

COVID-19 EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT AND IMMIGRANT YOUTH INTEGRATION IN  
RURAL AMERICA

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**Abstract**

Over the past two decades, Latino immigrants and their children have been migrating to rural regions of the United States, and oftentimes immigrant youth face increased barriers to integration when compared to Latino youth living in urban areas (Liu & White, 2017). Previous research has shown how factors such as marginalization, low parental engagement, stress, lack of resources, and language barriers create disadvantages for Latino adolescents living in rural communities to integrate into American high schools (Michaels, 2014). Seeking to better understand the integration of first-through second-generation Latino adolescents in rural America, my study examines education support for immigrant youth in rural America during the already arduous times of Covid-19 in order to understand how crises further affect their integration into new destination American high schools.

Using oral history interviews, this study investigates the experiences of eight adolescents from a rural dairy community in northeast Kansas. This study was done to learn more about immigrant youth integration and academic challenges during a global pandemic. In this way, this study highlights the needs and challenges of immigrant youth navigating their way through high school in rural America in order to encourage deeper and more extensive immigrant incorporation. As well as shed light on the additional barriers that Covid-19 creates for immigrant youth to integrate into rural American high schools. Ultimately, through this study, I learned that Latino immigrant youth living in rural America face more challenges when trying to integrate into American high schools due to different backgrounds, cultures, resources and practices than their white peers. Although facing these challenges as an adolescent is already difficult, adding new restrictions and regulations due to a global crisis opens the door for more integration obstacles for Latino immigrant youth in rural America.

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 virus is an infectious disease that has transformed the educational experience for students across the globe. Focusing specifically on students living in the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused American high schools to shut down and transition to remote learning in order to implement safe social distancing guidelines and prevent the spread of the virus. With approximately 50 million students learning from home, families had to adapt to this change and learn new ways to support their children in their academic journey (Malkus et al., 2020). While it is clear that COVID-19 unevenly impacts students across the country, geographic location appears to play a very influential role in how this crisis impacts students. For example, there is already limited research and information on how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting rural youth in American high schools, and there is less research on how this health crisis impacts immigrant youth. Rural students already lack resources such as high-speed internet access and are oftentimes overlooked, so I predict immigrant students attending a rural high school during these unstable times face multiple layers of challenges generated by language barriers, being a first-generation student, having cultural differences, and lack of appropriate infrastructure for distance education.

This paper analyzes the experiences of eight adolescents attending a rural high school in northeast Kansas during the COVID-19 crisis. Through oral histories, I gathered information about how COVID-19 impacts immigrant Latino youth and white youth attending high school in rural America. By conducting an interview with each participant through the zoom application, I was able to collect data about the experiences and challenges that each group of students faced. Additionally, I was able to better understand how both white rural adolescents and immigrant

Latino adolescents are impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. I detected the additional layers of challenges that immigrant Latino youth face. Among those interviewed for this study, five participants were bilingual (English and Spanish) Latino immigrant adolescents and three were white English-speaking students. The variety of experiences shared by each participant allowed me to see how these rural students were impacted by COVID-19. Ultimately, this study served to shed light on the rural community in the United States during this global health crisis, while also incorporating the immigrant Latino community to better represent these groups and their challenges during these very difficult times.

### **Literature Review**

Parental ability to oversee their children's academic progress has become especially critical during this COVID-19 pandemic because schoolchildren lack the in-person help and guidance of a teacher during this time of crisis. Current research already shows how parental engagement influences an immigrant adolescent's academic journey. Zhen Liu and Michael J. White (2018) conducted a study to examine the influence of parental engagement on academic performance of immigrant adolescents between 9<sup>th</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> grade. By comparing test scores and parental engagement of immigrant groups with Black, Hispanic, and Asian backgrounds to native white students, Liu and White (2017) concluded that greater parental engagement led to higher test scores and lower dropout rates. In addition, results showed that first-generation immigrant Hispanics perform worse in high school compared to third- or higher-generation whites due to lower parental engagement (Liu & White, 2017). This study shows that parental engagement in an immigrant adolescent's academic journey is significant because it affects a student's ability to do well in school and the lack of parental guidance could cause a student to struggle in school. By comparing

test scores, this study finds that immigrant Latino first-generation students already face the challenge of low parental engagement leading to low academic performance. How does this challenge impact immigrant Latino students when a crisis such as COVID-19 rises and schools are forced to shut down and teach online?

According to another study conducted by Roche, Lambert, Ghazarian, and Little (2015), one reason why immigrant parents are absent in their children's academic journey is because of high levels of stress, social isolation, and linguistic and cultural challenges that lead them to rely heavily on their children for things such as translating services and other tasks. Roche et al. (2015) observed that the cultural and language barriers caused immigrant parents to navigate life in the United States through guidance and support from their children, so these parents rely more on their youth than the youth on their parents when it comes to integrating and communication. Immigrant parents often do not know how to engage with their children's academic journey due to the language barrier. These parents lack resources themselves and may not have access to alternative resources for translation and communication beyond their children. For this reason, this study suggests that immigrant youth have to navigate their way through school while at the same time helping their parents navigate their way around language barriers in the United States. This may lead to more pressure for immigrant youth when trying to navigate their way through a global pandemic on top of these other pressures as well.

When it comes to rural living, resources for immigrant students are limited. As seen in a study conducted by Erin Michaels (2014), there are several limitations that Mexican American youth (children of immigrants) face in school due to their identity/culture. Michaels researched immigrant incorporation and inequalities in school by conducting participant observation in a Pacific Northwest rural high school. Upon his observations, Michaels (2014) concluded that there

are institutional constraints in rural schools that make it difficult for Mexican American youth to have equal access to resources than their white counterparts. According to Michaels, schools allocate resources or services in a manner that benefits certain students and not others. For example, Michaels (2014) described that schools are often composed of monolingual English-speaking administrators and staff which make it more difficult for Mexican American Spanish-speaking youth to communicate and integrate. Michaels (2014) observed how white teachers connect more with white students (perhaps due to similar cultures and experiences), so they often label low achieving children of immigrants as “problematic” and refuse to help and provide resources for them. Michaels (2014) finds that for these reasons, immigrant students have a harder time integrating in rural high schools and are faced with more inequalities than white students. Rural living also poses limitations for the community as a whole. According to Martin Koch (2018), rural Americans face unequal access to high-speed internet than urban Americans. In his study, Martin Koch (2018) reported that approximately 24.6% of rural Kansans lacked internet access (p. 8). This can pose many problems when students are required to learn from home but lack internet access, and certainly various participants in this study recognized the challenges. These limitations can make it much more difficult for immigrant youth in rural high schools to learn and integrate during the COVID-19 pandemic because online learning becomes essential and in-person interactions are lost.

The COVID-19 crisis has changed the way students learn in school. With thousands of students learning from home, parents have become more responsible for guiding their children toward academic progress. As previously noted, Liu and White’s study revealed that immigrant Latino students may struggle in high school as a result of low parental engagement, so how does parental engagement affect an immigrant Latino student’s ability to progress academically when

the setting changes to rural living and a health crisis such as COVID-19 emerges causing schools to become completely remote? Even so, immigrant parents often do not have additional resources beyond their children to help them with language and cultural barriers, so what pressure(s) does this create for rural immigrant students when trying to also accommodate to online learning at the same time? Finally, as Michaels presented in his study, rural immigrant Latino youth have a harder time integrating into their high schools due to limited resources available for them, so how does integration change when going online? Does going online make it harder or easier for immigrant Latino youth to integrate? And, how do teachers perceive student involvement when going online? Hoping to answer these questions, I conducted this study to shed light on what it means to be an immigrant Latino youth living in rural America during the arduous times of the COVID-19 crisis.

## **Methods**

Data for this study was collected through human subject research using oral history methods. Participants were recruited from two rural dairy communities in northeast Kansas: Prairieview and Oakdale. Our research team has worked closely with these two communities for more than five years, so for this reason, we confided in conducting the research study there. Latino immigrant adolescents as well as white adolescents attending high school were recruited to compare and contrast both of their experiences during the COVID-19 crisis. Since most adolescents were under the age of 18, parental consent was obtained prior to interviewing the adolescents and participants also provided oral consent prior to the start of each interview to protect anonymity. Research assistants then interviewed each participant using the zoom video-conferencing application for thirty to sixty minutes and asked questions about community, language, family, school experiences, etc. to get to know the participant and learn about his or her

experiences. Through this process, eight zoom interviews were successfully collected and recorded; five interviews were with bilingual (Spanish/English) immigrant Latino youth, and three were with monolingual white youth. Upon acquiring all of the recorded interviews, they were each transcribed and coded for further analyzation. The coding mechanism used for this study consisted of *open coding* which Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) describe as an analytic practice which enables researchers to read “fieldnotes line-by-line to identify and formulate any and all ideas, themes, or issues” (p.143). In this was, as I carefully read the transcripts, I wrote down the themes, ideas, and words that emerged in each line of the eight interviews and picked up the theme of *COVID-19 impacts on rural youth* as a common theme across all interviews. Overall, this process directed me toward my research topic, and thus allowed me to draw careful conclusions about how immigrant Latino youth and white youth are navigating their way through a global health crisis in rural America.

## **Discussion**

The eight interviews conducted for this study revealed four common ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected immigrant Latino youth and white youth in rural northeast Kansas: generating academic challenges, altering educational support, highlighting the effects of independent learning and lack of parental engagement, and affecting immigrant Latino youth integration. This global health crisis was a shock to many people across the world, but in this study, I highlight how this crisis affected a less acknowledged group of individuals in the United States; rural immigrant youth.

For the adolescents in our study, the ability to progress academically became difficult during the COVID-19 crisis. White youth particularly expressed feeling lost with the transition to



online learning. In fact, one white participant described her experiences with the transition to online learning as follows, “we have some online classes, we just did half days, and nothing really got done or anything during classes because no one knew what to do.” Likewise, another white participant stated, “how do you make people show up to class when it’s online?” making it known that he noticed a lack of motivation from his classmates to attend classes when school transitioned online. These feelings of not knowing what to do along with losing motivation to log into online classes slowed down student academic progress because students had to adapt an online learning style that many had never seen before, and this generated many questions and uncertainties on how to proceed.

When it came to immigrant Latino youth, some lacked the most essential resource, internet access, required for online learning. In fact, when asked about how COVID-19 impacted her school experiences, an immigrant Latina participant responded, “we don’t really have internet at our house, so it was going to be hard for me to do online school. What I had to do was, I have to use my phone [...] I couldn’t really do zoom because for some reason, my phone wouldn’t let me do it.” This particular student had to rely on her phone’s limited services to complete school assignments, and although phones are useful, students have assignments that just cannot be completed through the phone’s services, so this created a disadvantage between her and another student who may have had access to a computer and could use zoom. Additionally, immigrant adolescents in this study were also thinking about their families and how they could help them during this COVID-19 crisis. One immigrant Latina student admitted that she was considering taking the following semester off in order to stay home and help her family. She stated, “my mom’s still considering if she wants to send me to school right now since [...] I have to take care of my brother.” Similar to Roche et al., youth in our study expressed the need to support their families.

With the case of COVID-19, my study finds that immigrant children face the pressure of having to choose between helping their family at home or focusing on school. This health crisis generated new academic challenges for youth in northeast Kansas as participants in my study described feeling lost, noticing loss of motivation, experiencing struggles due to lack of resources, and wanting to help their families.

Even with these pressures and struggles that rural youth faced, various participants also reported how the school responded to the pandemic and the educational support that it provided. Online learning calls for loss of in-person interaction and becomes dependent on technology. One way that students in my study noticed the educational support coming from their school during these difficult times was through the different ways that teachers tried to facilitate their learning experience. One white adolescent in my study voiced, “and then, you know, it went online, they introduced different programs to learn better like, we started using Selous for math.” In the same light, another white student that I interviewed confirmed that he too noticed how administrators tried their best to normalize the school year for students and maintain certain traditions so that students were not deprived of special annual events. For example, this student said, “I really missed out on my extracurriculars and other activities, there was a bunch of stuff I was supposed to participate in, but that didn’t happen [...] graduation was put off until literally just like two weeks ago, we did get to have it though so that was nice.” Students attending this high school in northeast Kansas had to be patient and wait at least two months after the school year ended to have their graduation ceremony. Immigrant Latino students also revealed that they felt supported by their school’s efforts to help their educational journey online. For example, an immigrant Latina participant’s lack of technology caused her to struggle with assignments because she could not attend the weekly meetings on zoom. This participant stated, “the teacher would send me the

homework and I'd study the homework on the normal book." The teacher accommodated to the student's needs, and therefore would send her the homework instead of having her attend class remotely, since she couldn't. This evidence shows that this high school in rural America was putting in effort to try to help students learn and keep them engaged. However, a lot of responsibility to stay accountable with school still fell on students and parents when school transitioned online, and immigrant Latino students felt this affect their progress.

From the various experiences that immigrant Latino students described within each interview, parental engagement in their academic journey exists in certain forms. For example, the evidence in the interviews conducted revealed that parental engagement exists in the way that immigrant parents help prepare their children for school and support their academic journey in any way that they can. One Latina immigrant participant recalled her first day in elementary school and said, "my mom picked out my clothes and my bookbag was already ready from the day before." Two other participants also described similar experiences about their parents helping them prepare for school when they were little. This shows that although the language barrier exists between an immigrant parent and the American education system causing immigrant parents to struggle to help their children with something like English homework, they still work hard to instill motivation in their children by paving the way for them so that they are well prepared for their education.

When remote learning emerged during the COVID-19 crisis, accountability to stay on track in classes fell heavily on students. Students lacked in-person reminders from teachers to help them stay on track and submit assignments, so they had to rely on themselves and their parents for reminders about deadlines. The immigrant Latino participants in this study did not mention parental engagement with assignments and deadlines when asked about online learning

experiences. As previously explained in Liu and White's study, parental engagement is already lower for Hispanic immigrant students than Black immigrant students and native White students. So, it may be for this reason that immigrant Latino participants in this study did not mention parental engagement in their online academic journey. Independent learning and lack of parental engagement for immigrant adolescents in rural northeast Kansas navigating their way through online learning did cause them to struggle. In fact, one immigrant Latina student revealed, "I did not really like online because I usually need someone to tell me *oh you need to do this and you need to do that* so I can get stuff done. And I would fall behind when I was doing online school because I would usually just put it like *I'll just do that tomorrow* [...] and sometimes it wouldn't get done." In a similar manner, the pressure of learning independently, when usually accustomed to teacher guidance, was felt by another immigrant Latina student who stated that when it came to online learning, "it was pretty hard, sometimes I would wake up late." Evidently, independent learning and lack of parental engagement affected rural immigrant Latino youth in northeast Kansas because these participants fell behind and sometimes missed classes. This shows that the COVID-19 pandemic trumped an immigrant Latino student's ability to learn in this region of the country.

Before to the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrant Latino students in my study were already feeling nervous about integration in their school. One immigrant Latina participant described feeling nervous and anxious prior to her first day in a new English-speaking school. She admitted, "I was about to cry because I was nervous." Feeling nervous at a school where others don't look like you or speak like you can definitely make integrating difficult. Another immigrant Latina student in my study stated that she was struggling with integration because oftentimes teachers were strict and did not allow her to speak Spanish in school prior to the pandemic. This student

described feeling out of place because “we weren’t allowed to speak in our own language.” Being restricted on what language to speak can make it difficult for immigrant Latino youth to integrate because they may lose desire to branch out due to feeling out of place. These examples serve to show the pre-existing challenges that already made it difficult for immigrant Latino students in northeast Kansas to integrate in school, so adding the pandemic on top of this made integrating with other students especially difficult.

Integration after the pandemic became almost impossible for immigrant Latino students because they did not have any in-person interaction with anyone from school and some personal connections were lost. A participant in this study described that online learning made it harder for her to communicate and interact with other classmates even her friends. She stated that, “it kind of affected our friendship because I couldn’t really talk to them as much,” when describing how online learning affected her relationship with others. The lack of in-person interaction with others made immigrant Latino youth in this study struggle to integrate in school all together because all interactions were lost, and students were required to learn independently without seeing anyone else.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study served to show how youth in rural northeast Kansas were impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. The evidence in my study finds that both white youth and immigrant Latino youth faced academic challenges when school transitioned online. White participants admitted to feeling lost and noticing motivation drop when online learning emerged. Furthermore, as Martin Koch (2018) previously reported, up to 24.6% of rural Kansans lack internet access and immigrant Latino participants in my study reported that this lack of adequate internet access made it more

challenging to learn. Immigrant Latino youth also stated their desire to prioritize family during the arduous times of the pandemic and considered taking time off school. The global health crisis introduced academic challenges that made it harder for rural youth to learn and access school. In addition, evidence in my study confirmed that educational support emerged from the high school in northeast Kansas. Teachers introduced new programs to facilitate the learning experience of students, and administrators postponed important events like graduation so that students did not feel deprived of certain things and to try to normalize the academic year during the time of global crisis. This educational support was a new way of supporting and helping students accommodate to the online learning experience so that they did not feel so lost and deprived of special events.

My study also highlighted the effects of independent learning and lack of parental engagement which showed that when immigrant Latino students transitioned to online learning, they relied on themselves to keep themselves accountable, log into class, and turn in assignments. Since immigrant Latino participants in this study did not have in-person teacher guidance or parental engagement, possessed multiple responsibilities to support family members, lacked functioning technology, they fell behind and sometimes missed classes. This shows that independent learning and lack of parental guidance caused these teens to struggle to keep up in class. Finally, evidence in my study suggests that students were deprived the opportunity of integrating with their classmates. Immigrant Latino participants noticed a loss in friendships and connections due to the online methods, clearly integration became especially difficult. For all of these reasons, I conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic generated new obstacles for rural youth in this region of the United States that deterred their ability learn and progress smoothly in their academic journey. Currently, a lot of COVID-19 studies focus on the impact of the virus in urban settings, so through this study I hope to have shed light on the issues that rural youth faced at the

beginning of the pandemic and how they navigated their way through these challenges. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed millions of lives around the globe and I hope to continue learning about the different ways that it affects people so that I can be better prepared if the opportunity rises to help someone out during these arduous times.

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