing rural

context and culture in research, examining influences on student outcomes, the use of interdisciplinary research partnerships, and future directions for conducting and disseminating rural education research results" (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017, 1).

Research on ELs in rural settings is still sparse and, when carried out, it does not have prominence (Coady, 2020). The steady increase of superdiverse migration of transnational, multilingual, and cosmopolitan populations in rural new destinations with no EL education tradition, the unique needs of rural education, and the historical inequity in the EL education in the US clearly suggest a need for the creation of a clear national research agenda to advance the systematization of Multilingual Rural Education as an emerging research subfield which places multilingual and shifting migratory realities at the center of the rural education research agenda. Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the efforts of rural districts toward providing equitable access to education to ELs and supporting their social-emotional health. Especially during this time of dramatic health and economic struggle of families living and working in COVID-19 hotspots, it is imperative we conduct studies to improve educational policies and practices for rural ELs during and after the pandemic.

English Learners and their Families during COVID

As schools closed their physical classrooms and instruction went online in spring 2020, educators across the country reported that ELs, immigrant students, and low-income students were difficult to reach (Sawchuk & Samuels, 2020). Barriers related to technology, language, child care, and economic and food security contributed to a haphazard transition to remote learning that ultimately left many of these children behind (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020). Specifically, lower access to broadband internet, before and during the pandemic, impacted students with limited access to digital devices or the Internet, limited understanding of English, and limited ability to work independently without support (Mitchell, 2020a). A recent Migration Policy Institute report (Hoffstetter and Mchugh, 2021) indicated that barriers to digital access were particularly pronounced for parents of young children who were low income, ELs, and did not possess a high school diploma—the overwhelming majority of whom were immigrants. This suggested that many rural ELs might have experienced interrupted schooling due to inaccessible remote instruction, which, if continued in the following school year, would impact ELs' future educational trajectories.

Equitable EL education practices also require providing comprehensible content instruction through first and second language support, which involves a sustained individual instructional support (Mitchell, 2020a). The US Office of Government Accountability (GAO, 2020) released a report based on a 15 school sample found that, in the absence of face-to-face language interaction, often the schools were unable to address this language educational need in an adequate way during the school closure,

> English learners lost opportunities to practice their language skills, according to school district officials and representatives of professional associations. Also, limited English comprehension affected the ability of families to assist students with the curriculum, according to representatives of professional associations and a technical assistance center.… Some school districts addressed aspects of these challenges by, for example, increasing access to the internet and devices and adapting materials and instructional methods.… However, many of the major challenges with engaging English learners in distance education remained. For example, one district mailed home a workbook in both English and

> Spanish to help students access online learning, but this did not address the needs of students who speak one of the other approximately 90 languages in the district. (GAO, 2020, no page)

In a dialogue exploration between a rural educator and urban educator, Agulier and Nightingale-Lee (2020) indicated that, while state, district, and school level decisions regarding adapting remote EL education were likely made with positive intentions, students in marginalized districts experienced a vast increase in educational inequities that were present prior to the COVID-19 pandemic also due to a lack of understanding of the lived experiences of students and families in both rural and urban contexts. For example, when shifting instruction to a videoconference mode, immigrant status might have impacted family safety and willingness to participate to remote instruction, as "Children living in undocumented or mixed-status households may have greater concerns about online privacy and security when learning in virtual settings, leading to decreased participation" (Sattin Baja, Boix-Mansilla & Strom, 2020). In an interview with US Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, the Secretary underscored the importance of family engagement to help mitigate the social and emotional well-being of children and families, citing that researchers now estimate that school-age children experiencing some mental health challenge during the pandemic rose from 13%-22% to an alarming 80% (National Public Radio, Oct. 19, 2021).

While the study at hand focuses on specific rural locations within the United States, it is important to note that similar concerns were observed globally. Abuhammad (2020) analyzed social media interaction to develop understanding around the perspectives of a general parent population regarding barriers to distance learning during the COVID-19 outbreak finding that eight private and one public parent groups reported significant barriers in the following areas: personal, technical, logistical, and financial. Technical barriers were heavily concentrated on ability to navigate websites and resources but also indicated a lack of access. This international source indicates that we likely have global considerations to act upon in regards to unfinished learning and equity in education, leaning into collaboration beyond our physical borders (Abuhammad, 2020)

The Study

This multiple case study sought to provide an examination of the educational policies and practices implemented by schools and educators serving large multilingual/multiethnic populations of low-income English Learners (ELs) in hotspot COVID-19 meat packing towns in the rural Midwest during the pandemic crisis of 2020. Specifically, the study investigated how, during the Spring 2020 and the following school year, old and new areas of EL educational inequity revealed themselves during the pandemic specifically related to immigrant and refugee English learners (ELs) and their families in two rural school districts, what resources were mobilized by rural schools to communicate and engage multilingual immigrant/refugee families and parents of EL from the perspective of the parents and how they perceived their children' access to instruction during the pandemic. The selected schools/districts were located in pandemic hotspots where ELs' families experienced particularly high health risks due to work settings, were characterized by increasingly superdiverse educational realities reflecting similar trends across the rural U.S., and, presented unique histories of place-based language education policy development encompassing a wide range of EL programs. The study contributes to the research subfield of EL rural education--typically overlooked in educational policies practices and programs--and provides findings that can critically inform future emergency and daily local and state EL educational policies and teacher

education and professional development programs. The data presented here represents a part of a larger study which includes ELs' teachers and administrators and attempts to give voice to the often silenced or ignored voices of parents of ELs.

Methodology

The study was conducted in two rural sites, one located in West Central Illinois and one in Eastern Iowa. Both sites are rural districts serving large numbers of English Learners and located in areas where meat-packing plants hire high percentages of the ELs' parents. Both school districts provide Dual Language (Spanish-English) programs developed in the last twenty five years. The overall research methodology is grounded in sociocultural theories of education policies (Levinson & Holland, 1996; Tharp and Gallimore, 1991) and language education policy (Hult & Johnson, 2015) that examine local school policies as complex cultural products negotiated among participants and stakeholders (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents, school boards) and informed by state and federal policies. From this theoretical perspective, the study of educational policies employs culturally responsive school leadership (Gay, 2010; Kalifa, Wooden & Davis, 2016) and a social justice (Mehan, 2012) lens where a strong qualitative component are considered essential for capturing the multilayered reality of the educational contexts (Johnson, 2010). The case studies presented here (Merriam, 2009) utilized this framework to systematically unpack the perspectives of ELs' parents in the districts and inform our analysis.

We employed qualitative case study design (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1994), studying two sites in the rural midwest where we explored how schools that share similar regional contexts with different administrative and EL program settings and EL demographics. The case study design allows for in-depth explorations of complex and unique settings by capturing explanatory information over a sustained period of time through a combination of data collection instruments and sources and explaining causal links and pathways resulting from new policy initiatives or service development (Yin, 2009) such as the case of the response of rural school districts to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper reports parents' interview data and also selected school data from administrators and teachers interviews and online surveys.

Research Contexts

The two sites were selected based on existing relationships between the school districts and the researchers. Specifically, two local university researchers had been in a continuous collaboration with the Illinois district for the last twenty years, while one researcher served as Early Learning, Special Education, and EL Director in the second site in Iowa. Both towns reflected regional and national trends, as new rural immigration gateways where meat packing plants have attracted increasingly diverse transnational labor in the last twenty years with large Latino communities. The schools also provided similar language education policy and practices, as they have a history of Dual Language Immersion program implementation. However, the school districts were located in different (bordering) states that presented different program and community characteristics. (See Table 1 below for school and community attributes.)

The Illinois Site

The Illinois site is located in rural, west central Illinois on the Illinois River and has long been a destination for immigrants. While the dominant population still reflects the immigration waves of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries from northern Europe--primarily Germany--its demographics sharply changed starting in the early 1990's, when Latino families began to move to this midwest town. The local school district, which had less than 5 immigrant students in 1993, had over 200 Latino students four years later (Brunn & Delany-Barmann, 2001). In 2020, the Latino population made up 49.5% of the students in the district, while Whites constituted 32.9 % of the total school population, African American followed with 13.1% and other mixed-race and immigrants made up the rest (ISBE, 2021). In 2020, 91% of low income students attended the district and 48% were English Learners which have increased by 10% since 2017 (ISBE, 2021).

The significant demographic shift that occurred in the Illinois site in the 1990s is attributed to the establishment of the meat packing industry which continues to recruit workers internationally and attract workers from Latin America (e.g., Mexico, Dominican Republic, Africa (e.g., Congo, Togo), and recently Asia (Myanmar). This diversity is mirrored in the school district where 15 different languages are spoken. To address the needs of its growing and diverse multilingual student population, the district has provided a K-5 Spanish-English dual language program since 2004 (Paciotto & Delany-Barmann, 2011) and continues to improve and diversify its EL education programming (Illinois School District Handbook, 2018-2019).

The Iowa Site

The Iowa site was located in rural, eastern Iowa and is an employment destination for immigrant families. A locally originated turkey processing plant is one of the primary employers for immigrant families, as well as local farms. When the plant opened its doors in 1996, a significant demographic shift was observed in the school community. Currently, the town includes approximately 40% Spanish speaking families and 50% of the students in the school district identify as Spanish speakers (Census Reporter, 2019; Infinite Campus, 2021). The Early Learning Center (ELC) is the focus for this study and approximately 60% of the students at the ELC identify as speaking Spanish in their home. The school district and the town have changed significantly in the last 20 years, seeing a large influx of linguistic and cultural diversity (Arthur-Miller, 2021). The district established a Dual Language program in proactive response to the demographic shift and has continued to find ways to work effectively with multilingual children and their families (Paciotto & Delany-Barmann, 2011). The community has multiple small businesses (restaurants, stores, etc.) that cater to the needs and wants of the diverse population, such as restaurants, multicultural performing arts, and grocery options (Taylor, 2021). The demographic of the families of multilingual learners in this rural iowa town includes undocumented workers that travel frequently for work (Arthur-Miller, 2021; Taylor, 2021).

Table 1
Community and School Attributes

School District/Community	Illinois	Iowa
Community	5, 502 (2018)	4,519 (2019)

Population		
School Population	1519 ()	1213 (2020)
Low-Income Students	91%	42%
Multilingual Learners	60% of total student population at elementary level (740 students)	60% of total student population at the Preschool - Kindergarten level (215 students)
Number of languages	15	6
EL Programming	Dual Language Education (K-5), ESL pull-out, ESL self-contained	Dual Language Education Co-taught and Pull-out ESL

(Census Reporter, 2019) (Infinite Campus, 2021) (Gee, 2021).

Participants

In Illinois, the participants of the data presented here include a total of twelve Latina respondents and four African parents. We recruited parent participants through a convenience sample (Tedlie & Yu, 2009) that included Latina mothers, three African fathers, and one African mother from one of the communities. We wrote a request for participants that was distributed to parents from one of the teacher participants. This particular teacher had very strong ties to the immigrant community and could often be seen on Facebook providing information regarding community resources and concerns. The Latina mothers were from Mexico (eight), El Salvador (two) and the Dominican Republic (two), while the African parents were from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (three) and Senegal (one). The interviews took place through individual phone calls (Latino parents) and one focus group video conference (African parents). While the interviews with the Latino parents were conducted in Spanish by the researchers, the focus group interview was conducted in French with the support of an interpreter.

In Iowa, the participants of the data presented here include a total of six participants, including five Latina mothers and one Latino father. A call for voluntary participants was put in the school newsletter and sent out via Seesaw. We contacted each of the interested parents of Spanish bilingual students participating in virtual learning and described the opportunity for participation further. We also provided this in writing through Seesaw, our virtual learning platform. The building principal and researcher for this article personally made the phone calls to parents with interpreting and translation provided by the school's bilingual health associate/building administrative assistant. The Latino parents were from Puerto Rico (2), El Salvador (1), Mexico (1), and Guatemala (1). The parent interviews took place through individual phone calls (4 participants) and Google Meets (1 participant) based on parent preference. The parent interviews were conducted in English with a Spanish interpreter. Parents and teachers participated in a Google form survey. Teachers surveyed included five white teachers, two of them being Spanish bilingual teachers.

Data Collection

Data collection in the two sites happened in a parallel manner and was context driven. The researchers in the Illinois site were outsiders who had a long history of over two decades of con-

ducting research, teaching, and collaborating with the district. In Iowa, the researcher was an insider and worked as the principal and Director of Special Education and EL/Bilingual Programs. In Illinois, we began by conducting an online survey of teachers in the district. The online survey was adapted from a survey developed by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE, 2020) to understand teachers' experiences during the pandemic. We modified it including specific questions regarding instructional L1 and L2 support for bilingual learners and multilingual family communication and engagement. We also included sections which were specifically aimed at understand ing the initial response to the COVID-19 crisis and then the response in the Fall of 2020. The survey guided the construction of grand tour and mini tour interview questions (Spradley, 1979) for educators and parents. Teachers were recruited for the interviews through the survey, and parents of ELs were recruited subsequently with the help of teachers, administrators, and school language facilitators through snowball sampling. All participants received $40 gift cards for their participation. The data presented here represents the parent population.

In Iowa, we utilized the same adapted survey for our teachers' experiences during the pandemic. Teachers from the survey were also given the option to be interviewed. However, only parent data was used for this study. A google form survey was used for parents that included five basic questions regarding their access to education during the pandemic but most details were provided through the interview process. The parents in the sample were volunteers from a larger candidate pool that included all parents of preschool and kindergarten students who qualify for EL services that were also virtual learning during the 2020-21 school year. A semi-structured interview process was used for the parent group, as well as a basic survey. The interview and survey was conducted in either English or Spanish depending on the preference of the participants. Iowa participants received three bilingual picture books for their voluntary participation.

Modes of Analysis

The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed with Sonix and the interview data was entered into MAXQDA, a qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis software (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). The interviews, COVID-19 education plans/policies, and districts' website data were examined through content analysis following Spradley's (1979) and Bogdan and Bilken's (2006) methods for identifying and coding emergent themes and through a critical discourse analysis lens (Klein, 2010; Van Dijk, 1991) focused on the implicit meanings of the policies, mission/goals, and policy implementation frameworks.

Findings

ELs' Chronic Absenteeism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing more than 10% of school days in a year, or 18 days. Dusseault (NPR, October 8, 2021) notes that chronic absenteeism is considered an important risk factor for failing school and dropping out and that "a student sent home repeatedly on quarantine with no live teaching may be similarly at risk of disengaging from school" (NPR, October 8, 2021). In the two research sites, attendance data shows a large percentage of EL students missing schools at a higher rate than ELs in other locations. Specifically, during the S.Y. 2020-2021, 36% of EL students exhibited chronic absenteeism in the Illinois district as compared

to 24% state wide for the same group (ISBE, 2021) and, compared to the S.Y. 2019-2020, absenteeism in S.Y. 2020-2021 increased by 26% during the pandemic. Significantly, students who qualified for both EL and Special Education services also experienced marked chronic absenteeism with 51% missing school compared to 30% of special education students statewide (ISBE, 2021). The Iowa Early Learning Center saw absentee percentages in the height of COVID-19 transmission as high as 58% of the student population and the average throughout the 2020-21 school year coming in at approximately 23%, depending on the month (personal communication; district administrators). It is also essential to note that from October-December, 2020, there were also significant issues with staff being able to provide appropriate services due to their own absenteeism related to COVID-19. Throughout October, November, and December, there was an average of four teachers and three paraprofessionals absent per week due to COVID symptoms/diagnoses/quarantine, which is approximately 30% of the staff. There were times where teachers were teaching their classes online while having COVID symptoms. Although Iowa did not institute state-wide school closures until later in the year, this particular building had to close down in November due to not having enough staff to maintain the state required staff to student ratio, even with the Principal and district athletic director teaching in classrooms, along with substitute teachers that were hard to get.

The absenteeism rate and lack of qualified substitute teachers created a difficult learning environment for students as well as a stressful teaching environment for staff. Often, teachers who provide additional support to multilingual learners and other vulnerable student populations were subbing in classrooms and were unavailable to provide additional support and appropriate instructional services. Much like the current teacher shortage, the substitute teacher shortage is unprecedented. Four years ago in Illinois, 17% of the need for substitutes could not cover teacher absences due to the lack of qualified substitutes (Mathewson, 2017). These shortages have only been exacerbated by the pandemic (Goodrich, 2021). This finding is essential to consider from a place of psychological, physical, and emotional stress. After-effects of COVID diagnosis can leave individuals exhausted, achy, and feeling unwell for long periods of time in some cases. Many teachers were working while sick or coming back to work while still working to recover. Students were also returning to school so parents could work, but still feeling tired from the illness. Without additional support, this was difficult for teachers and students. For multilingual learners, they were also trying to navigate virtual and hybrid learning environments without the support systems that they were used to having. A study done by MacIntyre (2020) specifically looked at the coping strategies of language teachers during COVID-19 worldwide, studying more than 600 language teachers, many of which working with those who qualify for EL/Bilingual services. Prior to the pandemic, language teachers often had additional stressors including high caseloads, juggling roles, and extensive school-to-home communication assistance needs. The pandemic increased the weight of these demands and language teachers were often trying to service far beyond their own caseloads during remote learning to make up for absentee colleagues. Language teachers in this study also reported stress due to the constant feeling of being unable to appropriately serve their multilingual learners across the remote learning/hybrid learning landscape and stress from helping them navigate skills when they were unable to login for live sessions, which was echoed in the parent data from the current study (MacIntyre, Gregersen, & Mercer, 2020).

In general, the research sites mirror a nation-wide trend, as ELs showed higher absentee rates than non-ELs across the country. Data reporting on eleven large districts (Lehrer-Small, 2021) clearly shows that "English learners suffered disproportionate upticks in absenteeism through the pandemic" (Lehrer-Small, 2021) with peaks reaching 35% and "In all but one district,

the percent change in absenteeism was higher among ELs than the overall student population" (Lehrer-Small, 2021). Similarly, according to a report from Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE, 202) absentee rates in California, a state identified with some of the highest immigration numbers, ELs' absenteeism was 34% of where during the pandemic compared to 19% amongst their non-EL classmates. The national and local absenteeism data demonstrates that ELs were particularly impacted by the school closure and virtual learning modes generated by the pandemic criss and were exposed to higher academic vulnerability. The following sections shed light on the obstacles and challenges those new instructional modes posed to the families of the youngest ELs.

Instructional Modes during the Pandemic

The pandemic forced U.S. schools to drastically change in-person teaching and learning and adopt a variety of instructional modes. Specifically, the Office of English Language Education (OELA, 2021) provides a window on schools learning opportunities during the pandemic identifying three main modes of instruction utilized by all U.S. schools between January and May 2021: remote, hybrid, and in person. Locally, according to online survey of administrators and teachers in both research sites, the instructional modes changed in similar ways, as the pandemic progressed: in the Spring 2020, in the first part of the pandemic, districts shifted to 100% remote learning with elementary schools resorting to delivering packets of photocopied instructional materials to all families; in the Fall 2020, an alternation of modes from all Zoom classes (remote) to a combination of Zoom and in-person classes (hybrid) took place depending on patterns of COVID-19 infections and quarantine in the individual schools and districts. It should be noted that the states of Illinois and Iowa had differing policies regarding in-person learning during the second part of the pandemic. The state of Iowa forced schools to offer 100% in-person learning much more quickly than Illinois schools, but both states provided parents a choice of fully remote learning through the 2020-21 school year.

Struggles of Rural Immigrant Parents Working in the Food Industry

Most parents in the two research sites were compelled to work outside of the home, being employed in the local meat packing plants and subsidiary industries such as food distributing, pig and poultry farms, and agriculture. They all indicated inequities and difficulties supporting their preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school children through the early school closure in March 2020 and the virtual learning modes in the second phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020-2021 school year. Many parents' immigrant status, their long work hours and shifts, and their limited or non-English speaking abilities made supporting their children's remote learning very difficult.

In the Iowa site, one father from Guatemala provided a compelling account of the multiple factors that were impacting his family life during the school closure in Spring 2020 and his and his wife's ability to help their children's remote learning. His family showed a multilayered vulnerability that resulted in inequitable educational access for their children,

> I am here in Guatemala because I got sick and my mother got sick with the virus, while I was here visiting. My wife is at home [in Iowa] trying to help the girls with their school work, but she is also working 10-12 hour days at the turkey plant and trying to take care of

> her mother and father who are elderly. We have had three family members pass to COVID-19 and it's really sad for our family when we can't come together to say goodbye to them. On top of all of that, my wife goes to pick up the learning materials and then tries to help them with the activities but the directions are all in English from the teacher so she doesn't know how to help them. My daughter is in kindergarten so that's really hard because she also cannot do most of the learning herself. I try to help her from Guatemala because I speak some English but with the time difference and working to try to send money back home even though it's not much, I'm not that much help. (Interview #001, Iowa)

During a focus group interview in the Illinois site, an African father of three school-aged children whose wife was still in Africa, poignantly showed how his life and the lives of his children were negatively impacted by immigration issues in intense ways during the school closure. As his wife was not allowed to join her family in the U.S yet, he worked an exhausting five days a week and 12-hour night shifts at the meat packing plant which made it almost impossible for him to manage his children remote learning while also attending to household necessities,

> It is very difficult. I work 5 days at night. I work 12 hrs every day.…Today I slept two hours and then I came here [for the interview]. At 2 o'clock I go and take my kids to the library and then I go to work....My children are sixteen, eleven, and seven years old. It is very difficult for me. Sometimes I cry because my wife is not here. I miss my wife…it is very difficult if your wife or your husband cannot come and wife and husband and children are separated…if the Biden administration could help the immigration situation [so that] all the parents could come here, it'd be very important. (Focus Group Interview; Dad #002)

Parents who worked at the meat-packing plant all indicated that their hours had been increased due to the number of COVID-19 cases at the plant. Not only did they work more hours per day, but some were asked to work six days a week instead of five. The inflexibility of work shifts to accommodate parents of children who could not join their spouses due to immigration issues also caused great stress and the inability to take care of children's educational needs. One of the African fathers said,

> I have difficulties regarding my daughter. There are three people in the house and they all work in the afternoon and my daughter stays in the home by herself until one in the morning. I did everything to change my shift to the morning, so I can be with my daughter after school, but they wouldn't let me shift. I don't have any choice and I have decided to move to another state. (Focus Group Interview; Dad #002)

The social emotional well-being of ELs' parents during the pandemic was severely impacted by the increased work and household demands and, sometimes, decreased financial stability due to being infected with the COVID-19 virus. One father in Iowa recounted how even though he had ten days of COVID pay while he was sick, it wasn't enough because he also had to quarantine while other family members were sick. Some parents chose to stay home during the height of the pandemic in order to protect the overall health of the family. One mother of five children reported how she and her husband both signed a voluntarily leave from work because they had two very young children at home, a baby of nine months and a four-year-old, and were afraid of being infected at the workplace, "My husband was out for three months and I've been out since the

pandemic started because we have two babies…and we are trying to protect her and also the baby" (Interview #005). While the children did stay well, both parents ended up contracting COVID-19. According to the Guardian (Chang et al., Nov. 16, 2021), meatpacking plants all over the country did not protect their workers adequately, "In the first weeks of the pandemic…[workers] said management was forcing people with Covid symptoms to continue coming to work; that social distancing guidelines weren't enforced; and that they had inadequate protective equipment." In Illinois, one Latina mother was very frank about her overall stress and perspective and said, "speaking personally from my reality, this has been so difficult and I feel like I need help and I'm screaming for help, because if not, I don't know where this is going to end" (Interview #008). The level of exasperation caused by the multiple stressors that could not be controlled by immigrant parents clearly exacerbated the challenges associated with remote learning for EL students.

During the second phase of the pandemic, within parameters imposed by each state governments, as the pandemic developed in different ways in different communities and districts, schools in both research sites employed a variety of instructional modes at different times and in a flexible manner that was also adapted to the needs of single children and families. This meant that, as the schools made an effort to ensure face-to-face instruction when possible, parents could decide whether to keep their children at home attending remote learning or sending them to school. For the parents who decided to send their children to school, this meant that their children would attend in-person instruction with a restricted schedule to the limited number of children allowed in the classrooms. So, most children spent some days or part of each day at home during instructional hours and, especially in the first part of the school year, schools might suddenly shift all children to remote learning due the detection of COVID-19 cases among students and teachers. In October, 2020 the Iowa site from this study had to shift all students to online instruction, with only four certified teachers, several paraprofessionals, the principal and building office manager and bilingual health associate left without a positive diagnosis at that critical moment to help parents transition to an online system of instruction.

Three of the six parents interviewed in Iowa indicated that a primary reason for choosing virtual learning for their children was that they wanted to be the only ones leaving the house, thus limiting the likelihood of spreading the virus among family members, being quarantined multiple times, thus missing work and pay. They all worked at the local meat-packing plant and indicated they had difficulty finding appropriate childcare while they were working.

One father who worked long hours at the turkey processing plant shared his fear about bringing COVID-19 back to his family, reiterating that he did not want to endanger his children even more by sending them to school. Although he was hoping for a different outcome, the entire family, except for the two-year old, ended up contracting COVID-19:

> My kids, they want to come to school and see their friends and teachers and it's so hard for them to do their work on the computer but I just can't feel good enough about sending them right now. You know if they get it at school, I can't work and that's money that we need real badly. I am so scared you know, already that I might bring it home to my kids from the plant too. There are always cases there and some people come to work sick so they can get paid even though we aren't supposed to. My friend at the plant, we were so close, he just died in October of COVID because he didn't get help from the hospital fast enough. I'm just hoping and praying all the time that I won't be next because I have heart problems. And the thing is, the 10 days of COVID pay just isn't enough. (Father of 2, Interview #003, Iowa)

Tyson, the second largest food industry in the world and employers of some of the ELs' parents in the Iowa site, "refused multiple requests from worker and community groups to share copies of their detailed Covid-19 health and safety plans or the policies they use to ensure sick workers can stay home with pay" (The Action Network, n.d.). Only in September 2021, the corporation reached an agreement with United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) to implement measures in support of its workers--mostly belonging to minority groups--during the pandemic. The agreement indicates that,

> January 1, 2022, fully vaccinated team members can begin earning up to 20 hours of paid sick leave per year.…Other measures Tyson Foods is taking to support U.S. frontline workers during the vaccination process include: Providing paid administrative leave for up to two weeks for employees who are fully vaccinated and test positive for COVID-19 over the next six months. (Tyson, 2021)

In addition, in a recent brief about JBS, the largest food company and owner of the meatpacking plant in the Illinois site, the Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC, 2021) addresses the inadequacy of the response of the industry to the COVID-19 emergency within their plants,

> An adequate response to COVID-19 would have required much earlier investment in worker safety, including personal protective gear and paid sick leave, for example. JBS' priority instead was to keep its plants running with as many workers as possible; amid the pandemic, the company posted record net revenues of $51.8 billion in 2020.

Most of the parents who participated in this study had been subjected to such absence or inadequacy of worker protection and compensation agreements. Some of the parents worked at the companies listed or at other local food manufacturing facilities but with similar working conditions. The lack of health protection and the lack of paid family and sick leave added to the layers of difficulties and vulnerabilities immigrant parents working in meatpacking plants had to face. These impacted their ability to support their children on multiple levels including providing what they felt was adequate at-home educational support during the remote learning phases of the pandemic.

Els' Parents' Language Barrier and Childcare Difficulties

When childcare was available because one parent or a grandparent was available, most immigrant parents of ELs still experienced challenges when trying to help their children access remote and online instruction during the pandemic. Many parents lamented that the language barrier did not allow them or other caregivers to help their children at all or satisfactorily during online classes or with their homework. In one Latino family, the father worked in irrigation and the mother worked as a nurse and interpreter for twelve hours a day. The maternal grandmother was able to provide childcare during the remote learning months, but she did not speak English and could not support their academic development. The mother said, "I work a lot and at times the complication is when the children are at home with my mom. It's not the same as when they are with me and I can stay on top of them" (Interview #006). Another parent indicated that their children sometimes were cared for by grandparents who were the language of instruction,"For me it's

very, very difficult because I feel like I leave a lot of responsibility to [the grandparents]. Sometimes my mom helps me, but she doesn't speak English" (Interview # 006). She held two jobs and felt unable to keep up with her childrens' school work and lamented that sometimes they weren't turning things in and that this was hurting their grades.

One African father expressed frustration for not being able to support remote instruction for his children,

> It was very difficult for me. My kids' grades were very low and slow. I didn't know how to help them out and it was hard on the kids. Because I don't know much English, I didn't know how to help them, but I watched the kids and tried to pretend I knew what they were doing and sometimes I fell asleep. I was trying to watch the kids and guide them, but I didn't know how. I wish the school prepared us so we could help, but this didn't happen.

Another African father experienced the same frustration at his inability to help his children with school work because of the language barrier. Both tried to get help from the one French speaking language facilitator and interpreter but it was not sufficient,

> It was very challenging for us, because my wife and I don't speak English and had just come from the Congo and we didn't know anything. And the kids who are little also were learning [English]. We did our best, we kept calling [the French speaking parent liaison] to make sure they knew what they should. My kids are very smart and they did their best. (Focus Group Interview; Dad #003)

A Latina mother expressed her difficulty helping her daughter with the packets of homework that were provided by the teachers during the first school closure. She gave an example about music education and how her low English proficiency prevented her from supporting her child,

> My English is very bad. How Am I going to teach my daughter the musical notes, when I hardly speak English?…I'm not a teacher and I cannot teach my girl because of my pronunciation. In Spanish I can try, but it was in English and I could not. I would teach it in the wrong way. (Interview #008)

The interpreter who translated the French interviews, who was also the school French speaking parent liaison in the Illinois site, said that this father "used to call me a lot to ask for help" (Focus Group Interview; Dad #001). The pandemic increased demands on parent liaisons not only to field the increase in communication with immigrant families, but also to find alternative ways of communication with them. Several parents indicated that the liaisons frequently drove to families homes and met with them outside of their house to clarify school communications, provide instructional resources, and to help with instructional technology. Oftentimes these visits were above and beyond the expectations of the districts in which they worked. One liaison from the preschool noted:

> I answer at any hour. I'm Latina, a mother and I'm part of this program and I get calls at all hours. It doesn't matter if it's my program, the dual language program, the Migrant program. If they need something from me, I'm there." (Liaison Interview #001)

Parents' difficulties with accessing technology, language barriers, and to meet families' basic needs were all underscored in the GAO Report (2020) on meeting ELL's families' needs during the pandemic. Parents in our study verified this with their comments in addition to their difficulty accessing special services during the pandemic.

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Special Services During Remote Instruction

Across the country, especially early in the pandemic, some EL students with special needs went months without special services such as speech therapy, occupational and physical therapy (Mitchell, 2020b). Four of six parents of ELs at the Iowa site indicated the following barriers during the COVID-19 pandemic: difficulty accessing special services such as physical and speech therapy and difficulty with finding childcare that would also assist their children in virtual learning. One of six parents interviewed indicated that it was difficult to access special needs services such as physical therapy and speech services which are provided by Area Education Agencies in Iowa, which worked from home longer than classroom teachers and building administrators in specific districts. One Mexican parent shared the following regarding Special Education services of her preschooler:

> I try to keep him online during his speech [therapy] time but it's hard. You know, he's four so it's hard. Also, I don't always understand what his teacher is asking to do in English, so I just hope he is listening to her. I try to offer him extra play time to get on for his sessions, but he doesn't want to anymore. He's only getting about 30 minutes of time every week, and I think he's falling behind so much from where he was on his goals last year. (Interview #002, Iowa)

Comments such as these are consistent with reports of insufficient or lack of special education services from all over the country (Mitchell, 2020b). This is the first time in history since the IDEA legislation was put into place that all special education services have been denied, although they are considered essential to the childrens' growth and development. The shift(s) to remote learning for ELs who also might have special needs is complicated and ELs that qualify for both services, were left without any truly appropriate services at some points throughout their remote learning experience. Parents and teachers of students with special needs reported that their students could not have adequate access to necessary manipulatives or adaptive equipment, services had to be spread thin so many students get the appropriate minutes needed to provide interventions, specific intervention kits were not designed for an online learning environment, and students with sensory input challenges struggled to receive services through a screen (Lange, 2021). When one considers the additional needs discovered through this study for ELs on top of the issues with providing appropriate special education services, the immense impact can be imagined. Parents were working side by side with special education teachers to try to provide interventions and help prevent skill loss. Parents reported this was extra difficult when the Special Education teacher did not have Spanish support available. As reported in Lange (2021) and found in our interview data, ELs that

qualified for special education ancillary services, such as occupational therapy, play therapy, behavioral therapy, and speech therapy were significantly impacted because the services are not easily accessible through an online option and parents of ELs had difficulty overcoming language barriers and work schedules to meet with service providers to get appropriate assistance in providing those services at home (Lange, 2021).

Digital Literacy of ELs' Parents during the Pandemic

During the first part of the pandemic started in March 2020, when school closed, after a a few weeks of no instruction, the Illinois and Iowa elementary school administration and teachers resorted to sending instructional and homework packets to each home until the end of the year as an emergency but very insufficient measure. After a spring and summer of planning and preparation, the new school year started with a sweeping use of digital technologies in an attempt to provide effective distance learning to all students. Teachers were creating multisensory slide-deck lessons, using video options to record instruction like read alouds, science experiments, math lessons, and even model play strategies through video, developing ways for children to interact by posting pictures and videos, sending students links to interactive online games that build basic skills, creating hands-on learning kits for parents to pick up that matched the weekly lessons and so much more. Parent engagement and family play activities were even offered online. The researcher and principal in the Iowa location offered yoga, easy family cooking lessons, and science activities online and offered contactless pick-up of the supplies needed outside the school. For many students, this created a best-case scenario within a worst-case scenario. However, when one puts themselves in the shoes of an overworked front-line employee without childcare and an English language barrier, the immense efforts being put forth by teachers and administrators was creating an unintentional learning divide. Parents of ELs that were working 12-16 hours a day needed to also figure out how to get the appropriate learning materials picked up, they needed to learn to navigate multiple online apps and programs, they needed to schedule appropriately so all children in the house had access to internet and a device at the right time, and all the while, maybe not even having child-care if all adult family members were working front-line jobs during the day. The principal and researcher in the Iowa location reflects on one mother crying on the phone describing how her child wanted to participate with her friends but she couldn't help her get on the computer. In the two research sites, the districts provided free access to Wi-fi connections and an age-appropriate digital device to all children. While this was an enormous effort that filled the basic gap in access to technology and the internet among families, it also unveiled the digital literacy abilities of most ELs' parents. In the two research sites, the districts provided free access to Wi-fi connections and an age-appropriate digital device to all children. While this was an enormous effort that filled the basic gap in access to technology and the internet among families, it also unveiled the digital literacy abilities of most ELs' parents as well as the opportunity gaps that exist and continued to widen during the pandemic. To help fill the void, bilingual health associates, teachers, parent liaisons, building managers and administrators were meeting parents outside school buildings, video conferencing through their cell phones, and meeting people on their front porches to help them learn to access the necessary learning resources but it wasn't enough. Parents continued to struggle and children were unable to logon for lessons.

Parents appreciate that the school provides the technology, as one Latina mother expressed, "It's really nice that the school has given computers, because not everyone has one"

(Interview #003). However, the technological support to help parents supervise their children's online learning seems to lag behind the technology. One parent expressed her frustration with her experience, noting that she needed more guidance in order to be effective with the technology at home with her children,

> I sort of understand you, but I'm also not an expert in these new programs. They changed to these programs, but they never told me how I was to help my son or how to use it. They never educated us on how to open this document, or get to this program and from there, send it. (Interview #006)

The comment above is consistent with the national survey conducted for Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors, a parent-led educational organization, that found that "82 percent of Spanish-speaking parents want more technical support with learning websites and apps and 83 percent needed more help navigating distance learning platforms" (Mitchell, 2020b). Parents wanted to support their children, but they needed sustained support in navigating this new instructional and digital terrain. For example, logging into Google Meets or to Teams for attendance or class meetings, kindergarteners and early elementary children required parents' direct use of the devices.

One digital device parents were able to use more successfully and in a sustained way were the phone apps the school adopted to foster teacher-parents communication. Parent liaisons in both districts helped teach parents how to use apps like "Talking Points" which could be used in different languages and made multilingual communication possible, alleviating the distance between teachers and parents.

Social Isolation of ELs through Digital Connections

Despite all the digital connections created and used during remote instruction, isolation was a significant issue for many ELs. One single mother of two noted that studying online at home was "somewhat traumatic" traumatic for her children (Interview #004). Another mother noted that she had to work long hours and her daughter spent many hours a day alone, as they did not have any family locally. She explained that her daughter became very depressed during the remote learning months, "She is really struggling so she can continue studying and graduate. She's taking precalc, chemistry, and is very stressed about trying to learn online. Being here alone so much, because I had to continue working, has really gotten her down*"* (Interview #007).

A Guatemalan father in Iowa site noted the struggles of his daughter who was dependent on her brother for remote learning,

> My oldest son tries to get her logged on to see her teacher when he can but he's in high school and has a lot of work himself to get done. She loves to see her teacher though when she can get on there and the internet is working. (Iowa focus group Interview)

The feelings of isolation of remote learning presented challenges for the children and for the parents, also because parents were often at their children's mercy to receive clear daily updates on the school expectations. Many parents complained of children saying they were done with their work when they were not. At one point in the semester, a teacher told us there were over 600 Fs in teachers' gradebooks, mostly from incomplete assignments.

Parents of students who were participating in AP courses or advanced courses mentioned that the level of frustration was fairly high for the students. Students felt that they couldn't be as spontaneous with their questions and that the online learning was negatively impacting their learning (Interview #005). A Latina mother noted,

> My fifth grade daughter has been looking at new topics and she is reading what they send her but sometimes she just doesn't understand. So sometimes it's a little hard for me to explain new themes here. I just don't know how much she is learning. (Interview #006)

Silver Lining/Positive Outcomes from Remote Learning

All parents indicated multiple positive outcomes of virtual learning. Among them, they indicated that teachers met outside their contract hours to support their ELs when possible, the bilingual health associate/administrative assistant, bilingual paraprofessionals, and the building principal all helped them obtain the digital devices and technology they needed (e.g., Chromebooks, hotspots) and taught them how to use online learning tools, such as Seesaw and EPIC books. Also, teachers successfully delivered lessons and provided hands-on learning for their students, and the school district provided food and other necessities during COVID-19 in a timely manner. Additionally, three of the six parents interviewed in Iowa indicated multiple opportunities the school provided that allowed them to participate in virtual family events offered at flexible times and in a recorded format, such as virtual family yoga, pizza making, herb planting, and story times. In order to provide optimal support in these online activities, all virtual family learning experiences were interpreted in Spanish as well. The flexibility that virtual learning allowed made it more possible for families that worked evening and daytime hours to attend the events. This represented an improvement of the in-person events for these families.

Parents were also asked if they observed positive outcomes specifically regarding their children's learning experience. One mother noted that, above all, the older EL students had learned to appreciate the work of teachers, as they could see all the effort they made to reach them during the pandemic, "they are going to appreciate it a little more, when they go back to school [in person], they will appreciate the work that in reality teachers do" (Interview #004). One mother noted that her older daughter grew emotionally and academically from the remote learning opportunities, "Personally, I would say that it made my daughter mature a little in her approach to responsibilities with school" (Interview #005). Similarly, the direct involvement of ELs' parents in the remote classroom made teachers' work visible and tangible for them and increased their own understanding and appreciation of teachers' daily work.

Another parent, who had expressed having great difficulties dealing with the anxieties related to the pandemic, remarked that one thing the pandemic did do for her was underscore the reality that we are here today but could be gone tomorrow. She said "It makes me think that we have to be compassionate and love each other, because we are the only family we have" (Interview #003). The social emotional outcomes of remote learning for children and for adults, though very challenging during the pandemic, has underscored for many people the value of the relationships they had with others. This same mother indicated that she appreciated having more time with her children and had developed a greater appreciation for what teachers do on a daily basis. She also found the virtual learning was a learning opportunity also for her, as she stated that "One benefit is that I am learning with my children. I'm learning more English and at times I get frustrated or mad, but I give it my best and sit with them and learn" (Interview #003).

Though the majority of parents did not indicate any "silver lining" coming from their experience during the pandemic, all acknowledged better communication with teachers and a greater understanding of what their children were expected to do for school. The struggles of trying to keep the family going while addressing the educational needs of children was clearly a challenge on many levels and the pandemic greatly impacted these parents as frontline workers and put them at great risk. At the same time, it is important to highlight the glimmers of hope and resilience that ELs' parents showed and expressed.

Discussion

Spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, this study explored the experiences of migrant and immigrant families and parents of ELs who were navigating the educational system and their communities during such an unprecedented health crisis. The outcomes from this study indicate that multilingual immigrant and refugee families faced significant challenges during the pandemic and that issues related to employment in meat packing plants and other service oriented jobs exacerbated those challenges. What the study reveals is that state education agencies must ensure schools are prioritizing robust instructional supports, parent engagement, and the building of capacity to weather future crises. In a best-case scenario, schools may emerge from these trying times having built stronger and more resilient systems, not just for instruction, but also in terms of multilingual and meaningful two-way communication with ELs' parents and immigrant families, while developing technology that all students can access and benefit from in equitable ways (Sugarman & Lazarin, 2020).

Another concern that our research and that of others (CDC, 2021a) have revealed are the rising mental health needs and disparities among students and families. The Center for Disease Control definition of mental health includes "our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices" (https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/index.htm). Schools emphasize three interrelated components of mental health in their social emotional learning (SEL) curricula: the social (how we relate to others), emotional (how we feel), and behavioral (how we act). However, the emphasis on mental health and SEL is addressed differently in different contexts.

Our research indicates that schools working with rural multilingual families must continue to strive to create supports that will benefit this population that presents unique needs and faces unique struggles and socioeconomic obstacles. According to national statistics and to Secretary of Education Cardona, schools need to make changes *now* to help students and their caretakers. Though the recently released federal guidance for mental health support (USDE, 2021) provides links and examples of best practices, the guide does not have specifics on how to apply these resources in rural contexts and when serving multilingual immigrant/refugee parents. One thing is certain, parents of children with mental health needs indicate more trouble "getting by" and finding appropriate mental health support than those in urban areas (CDC, 2021b).

Though the digital divide between Latinos and other non-Hispanic demographics is growing smaller, Latinos are still less likely than white non-Latinos to have an Internet connection at home (Kim & Padilla, 2020). Lower access to broadband internet, before and during the pandemic, is impacting students with limited access to digital devices or the internet, limited understanding of English, and limited ability to work independently without support (Mitchel, 2020a). This suggests that many rural ELs might have experienced interrupted schooling due to inaccessible remote

instruction, which, if continued, will impact ELs' academic achievement presently and in the future. Importantly, equitable EL education also means providing comprehensible content instruction through first and second language instruction through individualized instructional support. In this context, it is critical to unveil and showcase what instructional initiatives rural educators have created to fulfill these special instructional needs in the absence of face-to-face language interaction.

State and district leaders should support parents in developing digital literacy skills that will allow them to supervise and engage with their children's online learning. Creating adult education programming that focuses on digital literacy skills, navigating web platforms utilized by schools, and other topics related to supporting children's academic success can help to close equity gaps and lift longer-term education trajectories for children in immigrant families. Parents of children in preschool and elementary grades should be a top priority for such programming, given that younger children are heavily reliant on their parents to mediate and guide their participation in remote instruction. In addition, for both the short and the long term, state and local education leaders should ensure that students and parents of ELs have access to multilingual technological support so they can immediately troubleshoot tech glitches and barriers that might disrupt learning.

Conclusions

Greater efforts toward conducting EL education research need to be made to fill the lack of information about this setting and the invisibility of the rural EL populations (Ruecker, 2016) during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in order to inform current and future educational policies addressing the need of ELs (Cicchinelli & Beesley, 2017) and their families. Our paper contributes to these efforts by revealing the multilayered educational, and social emotional complexities and challenges experienced by multilingual rural parents and their children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While fundamental factors faced by immigrant and refugee families require major shifts in labor policies toward drastically different workers protection and compensation laws, equity in education for low income ELs from immigrant and refugee families in the US also remains an elusive goal that the COVID-19 pandemic has further magnified. Most recently, rural disparity has emerged as one of the most prominent factors intensifying educational inequities, largely due to the differential access to reliable technology resources and human resources that rural students are provided. Technology resources create the largest educational gaps are lack of internet in low income homes, as well as inconsistencies in internet services for rural home locations (Yang, Zhu, & MacLeod, 2018). What were inequity concerns around technology in pre-pandemic times became an educational emergency during COVID-19 pandemic with the total shift to virtual learning. When considering the specific language needs of ELs, which include specially designed instruction, focus on first and second language development, focus on oral development and web-based supplemental language programs as central pieces of EL education, the pre-existing technology gap and insufficient instructional resources could only cause more concern and lower the access to equitable education for ELs.

One of the large-scale solutions is an emphasis on how EL teachers and General Education teachers can effectively collaborate to work with students and their families in supporting them to effectively navigate the online and digital learning resources. This collaborative effort must take into consideration the work schedules of parents, childcare support if parents are to physically

attend educational workshops on working remotely, transportation, and linguistic support for multilingual participants, following Sugarman and Lazarin's (2020) suggestion to create "adult education programming that focuses on digital literacy skills, navigating web platforms utilized by schools, and other topics related to supporting children's academic success can help to close equity gaps and lift longer-term education trajectories for children in immigrant families" (p.13).

Teachers and school administrators have been working relentlessly to reduce inequities and foster a positive, connected learning experience despite the challenges COVID-19 has caused for the educational systems both locally and globally. The outcomes from this study indicate that multilingual students and families had significant challenges and that issues with employment in meat packing plants increased those challenges, even though they tried their best to provide support to their children during remote instruction. The EL children of our parent participants experienced a wide variety of challenges during the pandemic, while also finding ways to be resilient during such a difficult time. Identifying the social emotional supports and educational/technological resources to sustain and nurture rural immigrant families during times such as these will help schools improve pre-existent educational practices and policies and develop a more equitable educational system beyond times of emergency.

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