

Voices from the Margins: Family Engagement Perspectives from Texas Colonias

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined family engagement in children's education among parents residing in *colonias* (low-income border communities) in South Texas. Through interviews with 15 parents from two school districts, the study explored factors that promote or hinder parental engagement. Key factors promoting engagement included the theme of parents' access to resources, school and home communication, parents' perspective of education, and family background. Major hindering factors included economic constraints, lack of transportation, language barriers, and cultural differences. The findings highlight the need for culturally responsive family engagement strategies tailored to the unique circumstances of colonia residents

Keywords: family engagement, parental involvement, *colonias*, low-income families, Hispanic students

1. Introduction

Family engagement has been identified as a critical factor influencing the academic achievement of elementary school children (Driessen et al., 2005; Hong & Ho, 2005; Neville et al., 2013). However, families living in *colonias*, low-income communities along the U.S.-Mexico border, often lack basic infrastructure. They face unique challenges that may impact their ability to engage in their children's education (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015; Olmedo & Ward, 2016).

Colonias, despite their challenges, are also characterized by the resilience and determination of their residents. Most *colonia* residents are of Mexican descent, with household incomes well below the poverty line (Texas Secretary of State, 2016). These difficult living conditions create obstacles for parents trying to support their children's schooling, but the resilience of these parents is a testament to their commitment to their children's education.

2. Purpose of Study

While numerous studies have examined family engagement in low-income and minority communities (Barone, 2011; Marschall, 2006), less research has focused on the experiences of families residing in *colonias*. This study addresses that gap by exploring the factors that promote and hinder family engagement among *colonia* residents in South Texas, providing a unique and valuable contribution to the field. The following research questions guided the research:

1. Which factors, if any, as reported by the parents in this study promote participation of parents from *colonias* to engage in their children's education?
2. What are the obstacles, if any, as reported by parents in this study that hinder parents living in *colonias* from engaging in their children's education?

By examining these questions, this study seeks to provide insights that can inform more effective family engagement strategies for this unique population. The findings have implications for educators, policymakers, and

community organizations, offering a roadmap for positive change and improvement in supporting children's academic success from *colonias* and similar low-income communities.

3. Review of Literature

3.1.1 Family Engagement.

Family engagement, as used in this study, refers to any type of involvement by parents in their child's education, both inside and outside of school (Baker et al., 2016; Weiss et al., 2009). This can include attending school events, discussing school activities at home, instilling a love for learning, and assisting with homework (Bowen & Lee, 2006). A substantial body of research has demonstrated the positive impacts of family engagement on students' academic achievement, motivation, and attitudes toward school (Cedeño et al., 2016; Gonzalez-De Hass et al., 2005; Marschall, 2006).

3.2.1 Barriers to Family Engagement.

While the benefits of family engagement are well-established, numerous barriers can hinder parental participation, particularly for low-income and minority families living in *colonias*. These obstacles create significant challenges for parents trying to engage in their children's education. The unique circumstances of *colonia* residents, including language and communication challenges, transportation limitations, work and time constraints, cultural misunderstandings, parent's educational experiences, and poverty, compound these barriers.

3.2.2 Language and Communication Challenges.

Language barriers can create significant communication challenges between *colonia* parents and schools (Barone, 2011; Hollinger, 2001). Many *colonia* residents are of Mexican or Mexican American descent, and language differences can impede effective communication with teachers and administrators. This language divide can lead to misunderstandings about school policies, academic expectations, and available resources, further hindering parental involvement in their children's education (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010).

3.2.3 Transportation Limitations.

Lack of transportation is a major obstacle for many *colonia* families (Marschall, 2006). With limited financial resources, households often have only one vehicle or rely on public transportation, making attending school events or meetings difficult. This transportation barrier is exacerbated by the poor infrastructure in *colonias*, where many roads are unpaved and lack proper drainage, further complicating travel for residents, especially during inclement weather (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015; Olmedo & Ward, 2016).

3.2.4 Work and Time Constraints.

Work schedules and time constraints can prevent parents from participating in school activities or helping with homework (Walker et al., 2011). Many *colonia* parents work long hours or multiple jobs to provide for their families. This situation is exacerbated by the high unemployment rate in *colonias*, which is eight times greater than the Texas average, forcing many parents to take on multiple low-wage jobs with inflexible schedules to make ends meet (Texas Secretary of the State, 2016).

3.2.5 Cultural Differences and Misunderstandings.

Cultural differences and misunderstandings between schools and *colonia* families can hinder engagement (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). Some parents may fear being perceived as disrespectful by intruding on school matters, leading to hesitation in engaging with teachers. This cultural disconnect is further exacerbated by the fact that many *colonia* parents highly respect teachers and believe it is the school's responsibility to instill knowledge, while viewing their role as providing nurturance and teaching morals, respect, and behavior (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 1995; Carger, 1997). Additionally, Hispanic families tend to value social responsibilities and the group's well-being over individual achievement, which can conflict with the American school system's emphasis on competition and

personal accomplishment (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001).

3.2.6 Parents' Educational Experiences.

Parents' own negative experiences with education can create anxiety about interacting with school staff or helping their children academically (Marschall, 2006). Many *colonia* parents had limited formal education. This lack of formal education can lead to feelings of inadequacy when attempting to assist their children with schoolwork or engage with teachers (Barone, 2011). Additionally, some *colonia* parents may have experienced discrimination or marginalization in their own schooling, further contributing to their hesitation to become involved in their children's education (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010).

3.2.7 Poverty and Basic Needs.

Parents' own negative experiences with education can create anxiety about interacting with school staff or helping their children academically (Marschall, 2006). Many *colonia* parents have limited formal education themselves. This lack of formal education can lead to feelings of inadequacy when attempting to assist their children with schoolwork or engage with teachers (Barone, 2011). Additionally, some *colonia* parents may have experienced discrimination or marginalization in their schooling, further contributing to their hesitation to become involved in their children's education (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010).

Understanding these barriers is crucial for developing effective family engagement strategies tailored to the unique circumstances of *colonia* residents. By recognizing the challenges these families face, schools can work to foster more meaningful partnerships with parents and ultimately support the academic success of children living in colonias.

3.3.1 Conditions of Living in *Colonias*.

Family engagement has been identified as a crucial factor influencing the academic achievement of elementary children. However, families living in *colonias* face unique challenges that can significantly impact their ability to engage in their children's education. *Colonias* are low-income neighborhoods along the Texas-Mexico border that often lack basic infrastructure and resources, with residents struggling to access everyday necessities (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015; Texas Secretary of State, 2016; Olmedo & Ward, 2016).

3.3.2 Poor living conditions.

The living conditions in *colonias* present numerous obstacles for families. Many homes lack potable water, sewer systems, and paved roads, creating unsafe and unsanitary living environments (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015; Olmedo & Ward, 2016). These conditions affect daily life and have implications for children's education and parents' ability to engage with schools. The "housing consolidation" process often results in homes being built in phases over several years, with families living in partially completed structures or trailers until they can afford to finish construction (Olmedo & Ward, 2016). Additionally, the lack of essential infrastructure leads to health risks for residents, as the absence of clean running water and proper sewage systems can contribute to various illnesses and sanitation issues (Galvin, 2018; Nuñez-McHiri, 2012).

3.3.3 Health Concerns.

Health issues are a significant concern for *colonia* residents due to the lack of clean running water and proper sewage systems (Galvin, 2018; Nemawarkar, 2016; Nuñez-McHiri, 2012). This health vulnerability can impact children's school attendance and parents' ability to participate in school activities. Additionally, housing conditions are often poor, with many homes built in phases or consisting of trailers due to financial constraints (Donelson & Esparza, 2010; Galvin, 2018; Nuñez-McHiri, 2012). This "housing consolidation" process can extend over several years as families struggle to complete their homes and pay off their lots (Olmedo & Ward, 2016). The lack of basic infrastructure in *colonias* also leads to safety concerns, as many areas lack proper street lighting and paved roads, making it difficult for emergency vehicles to access homes in times of need (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015). Furthermore, the absence of reliable public transportation in many *colonias* compounds these issues, limiting

residents' access to healthcare facilities and creating additional barriers for parents to engage with their children's schools (Barton et al., 2015).

3.3.4 Poverty.

The economic situation of *colonia* families further compounds these challenges. Approximately 40% of *colonia* families earn below the federal poverty threshold (Barton et al., 2015; States News Service, 2015; Strickland, 2016). The unemployment rate among *colonia* residents is eight times higher than the Texas average (Texas Secretary of the State, 2016). These financial hardships often result in limited access to transportation and healthcare, creating additional barriers to family engagement in education. Many *colonia* residents support themselves by participating in the informal economy as employers, employees, and consumers, which provides little job security or government protection but often allows families to make ends meet (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015). Despite these challenges, some *colonia* residents have found ways to improve their financial well-being through entrepreneurship, with flea markets serving as hubs for this informal marketplace in many *colonias* (Barton et al., 2015).

Understanding the factors influencing family engagement in *colonias* is crucial for educators and policymakers. By recognizing these families' unique challenges, schools can develop more effective strategies to foster meaningful partnerships with parents and support the academic success of children living in *colonias*. This study examines the extent of family engagement among *colonia* residents and identifies the factors that promote or hinder their participation in their children's education.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Parent Involvement Continuum framework that Cervone and O'Leary (1982) developed. This model conceptualizes parental involvement as ranging from passive to active participation (see Figure 1). On one hand, parents are passive recipients of information from schools. On the other hand, parents actively participate in their children's learning process. This continuum provides a valuable lens for examining the various ways *colonia* parents engage with their children's education at home and school.

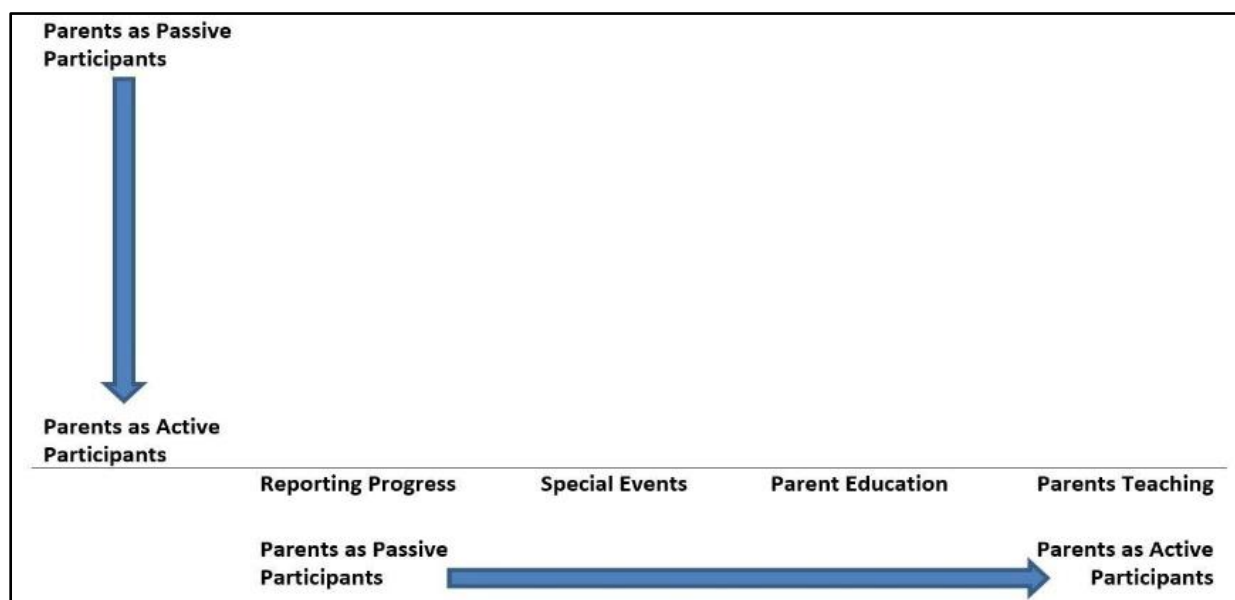


Figure 1. Parent Involvement Continuum

5. Methodology

5.4.1 Research Design.

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perspectives of parents living in *colonias* regarding their engagement in their children's education. Qualitative methods were chosen to allow for an in-depth examination of the complex factors influencing family engagement in this unique context. The research design incorporated interviews, photographs, and surveys to gather rich data on the lived experiences of *colonia* residents and their interactions with their children's schools. This multi-method approach enabled triangulation of data sources to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, providing a comprehensive view of family engagement practices and challenges in *colonias*.

5.4.2. Participants and setting.

The study focused on two school districts in South Texas serving students from *colonias*. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 15 parents whose children attended elementary schools in these districts. Eight parents were selected from District A and seven parents from District B. All participants resided in *colonias* and had at least one child enrolled in grades K-5. The participants were selected based on their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives on family engagement in their children's education. To ensure a diverse representation, the sample included parents with varying levels of educational attainment, employment status, and length of residence in the *colonias*.

5.4.3. Instrumentation and Data Collection.

A demographic survey was used to help narrow the number of parents chosen to be interviewed, including the parents who lived in *colonias*. Afterward, the researchers qualified the eligible parents and solicited their interest in participating.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with parents. The interviews, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each, were conducted in the participants' preferred language (Spanish or English) and audio-recorded with permission. Interview questions explored parents' experiences with family engagement, factors that encouraged or discouraged their participation, and their perceptions of the school's efforts to involve families. In addition to interviews, participants were asked to take photographs that represented their experiences with family engagement, which were later discussed during follow-up conversations to provide deeper insights into their perspectives. The multi-method approach, incorporating interviews, photographs, and surveys, allowed for triangulation of data sources, enhancing the trustworthiness and validity of the findings.

5.4.4. Data Analysis.

Interviews were manually transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis following the completion of individual interviews. The researchers manually transcribed each interview twice to ensure reliability and to gain familiarity with the data, identifying common phrases, patterns, and relationships. Transcriptions were then inputted into NVivo software for coding and analysis, facilitating efficient organization of the files.

The researcher followed these steps:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing and refining themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted with participants to ensure an accurate interpretation of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Participants were provided with summaries of the key themes and findings and allowed to provide feedback or clarification. This process validated the researchers' interpretations and allowed for deeper insights and refinement of the analysis, strengthening the overall credibility of the study.

6. Findings

Analysis of the interview data revealed four main themes related to factors promoting or hindering family engagement among *colonia* residents: Parent's Access to Resources, School and Home Communication, Parents' Perspective of Education, and Family Background. These themes emerged consistently across participant responses and provide insight into the unique challenges and opportunities for family engagement in *colonia* communities. The interplay between these themes highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of family engagement for families living in *colonias*.

6.5.1 Theme 1: Parents' Access to Resources.

Access to various resources emerged as a critical factor influencing parents' ability to engage in their children's education. Both promoting and hindering factors were identified within this theme. Promoting Factors emerged through community collaboration and institutional support. Informal networks helped overcome logistical challenges, with one mother noting: "We help each other out... It's like a big family" (Participant 3). Schools facilitated engagement by offering bilingual materials, childcare during events, and flexible scheduling. A father emphasized: "When the school provides translators, I feel more comfortable attending meetings"* (Participant 12).

Hindering Factors included severe economic constraints, with 40% of families living below the poverty line (Barton et al., 2015) and parents working multiple jobs. "I must choose between school events or putting food on the table" (Participant 7). Geographic isolation compounded these issues, as *colonias* often lack paved roads and public transit. A father explained: "We only have one car... I have no way to get there"(Participant 9).

6.5.2 Theme 2: School and Home Communication.

The interaction between parents and school personnel is a critical theme in the interviews and documents reviewed. Promoting Factors centered on bilingual outreach. Parents valued Spanish-language communication, with one mother stating: "Notes in Spanish make me feel more connected"* (Participant 5). Schools used emails, phone calls, and apps to maintain contact, though Parent A noted events still skewed toward Spanish-speaking families.

Persistent language barriers were among the hindering factors. Parents struggled with English-only materials, with one admitting, "I don't understand the newsletters... I want to help but don't know what's asked." Cultural gaps exacerbated this; Parent B observed, "Our parents lack technology knowledge and English... it's a barrier."

6.5.3 Theme 3: Parents' Perspective on Education.

Parents' beliefs and attitudes about education play a crucial role in shaping their level of engagement with their children's schooling. This relationship between parental beliefs and engagement significantly impacts students' academic outcomes and overall educational experience. Promoting Factors included deeply held educational values. A mother shared: "Education is the key to a better life... I try to be involved however I can"* (Participant 1). Parents found creative ways to engage, with Parent J explaining: "Even if I couldn't attend, I spoke to teachers afterward".

Hindering Factors stemmed from cultural mismatches and self-doubt. A father contrasted practices: "In Mexico, parents don't go unless there's a problem"* (Participant 13). Some felt ill-equipped academically, with Participant 6 stating: "Homework is too difficult... I feel embarrassed". Immigration fears also limited involvement, as parents minimized public outings to avoid border patrol.

6.5.4 Theme 4: Family Background.

The interviews revealed common family background characteristics across the ten participating families. Parents highlighted these shared traits, noting that neighboring households observed similar attributes. This consistency

suggests a pattern of familial characteristics extending beyond the study participants to the broader local community. The family's background and circumstances influenced their ability and willingness to engage in their children's education.

Promoting Factors included multigenerational support systems. "My parents help with homework... it takes pressure off" (Participant 4). Higher parental education levels boosted confidence, with Participant 10 noting: "I finished high school... feel comfortable talking to teachers".

Hindering Factors involved systemic challenges. Work schedules conflicted with school hours, as Participant 15 explained: "I work nights... hard to keep up". Health crises compounded these issues: "When my child gets sick, I choose between work and medicine"* (Participant 12). Limited transportation and medical access created cyclical burdens, with Participant 9 stating: "Extra shifts for bills leave little time for school".

7. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of factors that influence family engagement among *colonia* residents. While many parents expressed a strong desire to be involved in their children's education, they faced numerous obstacles related to their unique living circumstances. Family engagement plays a crucial role in the academic achievement of elementary school children. However, families living in *colonias* face unique challenges that impact their ability to engage in their children's education (Olmedo & Ward, 2016). *Colonias* are low-income neighborhoods along the Texas-Mexico border, often lacking basic infrastructure and resources. Several key factors emerged in promoting family engagement among *colonia* parents.

7.1.1 Strong Belief in the Value of Education.

Despite the numerous challenges faced by families living in *colonias*, many parents strongly believe in the value of education. They view education as a pathway to a better future for their children and are often willing to make significant sacrifices to support their children's academic pursuits (Amatea & West-Olantunji, 2007). This belief is rooted in their own experiences and the desire to provide better opportunities for their children than they had themselves.

Parents in *colonias* often express high aspirations for their children's educational attainment, hoping that education will lead to improved economic prospects and social mobility. However, their ability to actively engage in their children's education may be limited by various factors, including work constraints, language barriers, and lack of familiarity with the U.S. education system (Strickland, 2016).

7.1.2 School Outreach Efforts.

Family engagement is crucial for the academic success of elementary school children, but families living in *colonias* face unique challenges that can hinder their involvement in their children's education. *Colonias* are low-income neighborhoods along the Texas-Mexico border that often lack basic infrastructure and resources (Olmedo & Ward, 2016). Recognizing these challenges, some schools have implemented targeted outreach efforts to enhance family engagement in *colonia* communities.

Schools have developed several strategies to bridge the gap between educational institutions and *colonia* families. These include providing bilingual communication materials in both English and Spanish to ensure all parents can access essential information (Galvin, 2018). Schools also offer flexible scheduling for parent-teacher conferences to accommodate parents' work schedules and transportation limitations. Some schools organize teacher visits to students' homes, which can help build trust and understanding between educators and families. Additionally, schools often collaborate with local organizations to provide resources and support services to *colonia* families, addressing broader needs that may impact educational engagement (Nuñez-McHiri, 2012).

These initiatives aim to address specific barriers to participation faced by *colonia* residents, such as language differences, work constraints, and limited access to resources. By tailoring their approach to the unique needs of *colonia* communities, schools can create more inclusive and effective family engagement programs.

Families in *colonias* often struggle with necessities, which can impact their ability to engage in their children's education. Many *colonia* residents live below the federal poverty threshold, with limited financial resources for educational support (Barton et al., 2015). Families may live in substandard housing or share homes with multiple families, creating challenging study environments for children (Strickland, 2016). Lack of access to healthcare and proper sanitation can lead to health issues that affect both parents' ability to engage and children's ability to learn (Nemawarkar, 2016). Limited access to reliable transportation can make it difficult for parents to attend school events or meetings (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015).

By addressing these fundamental challenges through targeted outreach and support, schools can help create a more equitable environment for family engagement in *colonia* communities. This approach not only supports academic achievement but also strengthens the overall relationship between schools and the families they serve.

7.1.3 Use of Technology.

While technology can enhance family engagement, its use in *colonias* is often limited due to lack of access and resources. Many families in *colonias* do not have reliable internet access or personal computers at home, which can hinder their ability to engage with schools through digital platforms (Donelson & Esparza, 2010).

Some schools have attempted to address this issue by providing mobile hotspots, utilizing text messaging services, and offering computer literacy classes for parents. However, the digital divide remains a significant challenge for many *colonia* families, requiring innovative approaches to communication and engagement (Barton et al., 2015).

While families living in *colonias* face numerous obstacles, they strongly believe in education's transformative power. Schools serving these communities must continue to develop targeted strategies that recognize and address the unique challenges faced by *colonia* residents, ultimately working to create more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

The study also identified several significant obstacles to family engagement:

7.1.4 Economic constraints.

Economic constraints significantly impact the ability of *colonia* families to engage in their children's education. Many parents in these communities face challenges balancing work demands with school involvement, a common situation among low-income families (Strickland, 2016). The financial pressures experienced by *colonia* residents often necessitate long work hours or multiple jobs, leaving little time for school-related activities (Barton et al., 2015). This economic reality highlights the need for schools to offer flexible engagement opportunities that accommodate diverse work schedules.

The precarious financial situation of many *colonia* families is further exacerbated by the lack of reliable transportation. With approximately 40% of *colonia* families earning an income below the federal poverty threshold, owning and maintaining a vehicle is often out of reach (Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2015). This transportation barrier can make it difficult for parents to attend school events, parent-teacher conferences, or other educational activities, even when they have a strong desire to participate (Nuñez-McHiri, 2012).

Moreover, the economic challenges faced by *colonia* residents extend beyond immediate financial concerns. Many families struggle with substandard housing conditions, which can create unstable learning environments for children at home (Olmedo & Ward, 2016). The practice of "housing consolidation," where homes are built in phases over extended periods, reflects the financial constraints these families face and can lead to prolonged periods of living in incomplete or inadequate housing (Galvin, 2018).

To address these economic barriers to family engagement, schools serving *colonia* communities need to implement creative solutions. This might include offering parent-teacher conferences at various times, including evenings and weekends, to accommodate parents' work schedules (Galvin, 2018). Additionally, schools could explore options for providing transportation assistance or conducting home visits to reach families who cannot easily come to the school (Nuñez-McHiri, 2012).

By recognizing and addressing the economic realities of *colonia* families, schools can create more inclusive and effective family engagement programs. This approach supports academic achievement and strengthens the overall relationship between schools and the families they serve, benefiting the entire community.

7.1.5 Lack of transportation.

The geographical isolation of *colonias* and limited transportation options created significant logistical challenges for many families. This finding underscores the importance of considering transportation when planning family engagement initiatives in rural or isolated communities. Many *colonias* are geographically isolated from urban centers and towns, with rural transit sporadic at best. Due to insufficient and unaffordable transportation, residents face daily challenges in accessing necessities such as water, groceries, healthcare, and waste removal services (Zheng et al., 2022).

The lack of adequate transportation infrastructure in *colonias* has far-reaching consequences. It affects children's ability to attend school regularly, parents' capacity to maintain stable employment, and families' access to essential services. These challenges are compounded by the fact that many *colonias* are in areas with little economic or agricultural value, often in floodplains (Castaneda, 2016). Mroz et al. (1996) highlight the significant health and hygiene issues that arise from limited access to clean water and proper sanitation in these communities.

To address these issues, innovative and cost-effective solutions are needed to meet the immediate transportation needs of *colonia* residents. Family engagement initiatives in rural areas must consider these communities' unique strengths and challenges. For instance, community interconnectedness can be leveraged as an advantage in rural schools' efforts to strengthen student success (Blitz et al., 2013).

Strategies for improving family engagement in rural and isolated communities should consider partnering with local organizations. Collaborating with faith-based organizations, childcare providers, and other community partners can help families reach more effectively (Gupta et al., 2005). It is crucial to adopt culturally responsive approaches by engaging families through methods that respect and value their culture and history. Providing logistical support, such as offering transportation, childcare, and other necessary resources, can enable family participation in school events and meetings. Focusing on whole-family approaches using two-generational or multigenerational strategies to address the needs of entire families is also essential. Improving transportation infrastructure by advocating for better roads, more frequent and affordable public transit options, and community-based transportation solutions is vital for long-term success (Manusov et al., 2021).

By addressing transportation challenges and leveraging community strengths, family engagement initiatives can better serve the needs of families in *colonias* and other rural or isolated communities. The multifaceted approach to improving conditions in *colonias* requires a deep understanding of the interconnected issues of transportation, health, education, and community development.

7.1.6 Language Barriers.

Despite efforts by some schools to provide bilingual communication, language differences remain a significant obstacle for many parents. This highlights the ongoing need for comprehensive language support in schools serving diverse populations (Barone, 2011; Hollinger, 2001). Research indicates that schools with linguistically diverse populations need creative approaches to support home languages alongside English, as this dual development benefits students' academic progress and self-esteem (Learning Ladders, 2024). Moreover, incorporating students' native languages into classroom instruction has enriched metalinguistic awareness and enhanced understanding of academic content (NWLC, 2024).

The increasing linguistic diversity in schools underscores the importance of robust language access solutions. Many districts face challenges in implementing effective language access plans due to limited resources or fragmented approaches. Centralized language accessibility and scalable solutions are recommended to address these barriers efficiently (Cvijanovic, 2022). Additionally, federal and state laws mandate language support services for *English Learners* students and their families, emphasizing the legal and ethical responsibility of schools to bridge

communication gaps (HelloGlobo, n.d.).

To achieve long-term success in overcoming language barriers, schools must adopt comprehensive strategies that include professional interpretation services and culturally competent practices. These measures not only improve parental involvement but also foster an inclusive environment for all students (Cvijanovic, 2022; NWLC, 2024).

7.1.7 Cultural Misunderstandings

Family engagement plays a crucial role in the academic achievement of elementary school children, particularly for those living in *colonias*. *Colonias* are low-income neighborhoods along the U.S.-Mexico border often lacking basic infrastructure and resources. Residents of these communities face unique challenges that can significantly impact their ability to engage in their children's education (Gay, 2018).

Cultural misunderstandings between *colonia* families and schools can hinder engagement. Latino immigrant parents, who make up a large portion of *colonia* residents, may have different expectations about their role in their children's education compared to what U.S. schools typically expect. Language barriers can exacerbate these misunderstandings, as many *colonia* residents are Spanish-speaking and schools may not always provide adequate translation services (Valdes, 1996).

To address these challenges, schools serving *colonia* communities can implement several strategies. Providing cultural competence training for educators can help them better understand and respond to the needs and perspectives of *colonia* families. Clear communication of expectations, offered in both English and Spanish, can help bridge the gap between school and home. Employing community liaisons and conducting home visits can also facilitate better understanding and communication between schools and *colonia* families (Valdes, 1996).

By implementing these strategies, schools can work towards overcoming cultural misunderstandings and fostering more effective family engagement among *colonia* residents. This, in turn, can lead to improved educational outcomes for children living in these communities.

8. Conclusion

This study illuminates the multifaceted challenges facing family engagement in Texas border colonies and definitively establishes a roadmap for transformative change in educational practices. The findings unequivocally demonstrate that traditional approaches to parental involvement are inadequate and often counterproductive in these unique communities. Instead, this research compellingly argues for a paradigm shift in conceptualizing and fostering family engagement in marginalized settings.

The evidence presented here demands immediate and comprehensive action from educators, policymakers, and community leaders. It is no longer sufficient to merely acknowledge the barriers of economic hardship, language differences, and cultural misunderstandings. Instead, we must leverage the profound commitment to education found within *colonia* families as a powerful catalyst for change. This study conclusively shows that by harnessing community networks and adapting engagement strategies to the specific context of *colonias*, we can dramatically improve educational outcomes and break cycles of generational poverty.

Implementing culturally responsive, technology-enhanced, and community-centered approaches to family engagement is not just beneficial but also imperative. Schools serving *colonia* communities must radically reimagine their relationship with families, shifting from a deficit-based model to one that recognizes and amplifies the strengths inherent in these diverse households. This research provides irrefutable evidence that such a shift, when executed with fidelity to the principles outlined in this study, will lead to unprecedented levels of parental involvement and, consequently, markedly improved student achievement.

In conclusion, this study serves as a clarion call for a revolution in educational practices for underserved communities. It lays bare the urgent need for tailored, innovative approaches to family engagement in *colonias* and similar settings. The path forward is clear: By embracing the recommendations in this research, we can create a

more equitable, inclusive, and effective educational system that truly serves all families, regardless of socioeconomic status or cultural background. The time for incremental change has passed; this study demands bold, transformative action to ensure that every child in Texas border *colonias* – and beyond – could thrive academically and personally.

9. Implications for Practice.

The dissertation explores the complex landscape of family engagement among families living in *colonias*, revealing nuanced challenges and opportunities for parental involvement in their children's education. The research highlights that parents residing in *colonias* face significant barriers that impact their ability to engage with schools, stemming from economic, cultural, and infrastructural constraints.

Transportation emerges as a critical obstacle for *colonia* families. Many households possess only one vehicle, typically used for work, making it difficult for parents to attend school events or meetings. Some families struggle to find alternative transportation, relying on neighbors or friends, while undocumented parents may avoid unnecessary travel due to fears of border surveillance.

Knowledge and skills represent another substantial challenge. Many parents feel inadequate in supporting their children's educational needs, believing that teaching responsibilities rest solely with educators. Limited technological access further compounds this issue, preventing parents from accessing online resources to assist their children's learning.

The study reveals that family engagement is often situational, with parents more likely to participate in celebratory events featuring their children rather than academic-focused meetings. Despite these challenges, parents genuinely desire to support their children's education, often encouraging each other and seeking ways to overcome systemic barriers.

Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of understanding the unique context of *colonia* families. Schools and educators must develop culturally responsive strategies that recognize these families' complex realities, creating more inclusive and supportive engagement opportunities that respect their experiences and constraints.

10. Limitations and Future Research.

The current study's research scope was constrained by its focus on two South Texas school districts and a limited sample size. However, several promising avenues of exploration present future research opportunities.

Researchers could significantly enhance understanding by expanding geographic coverage, incorporating a more diverse range of regions, and increasing participant numbers. This approach would provide a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on family engagement dynamics within *colonia* communities.

Longitudinal studies offer critical insights by tracking family engagement patterns across various stages of children's educational journeys. Such research could reveal developmental trends and evolving family involvement strategies over time.

Exploring educators' perspectives represents another crucial research direction. Researchers could identify systemic barriers and potential collaborative solutions by examining potential disconnects between school expectations and the lived realities of *colonia* families.

Intervention studies designed to test and evaluate various strategies for increasing family engagement would be particularly valuable. These studies could develop targeted approaches that respect cultural contexts while effectively supporting student success.

By pursuing these expanded research directions, scholars could generate profound insights that ultimately support more effective educational engagement for students from *colonia* communities, addressing complex social and academic challenges with empirically grounded strategies.

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