

**LATINX STUDENT SUCCESS: RURAL SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS**

by

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A Scholarly Delivery

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

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Approved:

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## **Scholarly Delivery Framework**

The final composite examines executive leadership and social networks through two artifacts. The first scholarly deliverable is a case study article that can be used for teaching doctoral or master's candidates in the field of educational leadership. The title of this article is "A Case Study of Los Barrios de Isolation: Promoting Higher Education and Career Opportunities for Youth in Low-Income Neighborhoods". This case represents collaborative efforts between a civic organization and a local school in a barrio neighborhood to help increase the graduation rates among Latinx students. This article offers teaching activities that can be employed to further understand barrio neighborhoods that primarily serve Latinx students. The final scholarly deliverable is an empirical article titled "Latinx Student Success: Rural Schools and Social Networks". This empirical article focuses on the strategies that principals of high-performing rural schools use to increase the academic achievement of Latinx students.



**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS  
Letter of Approval**

March 16, 2021

Dr. Harper:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #2021.03.007 for your study titled, “**A Case Study of Rural Secondary School Principals and Latino Students,**” meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Human Subject Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **March 15, 2022**.

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A [Continuing Review form](#) along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a [Close out form](#) must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR](#), unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to [SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR](#), potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an [Amendment form](#) to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate records for five years and making them available for inspection upon request.
8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include the study’s IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB##-##-## Approved: ###/###/#### Expiration Date: ###/###/####.

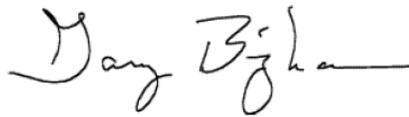
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an [Amendment/Continuation/Close out](#) form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Dr. Gary Bigham  
Chair, WTAMU IRB



Dr. Angela Spaulding  
Vice President of Research and Compliance

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, quiero agradecer a Dios por darme la fuerza para seguir luchando para lograr este sueño. Sin él, esto no habría sido posible. Gracias Dios por ayudarme a mantenerme enfocada para completar la misión en la que me propusiste.

This is also not just my accomplishment, but the accomplishment of my husband Ramiro and my daughter Camila. Thank you for your sacrifices and patience. I know this was a long road traveled for you two, but I couldn't have done it without your support along the way. You two are what kept me going each and every day. I love you two with all my heart.

Sir Isaac Newton wrote, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants". Mil gracias a mis papas Victor Rascón y Lucy Rascón. Este doctorado no solo es mío, sino que es nuestro. Ustedes dos emigraron a los Estados Unidos para asegurarse de que nos dieran una educación de calidad y un futuro mejor, y por eso estoy eternamente agradecida. Gracias por enseñarme a trabajar duro y nunca rendirme. Espero haberlos hecho sentir orgullosos. Gracias también a mis hermanos y hermanas por su constante aliento. No podría haber logrado nada de esto sin su apoyo. Los amo.

Thank you to my chair, Dr. Irma Harper. You kept me motivated, you kept me grounded, you encouraged me along the way, you held my hand through the entire process from start to finish, you advised me, you assured me, you challenged me, but most of all, you believed in me. Thank you for your genuine support, and I count my lucky stars that I was assigned as your student. There is no way I would have completed this program without you.

To Cohort 1, the first “Doctoral of Educational Leadership” students at West Texas A&M University, this journey was special because of all of you. Through this all, we learned to trust and lean on each other for support. Thank you for your friendship.

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**A Case Study of Los Barrios de Isolation: Promoting Higher Education and Career  
Opportunities for Youth in Low-Income Neighborhoods**

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Department of Education

College of Education and Social Science

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**Author Note**

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## **Abstract**

Living in barrios is not easy. This case study explores a grassroots intervention initiated through collaborative efforts between a civic organization and the local school. Barrio neighborhoods have internal and external barriers that impede academic performance and the quality of life among Latinx families. Changes prove difficult unless all stakeholders, including the Alamo Neighborhood Improvement Association, Isolation school leadership, and the families of the Los Barrios de Isolation, work together for meaningful transformations. This study addresses the tensions of working together and the tough decisions that need to be made in the barrio neighborhood to improve school and community partnerships.

*Keywords:* educational leadership, civic leadership, barrio

## **A Case Study of Los Barrios de Isolation: Promoting Higher Education and Career Opportunities for Youth in Low-Income Neighborhoods**

Curiel (2014) defined the term *barrio*, Spanish for the neighborhood, as mostly describing residents in an ethnic poverty community. Barrio neighborhoods are mostly relevant to Latinxs and thought of as fundamental for the economic and social mobility of Latinxs (Enchautegui, 1997). Onesimo-Sandoval and Jennings (2012) described the barrio as “a point of departure for recent Latinx immigrants, a space for an opportunity for Latinx residents and protection from the cultural norms” (p. 113). In other words, the barrio protects who you are and does not discourage the person you can become.

According to Galster and Santiago (2017), Latinxs are more likely to engage in violence, drop out of school, and have children out of wedlock. They are also more likely to move into housing units with higher violent crime rates (Hipp, 2011). These housing units and neighborhoods expose children and youth to community violence at an early age. Aisenberg and Mennen (2000) found that children exposed to community violence can demonstrate poor effects on school performance, loss of motivation, or negative classroom behavior. The researchers also found that community violence is linked to being a risk factor for psychological problems with children (Aisenberg & Mennen, 2000). Gorski and Pilotto (1993) found that “children cannot learn if they are worried about personal safety and security” (p. 38). The violence in these neighborhoods presents serious risk factors for children and their education.

According to Onesimo-Sandoval and Jennings (2012), the Latinx population is the fastest-growing population in the United States. They examined the trends of Latinx neighborhoods in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. The

study found that there has been an emergence of Latinx barrios and residents in those cities. In three decades, between 1980 and 2010, Latinx neighborhoods expanded by 232%. Barrio neighborhoods grew from 1,139 to 3,641. The concern with this growth is that a barrio neighborhood could limit opportunities for barrio residents.

### **Barriers for Latinx Students**

Latinxs fall far behind both white and Asian students in academic achievement and degree attainment, mainly because they begin school significantly behind their peers. Latinx students are, therefore, at greater risk of dropping out of school (Gandara, 2017). College enrollment rates among Latinx youth are also below average (Pstross et al., 2016). A host of influences and external factors play a part in this trajectory. In the past 20 years, high school drop-out rates among Hispanic students have been the highest in the United States, at 13% (Mahatmya et al., 2016). Drop-out rates seem related to high poverty, language issues, and recent immigration status (Martinez et al., 2004). According to Clark et al. (2013), “Latino students face daunting challenges finding access to support structures that will provide scaffolding for academic achievement and persistence through their early years of education” (p. 459).

Bohon et al. (2005) uncovered six primary barriers to Latinx educational attainment. He discovered a lack of understanding of the U.S. school system, low parental involvement in the schools, lack of residential stability, little school support, few incentives for the continuation of Latinx education, and barred immigrant access to higher education impact student achievement. Income, level of education, and higher levels of linguistic acculturation were also related to the perception of barriers among Latinx students (Becerra, 2012).

## **Educational Leadership**

Educational leaders should cultivate diverse and culturally sensitive schools and classrooms as diverse educational leaders, and teaching personnel are critical in public-school systems. It is important for “school leaders to engage students, families, and communities in culturally appropriate ways” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1282). Brown (2004) stated, “Effective, classroom teachers must be multicultural and possess the skills to provide a classroom environment that adequately addresses student needs, validates diverse cultures, and advocates equitable access to educational opportunity for all” (p. 325). Yet despite the increase in the Latinx population, “a majority of public-school teachers (81.9%) and school principals (80.3%) are white” (Rodriguez et al., 2016, p. 137). Khalifa et al. (2016) also noted that low school performance among students of color is related to the school teachers who serve these students. This is mostly due to their low expectations of minority students.

The teaching workforce in the United States remains predominantly white, even as the student body grows increasingly diverse (Lindsay et al., 2017). Nationally, an analysis of school district data from 46 states and the District of Columbia found that only one-tenth of one percent of Latinx students attend a school system where the portion of Latinx teachers equals or exceeds the percentage of Latinx students (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). Meckler and Rabinowitz stated, “Over time, the ranks of teachers of color have grown. In 1988, 87% of public-school teachers were white. By 2016, 80% were, according to federal data.” Does ethnically matching the teaching force with the demographics of the student population make a difference? Lindsay et al. (2017) reported that minority students often perform better on standardized tests, have improved

attendance, and are suspended less frequently when they have at least one same-race teacher.

School leaders struggle to retain teaching personnel and address challenges. Reed and Swaminathan (2014) stated that this makes it difficult for principals to build school stability, plan for appropriate professional development, build upon collaborative relationships, and implement long-term school improvement. Vice versa, good teachers will ultimately leave schools with ineffective school leaders, especially in urban schools (Khalifa et al., 2016). Urban schools are viewed as having greater challenges and lower academic achievement (Miranda et al., 2018). Urban schools are also known to serve most students of color (Branch, 2001). Murnane and Steel (2007) noted that teacher turnover is high in schools that serve a large number of poor or nonwhite students, which is one of the reasons some schools are turning to civic organizations that have close ties to barrios to rescue those children who are in jeopardy.

### **Civic Leadership and Initiatives**

Civic organizations are a benefit to underserved communities, like barrios, and can assist in providing central resources and programs. According to Wells et al. (2015), community organizations provide direct services and more often connect individual children to community resources. Civic organizations can also collaborate with schools or vice versa to address graduation rates. Wells et al. (2015) also found that sharing resources across organizations can indicate greater community capacity. Civic leaders and organizations are often the strong voice for their community and partake as change agents in their neighborhoods. Civic organizations can start grassroots initiatives, produce

programs to address the community's needs, and start projects such as neighborhood clean-up initiatives.

### **Case Narrative**

The Alamo Neighborhood Improvement Association (ANIA), a self-help group, cleaned up trash around a barrio neighborhood in east Isolation, an isolated metroplex in a western state. The barrio had a high crime rate and a poor appearance. The members wanted to clean up the area in the hopes that it would improve the citizens' morale. The ANIA removed a multitude of trash from the alleys between 10th Street and a major interstate highway. Community leaders and members from this association conceived this exercise as a powerful tool to help Mexican-Americans be proud of their barrio, language, and culture. They believed that once the Mexican-Americans had a good image of themselves, that they and others would see the value in their culture. However, dissonant members in this association after a while argued that this was still not addressing the root causes of drugs, violence, alcohol problems, and poverty in the community. Cleaning up the neighborhood was not changing the attitudes or behaviors of residents. The barrio neighborhood still had drugs, violence, alcohol problems, littering, and poor facilities.

So, the Mexican-American members of the ANIA who had grown up in the barrio rethought their efforts and became role models for the current generation. They had lived under the same conditions that the youth were living under, and these members decided that they could give the barrio youth hope for a future, not only by example but by providing assistance and scholarships for those interested in furthering their education. They wanted to create an educational pipeline of Mexican-American students and prepare

them for higher education opportunities. To create this pipeline, they knew they needed to expand upon their social networks and focus on engaging high-level roles of leadership in their organization to engage mentors in a variety of professional fields. Despite this pipeline initiative, not many of the barrio youth received a higher education degree. The members' good intentions were not yielding results and the frustration and anguish of watching these students' potential diminish caused tempers to fray.

Isolation Independent School District (IISD) had its concern about the barrio neighborhood in Isolation, not only in how it affected its residents but how it affected the school district. The high school drop-out rate at IISD was rapidly increasing. Moreover, the district had the lowest rate of enrollment of all time. This gave Superintendent Bob Simpson and his Board of Trustees an unsettling feeling. Following the trends, they observed that out of 30,751 students enrolled, Mexican-Americans had a drop-out rate of 11.5%. Why were these students dropping out? District leaders tasked Superintendent Simpson to gather information and find a solution to this problem.

### ***The Plan of Action***

Superintendent Simpson decided that his first plan of action was to collaborate with civic leaders, specifically Mexican-American professionals in the barrio neighborhood. He turned to Reverend Jacinto Murguia, Executive Director of Isolation Community Center (ICC), a prominent leader in the Isolation barrio neighborhood. He was highly involved in civic and political work and was known as an organizer for Cesar Chavez and his movement with United Farm Workers. As an influential activist, many in the barrio looked up to him.

Reverend Murguia was first on the list of people that Simpson thought would help guide them to a solution regarding barrio student achievement. He was devoted to his community, and most importantly, he had built trust with his neighbors and constituents. They met one afternoon on the sidewalk in front of the barrio. It was a bright sunny day, but neither man was smiling. This was the first time they had talked, and neither knew what to expect, but each considered the other as “a part of the problem”. Superintendent Simpson said, “Reverend Murguia, I need help. Our Latinx students from the barrio are falling behind at a staggering rate. They are dropping out of school. I need your help, and I need help from community members.” Reverend Murguia responded, “We have been waiting for you to ask.”

Superintendent Simpson, looked surprised and confused. The reverend continued to tell the superintendent that the barrio residents face significant social issues and barriers that should be addressed before academic success could be experienced. Simpson was confused and replied, “What are these issues and barriers? What can I possibly do to help? If I don’t understand, I can’t do my due diligence as the school’s superintendent.” The reverend smiled and said, “Well, this conversation is the first step. Right now, the residents do not trust you or your school. You must build a culture of trust before anything can be accomplished.” Superintendent Simpson lowered his head and said, “I need your help; I can’t help what I don’t understand.”

Reverend Murguia put his arm around Simpson’s shoulder and said, “Let’s take a walk around this neighborhood.” The reverend showed the superintendent the poor living conditions of the community. He told him about the high unemployment rates and the increase in violent crimes. He took him into the home of a single mother who recently

lost her son to gang violence. He showed him where the men in the community would wait each day in the hope of getting some type of day labor work to help support their families. Superintendent Simpson began to understand what Reverend Murguia was talking about. His heart was heavy, but he still wasn't sure what he or the school could do to help. The reverend saw his concern and confusion and said:

Simpson, you were not hired just to manage the day-to-day operations of your school; you were hired to make a difference! I need you to understand that our families and barrio community need a relationship with you, the principals, and the schools. Community engagement is key to school and student success. Trust needs to be your foundation. If you don't have that, you have nothing. Students will continue to drop-out!

They both agreed that working together was crucial to move forward.

Reverend Murguia and Superintendent Simpson knew they wanted to help and do something to improve the barrio neighborhood and those that live there. They started to recruit other professional Mexican-American civic leaders in the community. With Mexican-Americans not highly represented in higher education, this was going to be a challenge, but they knew they needed to build a task force to assert a plan to bridge the gap between education and minority students. Murguia and Simpson knew that cleaning up the neighborhood would help revitalize the barrio neighborhood and help instill positive attitudes. From there, they could encourage a mentorship program to help empower students to pursue a post-secondary education.

## *The Meeting*

Reverend Murguia and Superintendent Simpson called a meeting of potential supporters. All of the civic leaders gathered at ICC. As they entered the Center, there were whispers and reluctance to participate in the conversation. Reverend Murguia greeted everyone with a warm hug and handshake. He then proceeded to call the meeting to order. He gave a brief summary of the meeting between him and Superintendent Simpson. He and Simpson proceeded to tell the group that the school has data that highlights an increase in drop-out rates among Latinx students. The students are being afforded a free public education, and they are not taking advantage of the opportunity.

Reverend Murguia and Superintendent Simpson continued, “We have a plan. We need to clean our barrio. When we invest in our neighborhood, we are investing in our children. We have no doubt that this is going to change the lives of our children and youth.” Zeke Sisneros, a migrant counselor, stood up and replied:

Administrators don’t have high expectations for our people, and we live in a neighborhood that people consider as second class. I agree with Reverend Murguia and Superintendent Simpson; we must clean our neighborhood and change the mindsets of our people. If we don’t do this now, nothing will ever change, and our children will not have a future.

Charles Gallardo, an educator and coach contested:

We must demand an education for our students! Growing up, we were always told we weren’t college material or capable of succeeding at anything. I am tired of our people being marginalized, we belong, and our kids deserve an equal

education. Kids need to value their education, and parents aren't helping. We need to get everyone on board. Cleaning our neighborhood means nothing!

Sandy Carnero, a long-time social worker, agreed with Mr. Gallardo:

We have abandoned our neighborhood, and The City of Isolation has abandoned our neighborhood. We are divided! Our neighborhood is never going to change.

It's too late! Cleaning up the barrio is not going to make a difference. Our time is better spent elsewhere.

Amy Villegas, a community volunteer and retired school teacher, spoke out:

Mr. Simpson, you're a white man. You haven't been where we have. We have seen prejudice and discrimination. This affects our neighborhood every day and the people who reside here. Look at the schools. All of the teachers and administration are white. Kids cannot be what they cannot see.

Reverend Murguia and Superintendent Simpson took over the dialogue again and reiterated that there is still a long road ahead and many obstacles to work through. One of those obstacles is being able to recruit, hire, and retain more Latinx teachers to represent the diversity in schools. They also explained that the barrio neighborhood suffered from an increase in high school drop-out rates and low post-secondary enrollment. They tried to change the tone of the conversation and provide data that the school had gathered for them to present at his meeting. They also presented a map of the barrio and where they think would be the most effective area to start picking up trash and getting area residents involved.

Javier Martinez, a local business owner, spoke up and disagreed with Ms.

Carnero:

That's the negative mentality that got us here in the first place Ms. Carnero. Negativity is what has impacted our neighborhood. It is our responsibility as community leaders to keep our neighborhood safe and clean. It is our responsibility to increase community engagement and get our neighbors involved.

Luz Delia Salinas, a local restaurant owner, supported Mr. Martinez:

Just look around. Our streets are filled with litter. There are beer cans in every corner. We have created a landfill in our backyard. What does this say to our youth? That they don't deserve a nice neighborhood? That they are not worthy of a safe and clean environment? Our children should be able to play outside and have pride in where they live. If they don't have pride in where they live, what makes you think that they are going to have pride in the classroom? We have to do better for the next generation.

Victor Luis, a concerned parent, responded:

The sad reality is, is that some children may never leave the barrio. I am a third-generation barrio resident; my grandfather lives here, my father, and now me. I am proud of where I come from and where I live. Our neighborhood has many ties to my Mexican roots. However, we need to do things to improve our neighborhood. I have settled with the fact that the barrio is where I will be for the rest of my life, and as long as I am here, my responsibility is to make it better for my family.

Reverend Murguia then replied to everyone in the room:

All of your opinions matter. You were invited to this conversation because of your leadership in the barrio neighborhood. I value your input, but we all need to come

to a consensus and be unified to make this work. This is not about us and if we agree or disagree with the superintendent. This is about the future of our kids.

Reverend Murguia calmly continued:

It's important first to understand our neighborhood and the lives that these students live. Let's focus on addressing our neighborhood issues first. Let's plan to start cleaning our neighborhood, and if we do this, people will start respecting us, and our people will be proud of the barrio, our language, and our culture.

Reverend Murguia and Superintendent Simpson closed the meeting optimistic. Based on the mixed responses, they knew it was going to be a challenge moving forward, but they knew that in order to make this happen, they needed to have the support and collaborative efforts of everyone involved: this included school administration, community leaders, and barrio residents. As Reverend Murguia walked to his car, he looked out over the neighborhood, and his shoulders straightened as he saw what it could become.

### **Teaching Notes**

The internal and external forces that impact the youth of the barrio neighborhood in east Isolation are universal to barrios across the nation. The reality of poor academic performance, school drop-out rates are driven by inadequate economic conditions, violence, and generations of complacency. These conditions can help be alleviated through efforts such as the barrio in east Isolation.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

“Improving the lives of disadvantaged populations, whether through better schools, after-school programs, or teen pregnancy prevention clinics, requires proven theories of change (Brest, 2010, p.1)”. Collaborative efforts for change are not an easy nor a quick process. Employing a theoretical approach to social change provides a map

for unified goal attainment. The theory of social change is a thorough picture of how and why the desired change is expected to happen in a chosen setting. The theory of change defines long-term goals and then maps backward to identify necessary preconditions (Brest, 2010). To build powerful social movements, three tenets must be aligned a) political opportunity, b) organizational infrastructure, and c) engaged individuals (Kim, 2014). For significant change to occur, all three elements must be solid.

Several non-profit organizations such as the Alamo Neighborhood Improvement Association have utilized their own unique theory of change to create and implement their intervention for change. Organizations such as Outreach in the Barrio, Barrio Nuevo, Healing Urban Barrios, and Los Barrios de Amarillo are all working collaboratively with their schools and communities to improve lives in Barrios.

### ***Poverty and the Barrios***

Poverty, along with other challenges, is among the most detrimental condition affecting student's academic outcomes. Understanding one's barrio neighborhood and its composition can unveil the potential for academic resources, collaborative neighborhood efforts, targeting essential community stakeholders, and exploring teaching and leadership practices. Barrio neighborhoods have the potential for various growth opportunities.

Poverty-limited settings like barrio neighborhoods can play a critical role in shaping families' experiences. Poverty can restrict the housing choices of low-income families and place them in impoverished neighborhoods (Fauth et al., 2007). Poor neighborhoods may also have negative impacts on people's lives and their position in society (Eijk, 2010). South and Crowder (1997) explained that income might also impact

the likelihood of escaping poor neighborhoods. Neighborhood characteristics and conditions seem to be an indicator of the lack of economic opportunities, therefore, affecting students' academic outcomes.

The beliefs that students who are living in poverty, in poor barrio neighborhoods, and the lack of educational access can determine the likelihood of success for many Latinx children and youth. The poorer the neighborhood, the harder it is to establish positive educational outcomes, and the harder it is to obtain a post-secondary education. Students who also do not have familial support or attend culturally responsive schools can also lack the ability to be successful in school. Barrio neighborhoods have fewer resources than affluent neighborhoods, therefore, not giving children an equal playing field or access to basic services. Latinx students are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to earn a college education than white students.

## **Teaching Activities**

### ***Applying a Theoretical Lens of Change***

- I. Improving the living conditions and enhancing the quality of life in barrios is an extreme challenge. Solving this problem could be characterized as a “wicked” problem. According to Rittel and Webber (1973):

Wicked problems cannot be defined; they continue to change as we study them; the choice of an appropriate response or solution is never clear-cut; there is little if any room for trial and error; every problem is essentially unique; every problem is tangled up with other issues and may be a symptom of a larger, more complex challenge, and there isn't much margin for error in understanding the issues and in choosing strategies for

handling the problem because every choice creates new problems of its own. (cited in Ramaley, 2014, p.11-12)

- Applying this definition of wicked problems, explain why improving the living conditions of barrios is such a complex issue.
- What conditions must be confronted to create equity in barrios?
- Is equity possible? Is it culturally desirable for all involved? Is total buy-in from all parties achievable?

II. Pérez (2017) explains that barrios are “precious spaces that affirm cultural identities, nurture popular cultural production, and provide sanctuary for people with long histories of displacement, land loss, repression, and collective struggle (p.18).”

- Accepting this analysis about barrios, explain why a change in the barrios could be a type of “cultural resistance”?

### ***Out of Class Activity***

Implement a website search of the following barrio interventions and discuss what elements of change were required/or implemented to create a positive change:

- Outreach in the Barrio
- Barrio Nuevo
- Healing Urban Barrios
- Los Barrios de Amarillo

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## **Latinx Student Success: Rural Schools and Social Networks**

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies that principals of high-performing rural schools use to increase the academic achievement of Latinx students. Therefore, rural school leaders are challenged to implement effective strategies including utilizing social networks. **Research Method:** In this qualitative, multiple case study, interviews were conducted with five rural secondary school principals in Texas.

**Findings:** The findings in this study indicated that rural principals contributed their student success to (a) support/resources, (b) communication, (c) relationships, (d) involvement, (e) collaboration/partnerships, and (f) rural setting characteristics.

**Conclusion:** Findings suggest that principals value and nurture relationships between community organizations, their students' families, and their faculty. Developing these strong relations was 'the basis for their student success.

*Keywords:* Latinxs academic achievement, rural educational leadership, partnerships, social networks, multiple case study

## **Latinx Student Success: Rural Schools and Social Networks**

Latinxs are one of the largest and fastest-growing minority groups in the United States (Lee & Klugman, 2013). Crosnoe (2005) stated, “Effectively serving Hispanic youth is one of the most pressing problems facing the American educational system in the new century” (p. 562). According to Hughes et al. (2015), “Of the four largest ethnic groups of students in U.S. schools, Latinx students have the lowest rate of high school completion” (p. 443) and also the lowest post-secondary enrollment (Nunez, 2014). While the United States has a strong educational system, the attainment rate amongst Latinx students is only 30% (Anthony & Elliot, 2019).

The achievement gap among Latinx students requires effective leadership that sets expectations and creates an inclusive learning environment. A study by Khanal et al. (2019) supported leadership frames of “high levels of interest, collaboration, the prohibition of political activities inside the school, approachability for parents, transparent recruitment of high-quality teachers and goal-setting for teachers” (p. 16). Utilizing a social network is also vital. (Adger, 2001). “Partnerships between community-based organizations and schools have been recommended as vehicles to assist students in achieving academic success” (p. 8). Parent engagement and support can also lead to positive academic outcomes; however, many low-income families experience difficulties being involved or helping their children with their homework due to their own lack of educational experiences and economic resources (Civita et al., 2004). Therefore, community organizations can be vital to these Latinx students’ and can boost academic performance.

School leaders should take charge in addressing Latinx student needs and making critical decisions for them. To lead an effective school that promotes student success, school leaders or principals need a social network of individuals and groups to help in this effort. To properly form relationships and connect with community resources, principals should “be involved in the community, conduct regular assessments, and provide the mechanism for involvement to occur. The proactive principal must go out in the community and actively recruit” (Rieg & Marcoline, 2008, p. 12).

### **Research Problem**

Poor academic achievement of Latinx students was the underlying problem this study explored. The purpose of this study was to examine strategies that rural secondary school principals utilize to increase the academic advancement of Latinx students. The overarching research question for this study was, “What strategies are principals in high performing, rural secondary schools using to increase the academic advancement of Latinx students?” Sub research questions were:

- What role do community organizations play in the academic advancement of rural Latinx students, according to the perspective of a rural secondary school principal?
- What role does family involvement play in the academic advancement of rural Latinx students, according to the perspective of a rural secondary school principal?
- What role does faculty involvement play in the academic advancement of rural Latinx students, according to the perspective of a rural secondary school principal?

## **Review of Literature**

As school leaders it is critical to understand and learn how to address the underachievement of Latinx students. This matter remains untapped by many schools, particularly those that are rural. This literature review addresses the educational barriers students are presented with, the achievement gaps amongst Latinx students, rural settings, and the importance of effective leadership. Understanding these teaching points could be the secret sauce to success amongst Latinx students in rural schools.

### ***Barriers for Latinx Students***

Latinxs have the lowest college graduation rates compared to other ethnic groups (Lopez & Fry, 2013). Specifically, Latinx first-generation college students experience conflicts that negatively affect their academic achievement (Burgos-Cienfuegos et al., 2015) and are less likely to graduate due to a wide variety of barriers. These barriers included a lack of family support, financial strains, and poor academic preparation (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Similarly, Bohon et al. (2005) also uncovered six primary barriers to Latinx educational attainment. They discovered (a) lack of understanding of the United States school system, (b) low parental involvement in the schools, (c) lack of residential stability, (d) little school support, (e) few incentives for the continuation of Latinx education, (f) and barred immigrant access to higher education (Bohon et al., 2005) impact student achievement.

Low-income Latinx students in their early education years also experience barriers that hinder their academic success. Income, level of education, and higher levels of linguistic acculturation were related to the perception of barriers among Latinx students (Becerra, 2012). According to Clark et al. (2013), “Latino students face daunting

challenges finding access to support structures that will provide scaffolding for academic achievement and persistence through their early years of education” (p. 459). Bridging or helping to understand these gaps is critical to helping students succeed academically.

### ***Latinxs and Achievement Gaps***

Latinx students are at greater risk of dropping out of high school and continue to be underrepresented in higher education (Ojeda et al., 2014). Over the years, Latinxs have not performed well in the public-school system and continue to have one of the lowest post-secondary enrollment and degree attainment numbers among other racial groups in the United States (Nunez, 2014). In a study by the Pew Research Center (2002), 57% of Hispanic high school students complete high school, and only 10% attain a college degree. Among white students, 89% graduate from high school, and 30% attain a college degree (Pew Research Center, 2002). However, in the last few years, the college enrollment rate among Latinxs has increased. The enrollment rate grew from 32% in 1999 to 47% in 2016 (Gramlich, 2017). However, despite the fact that enrollment of Latinx students in higher education has increased, retention has not.

Latinx students are entering college unprepared and ill-equipped to handle the coursework offered by their school. Long et al. (2009) indicated that “students who are low income, Hispanic, and black are least likely to be prepared for college-level coursework” (p. 2). Therefore, the need for remedial classes among these students is high (Long et al., 2009) and leads to dropping out of school. So, it is critical to implement an early intervention in public schools and prepare students for the rigorous coursework offered in post-secondary institutions.

A student's success is merely represented in the learning opportunities they receive from their school. Irizarry (2012) stated, "Most public schools serving populations composed largely of students of color and students from lower socioeconomic strata are underfunded and overcrowded" (p. 299). Therefore, lower socioeconomic schools offer limited resources, experiences, courses, and curriculum (Irizarry, 2012). However, ensuring appropriate academic resources are provided to students is vital for their success. Irizarry found:

Academic pathways students pursued at their respective high schools were largely reflective of the opportunity structure and school climate in their respective institutions. Course offerings and extracurricular learning opportunities are undoubtedly seminal aspects influencing students' capacity to pursue higher education. (p. 301)

Torres (2019) discovered that Latinx students who obtained academic success in college were held to expectations from their parents to pursue higher education, set goals, utilize support services, and possess independent and assertive characteristics. However, students who leave school deal with social and economic impacts that alter their life. Some of these impacts include finding ways to finance their education, family pressure to contribute money to the household, or social isolation (Little & Mitchell, 2018). More needs to be done to prepare these students for success in college and help eliminate the barriers that hold so many students back from completion.

In the past 20 years, high school drop-out rates among Latinx students are the highest in the United States, at 13% (Mahatmya et al., 2016). Despite some efforts to close the achievement gap, Latinx students continue to drop out of high school more than

their white peers (Casellas & Shelly, 2012; Irizarry, 2012; Torres, 2019). According to Zamora et al. (2019), “64% percent of the entire Latinx population has an educational career that peaks at a high school diploma or less, as compared to their White counterparts at 37.2%” (p. 215). Casellas and Shelly (2012) also stated, “Latino students are significantly more likely than White students to enter kindergarten unprepared to learn, to have to repeat a grade, to be suspended or expelled, and to drop out” (p. 260).

Furthermore, Latinx students continue to underperform at all levels of education. Maurizi et al. (2013) uncovered that the “educational attainment of Latinx youth is remarkably low on almost every marker of academic achievement (e.g., achievement test scores, drop-out rates, graduation rates, college attendance)” (p. 323). Drop-out rates seem related to high poverty, language issues, and recent immigration status (Martinez et al., 2004). Latinx students experience barriers and conflicts that hinder their opportunity to attend or excel at a post-secondary institution.

### ***Rural Communities and Latinxs***

There are some Latinx students who find rural communities to be a challenge. According to Riggs et al. (2010), “Youth from Latino families living in rural communities may confront similar challenges including language barriers, relatively low socioeconomic and/or immigrant status, and high levels of family mobility and stress” (p. 418). Rural schools oftentimes lack high-quality teachers that are able to conform to Latinx students’ diverse needs. According to Goodpaster et al. (2012), rural schools have a hard time filling vacancies and retaining teachers. This is partly due to the social isolation they encounter in rural communities (Fry & Anderson, 2011).

According to a study conducted by Diaz (2005), Latinx students, particularly students who were born outside of the United States, have more of an attachment to their rural school despite some of their challenges. In this study, school attachment means “a sense of belonging of feeling like part of the school” (p. 300), which can be positive towards a student’s academic success. Part of the reason is due to the environment and small class size. Students who have an attachment to their school are less likely to engage in risky behaviors and more apt to be engaged in extra-curricular activities. Lee and Klugman (2013) determined that schools in communities with a high concentration of Latinx students were a positive attribute. They found that this kind of environment created a sense of belonging, held students to higher educational expectations, and instilled positive attitudes toward school, which helps raise Latinx achievement (Lee & Klugman, 2013). Also, students who reside in homogeneous neighborhoods are more likely to thrive due to their similar cultural principles (Brady, 2019). These students are also more apt to receive positive influences, have better test scores, and have higher educational ambitions.

### ***Effective Leadership***

School leadership has an impact on Latinx academic achievement. This is critical because the socioeconomic disadvantages and language barriers faced by many Hispanic youths create challenges that could impact upward mobility (Crosnoe, 2005) and create barriers to academic success. It is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure that their teachers are culturally responsive and that the vision of their campus instills social justice (Khalifa, 2011). Khalifa et al. (2016) suggested:

Such leadership activities will vary from one context to the next, but overall, school resources, leadership teams for cultural responsiveness, and mentoring (or challenging) teachers for culturally responsive teaching must be a constant part of the ongoing professional development in schools. (p.1287)

Culturally responsive school leaders are accountable for creating an environment that is conducive to social justice. Preparing teachers to be culturally responsive is crucial for that environment.

It is also important to lead a culturally responsive school geared towards inclusivity. Haines et al. (2015) discovered that families and community partners “associated the principal’s personal attributes with facilitating partnerships and creating an inviting school culture, including the principal’s enthusiasm, compassion, approachability, and ability to nurture relationships with students, families, school staff, and community members” (p. 233). Principals and their leadership practices are vital to ensuring school success and can create meaningful change both internally and externally.

A study conducted by Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) affirmed that school leaders who practice and promote shared leadership among their teachers and professional learning communities could improve student achievement. Shared values and ideas also strengthen when everyone works together for a common goal. Providing instructional coaching can also be beneficial to teachers, particularly those serving low-income schools. Teemant (2014) noted that this type of coaching provides teachers with extended support, knowledge, and growth.

Principals who also have ties to community organizations or resources can increase academic achievement among Latinx students. Quinones and FitzGerald (2019)

reported, “The integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth, and community development, and engagement with and in the community via partnerships is intended to improve student learning and cultivate stronger families and healthier communities” (p. 344). Therefore, it is important for school leaders to engage with community organizations and their leaders to put educational support systems for students in place.

Principals have the ability to build and forge relationships between schools and communities (Green, 2015). Khalifa (2012) reported, “The principal’s role as a community leader—including high principal visibility in the community and advocacy for community causes—leads to trust and rapport between school and community” (p. 424). Leadership plays a critical part in children’s lives and their continued academic success. Curry et al. (2016) concurred that “educational leaders and policymakers have become keenly aware that schools cannot effectively enhance student educational outcomes independently of the larger social context of families and communities” (p. 842). Collaborative and or reciprocal relationships between school leaders, families, and the community can help students thrive academically.

For many low-income Latinx students, community youth development programs are also important (Riggs et al., 2010). A study by Wells et al. (2015) discussed drop-out prevention programs and how schools’ collaborative efforts with community organizations, agencies, or partners can help improve graduation rates. According to Wells et al. (2015), “Communities in schools may therefore be uniquely well-positioned to inform drop-out prevention initiatives about interdependencies of child development; family needs; educational, health and human service capacity; the local economy; and

business sector priorities” (p. 49). Community organizations are more apt to provide direct services to students and their families. Miller (2011a) found that organizations and agencies can help find resources for students and their families who may be homeless. These organizations can help guide and equip school leaders with the tools and knowledge needed to assist these students and or implement effective school practices that address these barriers.

### ***Strategies for Success***

A strong community support system or a social network of parents, communities, and educators is important for students (Ishimaru, 2013), especially those who live in poverty. While some of the stakeholders in the social network may not be able to funnel money directly into homes, they can set up a food drive for those with food insecurity and donate to clothing closets so students have clothes or jackets to wear in the cold months. They can host toy drives for children who may not get a Christmas gift or provide a scholarship for a student to attend an after-school program. Nonetheless, to take advantage of these programs, low-income families must take advantage of the services provided by their school or other community organizations. Without all of the social networks working together, children suffer by not receiving the basic resources needed to be successful both in and outside the classroom. These relationships, for some students, are a lifeline and can positively impact a student’s future. Bryan et al. (2017) found the following:

Broadly defined, school-family-community partnerships are collaborative relationships and initiatives between school professionals, families, and community members (such as business leaders or faith-based organizations) for

the purpose of implementing programs that address students' complex needs; increase their educational resilience and strengths; and foster their academic, social/emotional, and college-career development. (p. 1)

Bryan et al. (2017) also provided evidence that school, family, and community partnerships could increase academic success, improve attendance, graduation rates, and improve social and emotional behaviors. Epstein et al. (2011) listed six types of involvement or practices needed for schools, families, and communities to work together. These included parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2011). All of these variables benefit children's learning.

A parent's role is important in their child's educational journey and can positively influence their child's academic and college aspirations and enhance student outcomes (Curry & Holter, 2019; Gil-Flores et al., 2011; Pstross et al., 2016). Burke (2017) found that "rural (vs. urban) Latino families demonstrated significantly stronger family-school partnerships" (p. 60) but have fewer resources to offer families. Support from parents can also set expectations and lay the foundation for future success. Lynch and Kim (2017) found that "younger children may experience greater success when they receive more scaffolded help from parents" (p. 48).

Lowenhaupt (2012) found family engagement strategies that have been successful among Latinx families. According to the results of this study, having school interpreters for Spanish-speaking families was important and regularly provided (Lowenhaupt, 2012). Lowenhaupt discovered that families felt more comfortable participating in their child's activities, events, and meetings when bilingual staff was present. The researcher

also reported, “the importance of personal, direct communication as a method of ensuring accessibility for Spanish-speaking families” (Lowenhaupt, 2012, p. 539). Specialized classes at the school, such as English language classes, also led to increased involvement of Latinx families. Families were more willing to participate when programs were designed around them (Lowenhaupt, 2012).

Latunde (2017) found that most Latinx families utilize community organizations such as after-school programs to enhance their child’s learning. However, “community-based organizations often provide access and trust, but they do not have information on school standards, assessments, and policies” (Latunde, 2017, p. 269). Therefore, it is important for both community organizations and school leaders to have communication. After-school programs “provide consistent and reliable educational services to children during the hours immediately following school” (Miller, 2011b, p. 37). Students who attend after-school programs are also more likely to be focused on academic and extra-curricular activities versus those who do not (Posner & Vandell, 1999). They are also more likely to have a decrease in problems or delinquent behaviors (Durlak et al., 2010).

After the schools have identified a student’s barrier, they can rely on community partners or organizations to assist in bridging these barriers. Quinones and FitzGerald (2019) found that having this type of school and community relationship can increase school engagement, academic results, graduation, and college rates. Ishimaru (2013) also found that “community organizing groups that work with principals focus on supporting them in building both bonding and bridging social capital with teachers and with empowered, low-income parents to improve student learning” (p. 9). To do this, shared leadership among schools and communities is pertinent and a strategy that is effective.

Pstross et al. (2016) revealed a school communication barrier due to language when it came to parents and their child's education. Because school information is often sent home in English and school personnel may or may not be able to translate important school information, it can be difficult for parents to monitor academic performance. Schools can use their social network to ensure that interpreters are available to help eliminate this communication barrier. School leaders should encourage teachers to involve families in their child's educational process (Latunde, 2017) and send regular updates regarding their academic progress in bilingual form. Bilingual parent meetings would also be beneficial to improve relationships. Ishimaru (2013) also revealed, "Principals enacted shared leadership with low-income, predominantly immigrant parents by building deep relationships, developing capacity in the form of *empowered* parents, and creating opportunities for parent leadership in new schools" (p. 19). This can positively transform the environment of schools and communities and welcome inclusivity.

### **Method**

A qualitative approach with multiple case studies was utilized in this study to examine rural secondary principal's practices, perspectives, and experiences working with a high presence of Latinx students. The study explored the role of community organizations, family, and faculty involvement and how these entities assisted in the academic advancement of Latinx students. The qualitative method was chosen because the rural school principals' perspectives and experience are critical in understanding the successful strategies to utilize when working with Latinx students' academic

achievement. Each principal had the opportunity to express and share their viewpoints and practices that are unique to their rural school district.

### **Research Design**

Leading a rural school district with a high presence of Latinx students can find its challenges. Finding an effective curriculum, programming, qualified teachers, and tenure is difficult. Therefore, this multiple case study featured secondary school principals from high-performing, predominately Latinx rural schools and their detailed responses on the practices they have in place to increase the academic advancement of Latinx students. The study also investigated the role of community organizations, families, and faculty in the academic advancement of Latinx students. The investigation sought their understanding by using narratives through individual in-depth semi-structured interviews.

This study achieved triangulation by interviewing multiple principals from different settings and also by analyzing campus performance data. Campus performance data were retrieved by accessing data from the Texas Education Service Center (ESC) websites, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website, Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) snapshots, and interviews collected from five rural secondary school principals.

### **Study Population**

The population of this study was rural school principals in the Texas. A rural school district is one that has an enrollment of fewer than 300 students, or that has an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state as well as an enrollment growth rate of less than 20% over the previous five years (Texas Rural Schools Task Force, 2017). Specific criteria were needed to qualify for this study. Those

who were eligible to participate, included principals who occupy a full-time position in a school with a high population of Latinx students. In this study, high population of Latinx schools was operationally defined as school districts that have over a 50% representation of Latinx students (TEA, 2021). The participants were required to be employed with a school district for at least one year and were classified as rural secondary school principals. The principals were from high-performing schools in Texas according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA) guidelines. High-performing schools were those schools that received an “A” accountability rating. The accountability rating was based on performance on items including, but not limited to state standardized tests, graduation rates, and college, career, and military readiness outcomes. The ratings examine student achievement, school progress, and whether districts and campuses are closing achievement gaps among various student groups (TEA, 2021).

The participant criterion determined similarities and differences between the schools and how they operated. Principals were similar in the fact that their schools predominately served a large base of Latinx students in Texas. They were also located within a similar geographic location and served schools within Texas. However, each school principal had a different experience in the school they served and the neighborhood in which they lived. Each principal revealed similar and dissimilar challenges, which conceded a multiple case study. Qualifying rural secondary school principals were selected by utilizing the TAPR. This report identified school districts, their location, student information, graduation profile, program information, testing performance rates, demographics, and socioeconomic status.

### ***Study Participants***

The participants chosen for this study all demonstrated a long-standing dedication to the education field. (Pseudonyms were used to for anonymity purposes.) Principal A taught in the classroom for 12 years in three different school districts. All of those years were at the secondary level, seventh grade to tenth grade teaching Texas and U.S. History, World History, and Geography. Following the classroom, he served as assistant principal for two years in a different school district before moving to another school district and serving in the principal role. His school is predominately Hispanic (67.7%) and his student population is considered economically disadvantaged (77%) (Texas Public Schools, 2019). His school is also a 6-man school in terms of the Texas classification for University Interscholastic League (UIL) sports.

Principal B was a classroom teacher for 12 years before becoming an administrator. She has served five years as assistant principal and five years as principal. Her school is located in a rural community in the central Texas area. Her school serves a predominately Hispanic student population (59.5%) and a majority of the student population, 69%, is considered economically disadvantaged (Texas Public Schools, 2019).

Principal C was in the education field for 19 years as a teacher, counselor, Licensed Specialist in School Psychology, Special Education Director, and principal. Of those 19 years, eight were in the principal role. Her school predominately served Hispanic students (85.9%) and majority of her student population, 75.2 %, was economically disadvantaged (Texas Public Schools, 2019). She has most recently

changed leadership roles into a directorship in a non-profit organization in South Texas focused on early head start programs.

Principal D taught 27 years in the classroom before becoming a school principal. In those 27 years, she taught every subject in sixth through eighth grade. She is in her second year as principal in the same school at which she taught. Her school is located in the Texas Panhandle and is classified as a Title 1 district due to their extremely high number of low-socio economic students (69.5%; Texas Public Schools, 2019). Her school predominately serves Hispanic students (77.6%; Texas Public Schools, 2019).

Principal E has been in the education field for 14 years. During his time, he served four years as a classroom teacher, four years as assistant principal, and six years as principal. His school predominately serves Hispanic students (52.6%) and majority of his school population is considered economically disadvantaged (76.3%; Texas Public Schools, 2019).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected from in-depth interviews with five rural secondary school principals. Busetto (2020) stated, “Interviews are used to gain insight into a person’s subjective experiences, opinions, and motivations – as opposed to behaviors” (p. 3). The interview guide was based on the overarching research question and the sub research questions. The interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews include open-ended questions and allow for flexibility in asking interview questions (Merriam, 2009). This flexibility includes varying the order of questions and asking questions that may emerge during the interview.

Prior to the implementation of the interviews, a pilot test was administered to validate and check the reliability of the interview guide. Teijlingen and Hundley (2002) emphasized the benefits of conducting a pilot study, citing that it aids in ensuring the efficiency of the data tool being utilized. The pilot testing panel consisted of two non-participants of the study. Once this process was completed, necessary adjustments were made in the interview guide.

The interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate the participants and to follow health guidelines due to health concerns of the COVID 19. The interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes and were recorded to help with the data transcription and the analysis process. These participants were asked a series of open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview process. The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to aid in the confidentiality of the data collected as well as the anonymity of the interviewees.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed, transcripts were collected and analyzed. The *Framework Method* by Gale et al. (2013) was used to analyze data results in the research study. The procedure for analysis in this study included seven stages. The first stage was the transcription of the data from the interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcript were readily available through the video conferencing process. The second stage was familiarization with the interview (Gale et al., 2013). Gale et al. (2013) stated, “Becoming familiar with the whole interview using the audio recording and/or transcript and any contextual or reflective notes that were recorded by the interviewer is a vital stage in interpretation” (p. 4). The third step was coding (Gale et al., 2013). After analyzing the transcript, a color coding was used to note anything that was vital or

relevant to the study. Some of the codes, referred to a person's values, emotions, and behaviors. Coding also helped with interpreting and analyzing the results from the interviews.

Developing a working analytical framework was the fourth step in the Framework Method (Gale et al., 2013). This step included grouping codes together based on likeness. The fifth step was applying the analytical framework (Gale et al., 2013). This step "is applied by indexing subsequent transcripts using the existing categories and codes" (p. 5). Stage six was charting data into the framework matrix (Gale et al., 2013). This stage required qualitative data to be organized in a matrix to help summarize the data in categories. The last step was interpreting the data (Gale et al., 2013), which required an explanation or understanding of the data results. Differences and similarities were identified in this stage.

### **Findings**

The overarching research question for this study was "What strategies are principals in high-performing, rural secondary schools using to increase the academic advancement of Latinx students?" The sub-research questions focused on the roles that community organizations, family, and faculty involvement played on the academic advancement of Latinx students through the perspective of rural secondary school principals.

Six themes emerged through the three sub-research questions that helped answer the overarching research question. In respect to the first sub-research question, the themes support/resources and collaboration/partnerships emerged. Regarding the second sub-research question, the themes of relationships, support/resources,

collaboration/partnerships, rural setting characteristics, communication, and involvement emerged. Sub-research Question 3 included the themes, involvement, rural setting characteristics, support/resources, communication, and relationships.

### **Theme #1: Support/Resources**

The theme, support/resources, encompassed all of the various services there were available to families, students, and teachers. These support/resources included bilingual translators, tutoring services, the service center for professional development, a curriculum director, block schedules, post-secondary classes, incentives for students, the Fundamental Five, TEKS resource system, and tutorial time/enrichment which all played a role in the academic success of students.

Principals have developed and implemented systems for their teachers to be successful in the classroom. If the teacher is successful, then the students are going to be successful. Providing professional development opportunities for their teachers enables teachers to develop new skills for the classroom. These learning opportunities also give teachers the knowledge on how to address certain learning differences. All of the principals unanimously utilized their ESC for trainings. Principal B stated, “We work mainly with ESC 14, especially in our ELA department.” Principal D stated, “We actually just use ESC 16. We contract with them. They can come in and do a day training with all of our teachers.” Principal A also discussed how his school utilized ESC 17 for training opportunities.

Regarding leadership, many of the principals in the study found it important to implement a set curriculum and schedule in their schools. They felt that by having efficient systems in place, both teachers and students would be more successful. Principal

B explained, “Being a Title I school and predominately 70% Hispanic and 80% economically disadvantaged, we have found that using the “Fundamental Five”, has helped with our language barriers.” Principal C also implemented the Fundamental Five and discussed how this curriculum contributed to teacher and student success in their school. The principals explained the Fundamental Five was a formula for quality instructional practices or strategies implemented in the classroom to help increase the academic achievement of schools and students. Principal D found that one of the things they attribute to their student success was block schedules that are composed of 70-minute classes. Principal A also implemented 30-minute block times as enrichment or intervention times.

The secondary principals also attributed their teacher and student success to a variety of instructional practices. Principal B detailed that their school is on the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and skills) resource system and that they utilize Pearson as their English textbook across the district. Principal D discussed that their school emphasizes ESL strategies, and they also have ESL (English as a Second Language) aides that go to the class to help support students. Principal C detailed that prescriptive tutoring helped their students when it came to their standardized tests. Principal D utilized peer tutoring in their school.

## **Theme #2: Communication**

The second theme, communication, encompassed the various strategies that principals and teachers utilized to communicate and create transparency with families. They ensured that bilingual staff/translators were present when needed at family/school-

oriented events. They also found it important to send newsletters and school communication home in two languages.

The principal participants agreed that communication with families was critical. They stressed the importance of having bilingual staff present at all school functions and that all information sent home should be provided in both English and Spanish. Principal D stated, “Everything we send out goes in both languages.” Principal C also stated, “We always have somebody with us that is able to translate.” Principal E also supported that bilingual staff was critical to effectively communicating with Spanish-speaking parents. He stated:

If there are Latinx parents with a language barrier, we will make sure to have the personnel there to help us communicate in a way that helps the parents and family feel comfortable enough to ask questions they want to ask. And at the same time being able to convey their expectations. That way, we’re on the same page.

### **Theme #3: Relationships**

The third theme covered relationships. The principals felt that it was important to have a basic understanding of each student. This included familiarizing themselves with the background of each child to help build a trusting relationship with them and their families. They also found that communication between teachers and families help to build expectations for high achievement for the students.

The relationship between the faculty, parents and students were critical components to an effective school environment. Principal A stressed that it was important for a teacher to understand the culture and background of their students. He said,

When I first became a teacher, I thought every kid wanted to be great, and they all wanted to win. And the reality is, that's not the case at all. Students have to be motivated. This motivation is the key to successful achievement. So, if our teachers can understand it [background and culture], in my opinion, it makes them have a little bit more empathy which promotes achievement.

Faculty also play an important role in motivating their students to become involved in extra-curricular activities. This was a consistent response among all the principals. Principal B shared, “We’ve got a strong relationship with our athletic department. About 90% of our students are involved in athletics, which motivates our students to maintain high academic standards.” Principal C stated, “We have about 93% of our high school population involved in something, not necessarily just sports.” Principal A stated, “Since we are so small, our teachers go to every event.” He stressed how important it was for the students to see their teachers supporting them. When we think about faculty, we mainly think about the teachers and their direct influence on their students.

#### **Theme #4: Involvement**

The fourth theme that emerged in this study was involvement. Parent involvement in their child’s education and campus activities was important to help with the student’s academic success. Student involvement in extra-curricular activities and sports also sets high academic standards for students. They found that when students were more involved, they had a better academic performance.

All of the principals also concluded that if parents were involved in their child’s education, they were more likely to succeed. Though the principals could not give a

statistical percentage, they all agreed that parent involvement was key to students' success. Principal D stated:

I believe that's why they do better because of their parents' care. I think maybe in the past, we didn't even bother to call some of the parents because we assumed they didn't care. We are more communicative with them now, and they do care.

They want their kids educated and doing well. I think the communication from the teachers to the home builds expectations.

Hosting *parent nights* for the schools was also common amongst all of the principals that were interviewed. This provided communication between the school and the parents while also helping build a trusting relationship. Some events that were mentioned included: Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) night, dual credit night, and high school scheduling course night.

#### **Theme #5: Collaboration/Partnerships**

The fifth theme, collaboration/partnerships, encompassed all of the services that were available to students. Principals felt that community resources were critical to helping fill student's academic and basic needs. These community resources included supplemental food programs, the Lions Club for reading glasses, the Rotary Club for college scholarships, local churches, Athletic Booster Clubs, Meals on Wheels, nearby colleges and universities, and local businesses.

The participants from the study also mentioned that they had collaborative relationships with community colleges. Students were able to participate in associate programs or technical/industrial-based certifications. Principal C stated, "We're trying to give them that opportunity to not just make a minimum wage job, but being able to have

an opportunity to make a livable wage.” This participant understood that some students did not want to take more classes, so they found that technical/industrial based programs were important to offer students, especially in rural communities. These community colleges also provide TSI, SAT, ACT, and dual credit opportunities. Principal E stated, “We have a MOU with them [community college]. They bring in an advisor to meet with our students.” Principal D also discussed that some students finish school with a professional certification. Principal D stated that they pay for their students’ certifications, and “kids can actually leave high school with a welding certification, Microsoft certification, and health sciences which is like your CNA.”

#### **Theme #6: Rural Setting Characteristics**

Lastly, the characteristics of their rural setting allowed for strong relationships with their students and their families. Due to being in rural communities, principals and teachers were able to give students more individual attention and provide students with more opportunities. Families were also generational; therefore, *everyone knew everyone*, which played an important role in the academic advancement of students.

Principals C mentioned, “One of the things that rural schools have that you won’t necessarily have in larger districts is there’s a lot of generation after generation after generation tends to attend a rural school.” Principal B mentioned that her teachers were close to their families and knew them well. She stated, “Some of our teachers have taught the students’ moms, dads, brothers, and sisters. So, it’s an easier way of making a connection. That’s something that you don’t find in your big schools; you find that in rural schools.”

## **Discussion**

### **Summary**

This study contributes to the limited research on secondary rural school principals and Latinx students. With the rapid increase of the population of Latinx students in the nation and in rural settings (Lee & Klugman, 2013), it is critical to help ensure that schools are prepared and educated on the best practices. Therefore, providing research on high-performing rural schools with a high presence of Latinx students could be a beneficial resource. Also, being able to share these secondary principals' successful strategies provides valuable information for other rural educators and leaders.

The rural secondary principals in this study discussed their strategies that helped to increase Latinx students' academic success. They were also able to articulate what could be helpful to other schools. Given the findings, it appeared that the principals were able to engage their school with different instructional practices and also serve as a resource agent while working with other social networks to help supplement student needs.

### **Conclusions**

The study supports that effective principal leadership and instruction is correlated to academic success among Latinx students. From the interviews, it was evident that principals were able to establish clear goals, direction, support, and resource for students, teachers, and families. The principals in this study found it important to be present in community events and school functions to familiarize themselves with the students' families. They also found it important to provide instructional practices and continuing

education opportunities for teachers. All of the rural secondary school principals in this study were responsive to their school context.

Evidence suggested that although these rural schools did not have many community organizations, they had community resources that were critical to the academic advancement of students and meeting their most pressing personal needs. Each school also had a partnership with a local or nearby community college. Therefore, some students were able to graduate high school with a degree or a certificate. This implies the need to establish strong school/community partnerships.

Parental involvement with the school was also an essential element in the success of Latinx students. Parents played a positive influence in their child's life and also held them to a higher academic standard. Principals endorsed the importance of being able to effectively communicate with parents in both languages, preventing miscommunication. They also supported the importance of hosting events in the evening so parents could attend and hosting different school functions to support transparency.

### ***Research Questions***

**What role do community organizations play in the academic advancement of rural Latinx students, according to the perspective of a rural secondary school principal?** The study found that community organizations provide resources and support systems to help students be successful in school. School-family-community partnerships work together to help improve the students' academic outcomes and also address students' most complex needs (Bryan et al., 2017). The rural secondary school principals in this research study did not have an influx of community organizations to work with due to their rural location; however, they had community resources they were able to

utilize. Most of the principals relied on community resources such as the Rotary Club, Lions Club, Athletic Booster Club, Meals on Wheels, Back Pack Buddies/Snack Packs, and churches to help fill the needs of these students and their families. These resources were able to help students with food, eyeglasses, college scholarships, and more.

The findings corroborate that school leaders are most influential in their problem-solving capabilities and leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2010). The findings in this research study indicated that principals encouraged professional development and trainings. There was a consensus that all principals utilized their ESC to provide trainings for their teachers, then in turn, they could be successful in the classroom and knowledgeable of different teaching practices. If something was not working in their school model, they made sure to modify it to better suit teachers and students, such as implementing block schedules or curriculums. School leaders influence and encourage activities outside of the classroom. The study supported the literature that students are more successful if they are held to a higher educational expectation both at home and in the classroom (Lynch & Kim, 2017).

**What role does family involvement play in the academic advancement of rural Latinx students, according to the perspective of a rural secondary school principal?** The study endorsed the findings of King (2018) in that family involvement plays a critical role in the academic advancement of rural students. Families influence students' learning by serving as a motivation to help them perform well in school. The participants agreed that if parents were involved and had high academic expectations for their children, these students were more apt to excel in school. Each principal that was

interviewed in this study was rooted in the belief that communication and relationships among the schools and families were critical for the academic advancement of students.

The findings in this study corroborate that a family's role can positively influence their child's academic outcome (Curry & Holter, 2019; Gil-Flores et al., 2011; Pstross et al., 2016). From the findings, it was evident that high home and school expectations helped students better perform in school. Moreover, due to having a high percentage of Latinx students, all principals found it important to have school interpreters present when needed to better communicate with parents. Lowenhaupt (2012) supported this statement and found that when parents are provided with interpreters, they are more comfortable participating in their child's activities when they met with bilingual staff.

**What role does faculty involvement play in the academic advancement of rural Latinx students, according to the perspective of a rural secondary school principal?** The participants in the study agreed that teachers are a major influence on student achievement. The literature supports their thoughts. Teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling (Opper, 2019). A teacher's influence, ideas, and expectations of their students' capabilities have an effect on student academic performance and achievements (Richland, 2017). This is especially true in rural schools where the student populations are small, and teachers are able to learn more about the students' backgrounds and culture.

From the findings in this study, it is easily conceived that principal leadership plays a critical role in the success of any school. Research supports that principals help improve the outcome of student success (Janak, 2020). They support and strengthen the relationships with community organizations, families, and faculty. They strengthen the

collaboration/partnerships within their rural and surrounding communities. They encourage family involvement in their student's education and in the school. They ensure that families, students, and teachers can easily access support systems and resources. Overall, they establish a school-wide vision of success for everyone in the social network.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were several strengths in this study. The first strength is the qualitative design, in that it allowed for more depth and perspective to the topic. I was able to delve into the experiences of the participants to determine the roles that affected Latinx student achievement. Through semi-structured questioning, the participants were able to explain the rationale for their response.

The relevance of the topic is also a strength of the study. With the growing population, Latinx student achievement is a critical concern at the local and national level. Obinna and Ohanian (2020) stated, "Despite their numbers, the achievement gap between Latinos and their non-Latino peers remains wide since they have the highest rate of dropout" (p. 654). This research is significant, especially in areas with a high Latinx population.

Limitations existed in this study. Participants were chosen from high-performing schools with a high population of Latinx students throughout Texas. This broad population limited specific regional needs that could be examined as unique to that setting. Due to the timing of this study, the principal interviews were conducted during the last few weeks of the school year. During this time, principals were busy with end-of-

the year activities and had a full schedule. Therefore, there were some constraints on when principals were able to be interviewed.

COVID-19 was also a limitation of this study. Due to the global pandemic, principal interviews were not able to be conducted in person. The pandemic caused an increase in the participants' stress levels as well as their school workload. Schools had an overwhelming and tough school year with the immense challenges of the pandemic. Due to this added workload, some interviews were delayed to the end of the school year. This may have eliminated some participants that could have given valuable information for the study.

### **Implications**

The findings from this study are instrumental in filling in the literature gap for rural secondary school principals, in better leading rural schools with high percentage populations of Latinx students. Best practices emerged from this research to inform principals in their work as they strive to close achievement gaps by improving Latinx student success. Some of these best practices support rural principals promoting the utilization of collaborative social networks between schools, community, and families to gain a deeper understanding of their Latinx students as well as obtain any resources that could aid in their academic achievement.

The findings of this study call for a need for extensive training in preparing rural principals in the areas of relationship building within and outside the school community. These trainings should focus on building collaborative partnerships that center on support, resource obtainment, family and community involvement. These trainings should also incorporate the culture, barriers and needs of the Latinx population.

Understanding these areas will aid in the efforts of getting Latinx families involved in their children's education.

Based on the research findings, there are recommendations for future studies. First, due to their location, rural communities have few organizational partners which help supplement student's basic needs. Research on how rural schools could develop outreach partnerships with surrounding communities' organizations would be beneficial. Further research could be done on these partnerships on how they benefit Title I schools, and the Latinx population. In addition, an examination of techniques used by school leaders and how they use their role to connect or bridge the gap between rural schools and communities would be beneficial.

While the purpose of this research study was to explore strategies that rural secondary school principals utilize to increase the academic advancement of Latinx students, the hope was to assist in filling in the gap of research for rural secondary school principals, specifically schools with a high presence of Latinx students. This research study provides an opportunity for rural secondary school principals to share their best practices to help increase Latinx student success. Due to the participation of these principals in this study, new research could be included in the secondary rural school principalship context.

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