Borderland education beyond frontiers: Policy, community, and educational change during times of crisis

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Abstract
In this paper, we put center stage the story of a community in the borderland of Palomas and Deming, two twin towns located across the border from each other. In regular times, almost a thousand children crossed the checkpoint every day from Palomas in Mexico to Deming in the United States to attend school. During the COVID-19 pandemic, accessibility to education has been almost completely denied for students living in Mexico. This paper unpacks the findings from a critical case study focused on the school leadership of the community and marks the beginning of a larger action-research initiative aimed at forging alliances with and among community stakeholders, researchers, and community leaders to bring transformative change. Findings suggest that these borderland cities do not view themselves as divided by a physical or ideological Frontera or Barrera. Rather, they see themselves as a unified community whose members live on both sides of the border. The Palomas-Deming borderland community shares one mission of creating the necessary conditions to provide educational equity for all students in the region with U.S. passports regardless of a student’s country of residence. Within these contexts, our paper adds to the sparse scholarship on borderland education and highlights community-based needs for and capabilities of transformative educational change that we perceive as the pathway to more equitable opportunities for learning.

Keywords
Mexico-U.S. border, borderland region, equity, inclusion, educational leadership, educational change, access, COVID19, frontera, critical case study, transfronterizos/as, community uplift

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Introduction

The city of Deming sits at the border of the Global South and the Global North. Its twin town, Puerto Palomas, just across the border, has around 1,000 of its children cross the checkpoint every day to go to school in Deming. This daily border crossing to attend school creates a reality for the Puerto Palomas children, their families, and the community that is not like any other. Within the strenuously limited economic, social, and healthcare systems and against the backdrop of current world events, we push this community to the fore as an epitome of a collective who lives on both sides of the border (see Yaar-Waisel, 2021) but works together during the challenges of strict immigration policy (see Craig and Richeson, 2014) and COVID-19. In this paper, we aim to share the reality of accessing education for transfronterizos/as in this borderland region and the resilience and collective collaboration between school leaders and the community in efforts to strive for more equitable access to education.

Two foci guide this paper. The first focus is on sharing a counterstory (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001, 2002) on how the rural school district in Deming works towards an equitable education system for the children in its community. The second focus is on how educational leaders in this community sustain learning during the pandemics of racism and COVID-19. Much of our work is addressed to cater to the reality of the transfronterizos/as who cross the Mexico-U.S. border to attend school (PBS NewsHour, 2017; Santiago, 2017). Casting a shaft of light on this critical case study of a borderland education at a time of crisis turns attention to collective community efforts in alleviating context-specific problems. This paper grounds a small part of a larger community action initiative where scholars, policymakers, and school leaders are currently identifying, exploring, and promoting community resilience and assets for the purposes of informing policy and practice.

One of the research projects in this initiative is called Borderland Educational Research Community Coalition (BERCC). The purpose of the BERCC is to increase the capacity of educational research within the borderland community, to identify pressing educational issues, and address needs for education promotion and policy advocacy within the borderland region. By focusing on the implementation of community participatory research and initiatives (Bang and Vossoughi, 2016), BERCC researchers have been collaborating with educational leaders within the borderland to define specific research questions, design research projects, collect and analyze data, and interpret and apply research findings to improve the educational outcome of students. This project is a step towards creating a larger coalition that could potentially include educational institutions and provide college students in the field of education with more meaningful research and outreach experiences with the surrounding school districts by forging “alliances with community stakeholders” (Ozanne and Anderson, 2010).

Through this research, we aim to encourage critical conversations about borderland communities regarding negative immigration policies and the exacerbations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This type of work allows researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to reconstitute social relations and to consider educational disparities and the way those disparities are framed in our socio-cultural ideologies (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As educators and scholars, we acknowledge that “no knowledge is value neutral” (Grogan and Simmons, 2012) and that our personal and professional backgrounds, our experiences, and identities inform every aspect of our research including what it is that we focus on, how we design the research, processes of data collection and data interpretation, and what ends up in research reports such as this paper. Both of us bring into this work our drive to foster formative relationships with research participants and to position borderland education center stage. This commitment interlaces our own experience with that of the participants. We are both dedicated to transfronterizos/as, social justice issues in education, and equity for all
students, especially those disenfranchised by inequitable and hegemonic systems. We recognize and honor that the genesis of the Southwest Indigenous Peoples established their guardianship of the lands now occupied by New Mexico State University and the Deming, NM area and we acknowledge and respect the sovereign Indian Nations and Indigenous Peoples. This acknowledgment takes the form of our turning the limelight to the borderland community during a time of crisis. To define the border area, we follow the advice of Anzaldúa (2012) to view this as a geographical region that is most susceptible to la mezcla (hybridity), neither fully of Mexico nor fully of the United States thus situating this work within a postcolonial critical perspective (see Grogan and Simmons, 2012).

We take a critical stance in data collection, analysis, and reporting of what we learned from the individuals whose voices are echoed in this work before and during the pandemic and we thank the participants for their time and trust (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001, 2002). We both spent time self-reflecting on our roles as allies and active anti-racists and how to conduct this critical research and share our platforms while recognizing our privilege as educational researchers to call attention to systemic oppression (Ayvazian, 1995) while taking care not to perpetuate inequities through our own actions, behaviors, and attitudes (McCoy and Rodricks, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to develop alliances and, by extension, critical conversations that may lead to positive policy and educational change. We are aware of the ethical responsibility we bring in shedding light on borderland education in this context. As scholars in educational leadership and educational change who are deeply invested in equity and justice in education, this study aims to surface the workings of one borderland community in the face of crises and to bring forth their knowledge and reality (Tate, 1994).

The context of borderland cities

Deming, New Mexico is a rural community with an estimated population of fewer than 15,000 residents (U.S. Census, 2019) that borders the quiet community of Puerto Palomas, Mexico, with less than 5,000 residents. These sister cities have strong economic, cultural, educational, and social ties that bind them together. As is expected within such a tight-knit community, many of the students who attend the Deming Public School District (DPSD) have familial ties on both sides of the border. Many of those who cross the checkpoint live in Palomas as U.S.-born citizens.

According to the Deming Public School District and the Columbus Border Crossing Security, around 1,280 children (border patrol, personal communication, 10 October 2021) who are U.S. citizens cross the Mexico/U.S. borderland daily to attend DPSD. It should be noted that DPSD is the only school district in the U.S. that allows students to attend without paying out-of-state tuition. According to the education clause in the New Mexico Constitution, “a uniform system of free public schools sufficient for the education of, and open to, all the children of school age in the State shall be established and maintained” (New Mexico Constitution, Article XII, §1). It stands to reason then that when a family member submits an application to DPSD for a student living within the school district, that student is accepted regardless of citizenship. For U.S. citizens living across the border in Palomas, the application is accepted as they have the right to a free education in the state of New Mexico. Many of these students have at least one parent or caregiver living in Deming; many others do not.

Other districts along the southwestern border region allow students who live near the border in Mexico to attend school in the U.S., but they must pay out-of-state tuition. As the poorest district in the country, Deming, New Mexico, has an agreement with the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) and the Office of the District Superintendent that allows these students who
are citizens of the United States but live in the neighboring town of Palomas to attend school in Deming (The World, 2012).

Because these towns have operated as one school community for many years (long before there was a noticeable or physical frontera/border) and the fact that the school district is one of the very few employers in this region; there is a necessity to keep the numbers of students high to support this region economically, politically, and socially. Without this agreement, there would be little to no employment, minimal quality education available to students, or limited social mobility through education in this area of the country. As citizens of the United States, these students have the right to a quality education. Given this context-specific reality, the New Mexico Public Education Department and the Deming District leadership maintain and support the border crossing as families have been performing this ritual of daily passing of the physical and ideological border for many decades.

Methods

Informed by Herr (1995), who calls for meaningful research that is guided by a continual inquiry, as opposed to a one-time intervention or data collection, our critical case study (a small part of the larger BERCC and Palomas/Deming community research initiatives) took several months as we revisited data, returned to observe the border crossing, and check on any changes in policy regarding the transfronterizos/as. As researchers committed to educational change to allow for more equitable access to education, it is important to build connections, trust, and resources to ensure a long-term relationship between the university, the district, and the schools in the southwest borderlands and elsewhere. This critical case study focuses on answering the following question through the perspective of school leadership and educational change: What are the navigational capitals and assets brought by the transfronterizos/as and surrounding community of Deming Public School District during the racism and COVID-19 pandemics? Data collection and analysis was guided by Yosso’s (2005) seminal work on community cultural wealth theory that is grounded in critical race theory.

During the data collection process, the first author met with the district leadership and school principals to better understand decision-making processes related to how the district and schools have been supporting their students and community during the COVID-19 school closure. The data used in this paper were collected through interviews with these educational leaders as well as through field observations at the border crossing and at local schools. Our research aimed to to learn more about resilience and community assets (Crosnoe, 2005) that stakeholders of the Palomas/Deming region utilized and built on during the challenging times of strict immigration policy, the building of the border wall (CNBC, 2017; Exec. Order No. 13,767, 2017), and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Along with following the latest news and online archives related to the pandemic and immigration policies, border crossing reality was captured through five full-day field observations of the border-crossing area and through interviewing three school principals, and two district leaders. The purpose was to further understand the Deming infrastructure and process of bringing students to school and back home. The five full-day field observations were carried out over a period of several months. The first author also shadowed a border crossing school district guard, two border patrol guards, a bus monitor, and a bus driver at the border crossing. In addition, she shadowed school leaders in three 90-min leadership meetings. Overall, this paper builds on seven one-hour semi-structured interviews with school and district leaders and is supported by field observations, informal interviews, and shadowing when possible. Specifically, the first author conducted one interview with each of the three school principals and two interviews each with the two district
leaders as per their availability and interest following an invitation to share their perspective and experience. The bulk of the interviews were carried out during the fall of 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and as the district was facing major challenges in the face of punitive immigration policies. Follow up interviews with the superintendent and two school leaders and two field observations were conducted one year after the initial data collection to see what changes had happened at the border and to better understand the effects of the pandemic on the community and the many assets that the community mobilized to address and redress these challenges.

The entry point for data collection was at the beginning of the student trek across the border as the transfronterizos/as crossed the border at 6:30 AM carrying their passports on their lanyards to attend school on the U.S. side of the border. Early on, we realized that students as young as three years old had to get up before dawn to get to school as their commute to the entry point in Palomas took an hour. They would complete the trek again after school in the opposite direction, getting home late in the evening, only to wake up again for school before the crack of dawn the following morning. Many did this for their entire schooling to get a high school diploma and quality education in the U.S. As scholars and educators, we were moved by these daily treks to school and back home.

**Theoretical framework**

We use a critical lens of decolonizing and culturally sustaining approach to this research to respect and appreciate how this rural school district located on the Mexico/U.S. border intentionally and carefully responded to the challenges of COVID-19 and of the ongoing social unrest. We draw on the theoretical framework of community wealth and cultural capital that Yosso (2005) suggests to challenge traditional and hegemonic perspectives and practices that minoritize historically disenfranchised populations. Yosso applies the concepts of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to shift deficit thinking placed on Communities of Color and to deconstruct how these relate to community and family engagement in schooling. Yosso’s work inspired some recent developments in the field of educational change in creating and supporting culturally sustaining leadership practices (FitzGerald & Quiñones, 2019; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2016; Santamaria, 2014) that school leaders draw on to better support their students (Lee & Walsh, 2019). This is significant because more than 1,000 transfronterizos/as students, who are U.S. citizens, cross the border daily to go to school in DPSD thus rendering this perspective necessary as it allows a more emancipatory approach to research.

Community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) builds on the ideas of CRT that challenge hierarchical notions of what is of value in schools. Yosso offers six forms of cultural capital that reflect and build on community cultural wealth that students of color bring to their school communities: aspirational, familial, social, resistant, linguistic, and navigational. We coded our interview transcripts and observation notes using Yosso’s (2005) framework, highlighting words and phrases that exemplified and amplified any of the six forms of capital as described in Yosso’s work. The school community in this study demonstrated a plethora of all six forms of capital.

We found that three of Yosso’s community cultural capitals were the most prevalent during the coding of our data: social, resistant, and navigational capitals. As we focus this paper on leadership in particular, we unpack these three forms of capital that surfaced the most in our interviews and observations. These include social capital as the networks of people that came together and provided community resources including instrumental and emotional support; resistant capital in the form of the community’s resilience to help students to navigate the inequities faced due to the pandemics; and navigational capital in the form of maneuvering through the messy and unprecedented challenges brought by the racism and COVID-19 pandemics in the DPSD. The knowledge gained through critical research builds on trust, partnerships, and community may inform policy and
practice in education that serves borderland communities as we seek to foster and strengthen educational leadership to address context-specific issues. We now turn to a detailed description of the findings.

**Findings**

Deming, New Mexico is sustained almost entirely by the jobs provided by the school district, the largest employer in this borderland town. As the locus of the community, the area depends upon the school district’s support, knowledge, and vocational training for the community’s survival and development. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this rural border town has been impacted greatly as many residents in this area do not have the infrastructure or access to the tools they need for online teaching and learning, namely, devices such as laptops, tablets and Internet access (Cyr, 2020) thus exacerbating a digital divide. During much of the COVID-19 pandemic, the border was closed and many of the DPSD students were unable to access school or even technology to meet online with their teachers. Deming’s community has been managing the additional detrimental impacts the pandemic has been inflicting on the deeply intertwined economic, social, and healthcare systems. For example, leading up to the pandemic, this community was already referred to as the “poorest of the poor” (U.S. News, 2018).

Deming was a hub for immigrant deportations and processing when migrant shelters all but disappeared in the area (Turner, 2020). Today, this community continues to struggle with the aftermath of separation of families and the economic stress from punitive immigration policies placed on an already strained system but, at the same time, it also continues to build on its community-based assets of family, culture, and language (McFadden et al., 2019). In pre-pandemic times, this rural borderland school district provided quality education to many transfronterizos/as who were committed to and appreciative of the value of education. This was evidenced by their daily trek to school, their 90% graduation rate, and their attendance at events before and after school. Students took the initiative to organize online meetings between their teachers and parents/caregivers who were unable to cross the border to meet in person. Historically speaking, the practice of open enrollment and quality education has been available for more than 70 years since 1948 (Sahagun, 1993). The Superintendent of DPSD explained,

> This has been the tradition in the community for way before I got here. This actually started in 1948. When you go back this was really a relationship that took part, when you look at Deming Public Schools, it’s one of the only, there’s really only two districts in the State that really are encompassing county schools and that’s Galen McKinley and then there’s Deming Public Schools. When you have that, you have Deming and then 30 miles south you have Columbus, the village of Columbus and right on the other side of the border, you have Palomas. If you go back to 1948, this is really just one big community starting to get started. And so with that, what happened, how it transpired, they’ve been doing that for 60, 70 years now.

The principal at the elementary school told us more about the attendance requirements during our visit. She said,

> So typically, a student must reside within the school district to be able to attend that school district. The person that has the say over who has residency is the Superintendent. This is something that we’ve done for 70 years now. [We] accept address from Palomas. I consider that in-residency, in-district residency.
As you come into any school district, you’re going to fill out the information to become a student, and you’re going to put your address down and we accept those.

The Superintendent explained during a break in a two-day-long leadership meeting in the high school building some of the politics they dealt with daily.

Once I’m able to tell the story and what I’ve been able to say just now, they get it. Because of national politics now, with this idea of migrant families, and illegal crossings and the wall, now it’s been a daily type of conversation...Gadsden School District is [also] a good example of a district that’s not only close to an international border but also close to a State border. So, they have some relationships where they have some students coming in from Texas over into New Mexico and vice versa just because of the proximity of where they live. In some instances, it’s closer to come to Gadsden schools than it is to go to... just because of where they live.

During one of the initial visits to the border, the DPSD Superintendent described the area on the U.S. side of the border,

Columbus...It’s a very rural area. It’s only got a couple of thousand people that live there. Many of them are retired types of individuals. We do have some students that live in Columbus. You can see here, this is the road, this is Highway 11 that takes us to Deming, which is 30 miles north. We have a large federal presence with border patrol, customs, security, things like that, so we have a lot of families that are part of our school system that have both parents as part of law enforcement. This is a new port [pointing at the border wall structure that was facing us on the U.S. border]. You can see that it just opened up about two months ago, and they’re kind of working out some of the kinks with it right now. It’s able to take a whole lot more traffic, and what you’re seeing right here, that’s the line right there, the border. Kids are going to be able to come through here, and it’s very high-tech. X-ray, Gamma Ray, everything, they’re able to scan you before you come in, and when you’re going back.

So, every morning, about 6:20, you start to see the kids come over. These are our high school and middle school kids. These kids, there’s about right around 400 of them, and they line up and start to get on the bus. They’re going to take the 30-mile trip north to Deming. That’s where we have our intermediate school, which is a sixth-grade school, our middle school, which is seven and eighth, and then our high school. You saw the elementary school just a mile down the road.

As we were standing waiting at the border to see the kids cross, the crossing guard came over to chat and we were introduced. She shared more information on the children and explained that even though the area was rural and quiet, there was a lot of attention given to immigration and to Palomas and Deming in particular. She noted they were wary of talking to people that they did not know well or that the leadership may not trust and that that was why she did not join us earlier when she saw us sitting by the bus port. The superintendent nodded and stated that the leadership was bombarded with emails and phone calls from the press, and that he was trying his best to keep visits from the press and researchers to a minimum but that he still has at least two or three interviews a week. He and the crossing guard explained, trying to be considerate of me (Kristin) and a doctoral student who accompanied me to the field observation.

Depending on where you’re at in the country, I’m going to make some assumptions that because of national media, it’s thought of as a very unsafe place, the border, and that’s very far from the truth. This is
something that we live with everyday...go back and forth. It’s just like, for example, for you being here in your hometown, and going across town to the mall. It’s as simple as getting in a car and driving around town, you head to the restaurant. It’s the same thing here. We have families that go back and forth just like they travel back and forth from town.

The crossing guard added,

People are related to each other. They’re friendly with each other. They build relationships, it’s a community. So, when you look at Columbus and Palomas, they’re two cities and two countries, but really, it’s one big community.

Referring back to the crossing, the crossing guard continued as if contemplating, but she spoke loud enough for us to hear her, “It’s like a mile. Because the parents can’t see. They can’t see no more. They have to trust.” The Superintendent agreed, “They got to trust us.”

As we began to see the students coming around the corner from the border checkpoint and heading down a long path towards us, she continued,

The right side here is for us to go south. So that’s a quick one. For us coming north, they’re going to come on the other side of the street, and you see them coming and there’s multiple checkpoints that they come through. There’s the main checkpoint, and then there’s a secondary. The kids got to the edge of, they are coming through the secondary port, or checkpoint. Once they get past that one, they’re able to cross the street here, and we have our waiting area here. This is a super high-tech port of entry now. There’s a built-in gamma... What’s the term for it? There’s x-rays and gamma machines to be able to check. There’s also that going south now too. They’re actually able to have security checkpoints going both ways now.

As the students drew near, we all helped the students to get on the correct buses in the near darkness. It was clear that this was a very organized process to keep the children safe, especially as they lost sight of their parents on the other side of the border wall that just a decade ago was simply a chain-link fence that they squeezed through and a single agent keeping an eye out for them. The crossing guard said as the first of the buses drove toward the elementary school, “There’s nine buses altogether, so I think for high school there’s three…”

As we waited for the next group of students to cross the border, the principal of the high school joined us and explained how much they have been working with the border patrol and Presidente (Mayor) of Palomas before, during, and after the building of the border wall to ensure the safety of the children.

We worked with the port as they designed this and built it for little changes along the way. That was our one big worry, well two things, is how far they have to walk north now, because it’s quite a bit farther, especially when they’re three and four years old. The majority of them start with us at three years old. They come to us in pre-kinder and they’re with us all the way until they’re 18.

The principal explained that there were extra challenges for students crossing the border but that the community was mostly supportive of the transfronterizos/as and rallied to support them. The Superintendent agreed and tried to compare the crossing experience to everyday American life.

…How this came to be, it was kind of like one big community, it’s still very much like that. You have really family members, you have friends, you have colleagues that go back and forth to Palomas. For
example, for us, if we were to jump in the car right now and drive across town over to the mall. You get in, you drive across over to the mall. It’s kind of how it is here. You want to go eat at a restaurant, you just get in the car, you cross the border, and you go to a restaurant. It’s not a big deal. It’s really one large community. It is hard for people who don’t live there to have that kind of context.

**Bounding policies**

The politics were an issue for those that we interviewed during our visits to the border. The school leaders, crossing guard, and bus drivers hesitated to share too much information and we did not push them at all as we were keenly aware of the national press and its effects on their morale. The Superintendent was used to these types of conversations and was relieved to share his thoughts with us as he knew that we were dedicated to long-term research. He pro-actively supported transfronterizos/as and worked with several of our graduate students who were born and raised in the area. He explained how stressful the role of the Superintendency could be, especially when political stakes were high.

There was a big meeting last week, in Deming. It was really interesting because it was [a politician from] the Republican party who called me up and asked me if he could use the auditorium to have this meeting. Once I tried to press him a little bit on what the meeting was about, he talked about it being about border issues. It’s more than that too, we have some state issues that are happening now when it comes to gun rights. I think these were important issues for some of our Republicans. But once they talked about wanting to talk about illegals crossing and the students that are coming across the border, I just didn’t agree with them using the auditorium.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began and added to the stress of the ongoing racism pandemic, the community came together to support their school district and transfronterizos/as with all the resources available to them. Some of the collectively formulated solutions for those on the Mexican side of the border before and during the COVID-19 pandemic included providing Internet through local businesses for school learning and for disseminating information and resources about effective protective measures against the pandemic. El Presidente, the mayor of Palomas, has often made announcements to the town from a centrally located small gazebo, and the school district created a YouTube channel to play the sports games online. When we asked the Superintendent about challenges in engaging families regarding the additional travel across the border, he explained that it was more difficult than it had been years ago before the cartel gained power in Mexico.

It’s a little unique. If we got back about 13–14 years ago, the school principals would actually go across the border to be able to meet with parents, do parent-teacher conferences, hold community events, do our PTO meetings, things like that. There was a time right around 2007, where the cartel violence picked up. When that happened, they stopped. We can’t on official school business cross the border. We used to take school vehicles across, all those kinds of things. It really comes down to insurance issues, our liability insurance won’t cover us when we cross the border anymore.

When asked about Internet access and technology, he said that it is challenging with budget constraints and liability issues with the border. This was increasingly difficult during the pandemic. As a result, school for those without Internet or computers halted to a stop and little learning took place for many months until infrastructure was expanded to include more hotspots and iPads were distributed to students. Some students on both sides of the border faced challenges recharging their
iPads and other digital devices because they did not have electricity in their homes. Similarly, Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) was limited and professors at the university and outreach organizations scrambled for grant monies to cover some of the costs for the DPSD. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was some Internet availability and computers for transfronterizos/as, but it was not enough for everyone.

We’ve had to be a little innovative in how we do this. We’ve set up Internet cafes across the border. We supply the technology and there’s a store right across the border there that has an Internet connection. Internet is different here, between the two countries. Here it’s like anywhere you go, you got wireless, you go to a store, you got wireless there, you got it at home. There, it’s a hot commodity. It’s not everybody that has those Internet lines, but we did have one that had that and so the store owner was able to say “I will give you the space, we’ll set up the Internet café” and we have that slow connection line, but it does work, so we are able to Skype with parents and set up those parent-teacher conferences and things like that. That keeps them engaged. When it comes to athletic events, graduation, things like that. We now stream those things. We have our YouTube channel, so all those things get streamed. If a parent can’t come to graduation or some kind of honor-roll event, things like that, we are able to stream those so parents can actually see it there.

We also have issues where, say somebody gets in trouble, gets in a fight, gets suspended. Sometimes it can be a little bit harder, it’s not harder, it’s just one or two more steps to be able to contact those parents. More so, when somebody maybe falls on the playground and breaks their arm, or we have some kind of medical emergency. With those sorts of things, we actually have a really good relationship with the local Presidente there, the mayor there, and some of the local officials, the DEEF...social workers. Also, just like Internet lines, not everybody has a cellphone or a phone line. I’ve actually seen where they’ll come out, they’ll just get on the bullhorn and they’ll just start calling for people. It’s word of mouth. Within 10 minutes they find whoever it is they’re looking for. We’ve got a really good relationship like that too. Some things are just getting back to the old ways of trying to track people down and finding them. We usually do a good job. Sometimes, when we do have those medical emergencies, that’s when we have to work with border security. Let’s say we have a student that, this happened a couple of weeks ago, we had an outbreak of the flu. We had some students that were spiking 103, 104 fevers so we sent a couple of them to the hospital. Well, one of them was from Mexico, but his parents couldn’t come across so we either have to try to have some kind of medical emergency type of permission to come across. Because then the hospital can’t really do anything unless they have permission from a guardian. Or we will try to find an uncle or an aunt or someone who can cross the border and they can start to make some of those decisions. But like I said, it’s not hard, it just takes one or two more steps. Which takes a little bit more time. Every situation is a little unique.

Later in our conversation, the principal mentioned that he felt family engagement is challenging for any school district and that Deming has been making an extra effort to accommodate needs so that families felt welcome to events and meetings. During the interview, the principal provided more details about the kind of support and bounding policies that were set up.

If we’re talking about specifically the parents in Palomas, by far they want to be more involved. I think it’s because they don’t take it for granted. It’s something special for them to be a part as much as they can. Whenever we are able to set up online conferences or stream things, we get a high attendance rate for those things. Even just parents in Deming, that live in Deming or in Columbus, it’s hard just like it is
anywhere else. You have to be innovative in how you get them to participate and show up, and things like that. It’s not any different than any other community, it’s hard to get that to happen.

**Social, resistant, and navigational capitals**

At the break of the pandemic, the close-knit community spread the news of the border closure through word of mouth, and it took just minutes to get information from one side of town to the other. Local businesses increased their technology support and allocated space for students to work in. The Deming school district set up hotspots around town for students to come and study. Because the Deming school leaders were unable to cross the border to support their transfronterizos/as students during much of the pandemic, students on the Mexican side lost much learning time. They could not access the hotspots. They did not have enough iPads or computers that were needed to connect for learning.

Our findings demonstrate that there is much to learn from this small town on the border where shared vision, mission, and values occasion opportunities for learning using social, resistant, and navigational capitals. Continual efforts are made to allow more access to quality education for all in this region of the United States. Values of bilingualism and education are fostered by members of the extended family. Resistance through resilience is an asset that this community practiced, particularly in years past during a negative national anti-immigration push from policymakers. For generations prior to the pandemic, family members would pass through a chain-link fence without interruption. The construction of a multi-million-dollar gamma-ray wall with armed guards spawned the worry of being stopped by border patrol, and having limited access to family and friends. A principal of one of the schools on the U.S. side, still drove her children to daycare in Palomas, Mexico during the week up until COVID-19. She and everyone in these two small sister towns were forced to stay on their side of the wall. Even those with U.S. passports were denied access to the quality of education that they sought and consequently were unable to successfully complete their grade levels in a timely manner.

This small slice of land, hugging the border of New Mexico and Mexico, is special in that it represents many of the most disenfranchised by colonizing hegemonic systems in the United States. To navigate through the system, students embody resilience and respect for speaking and learning multiple languages, relying on their home cultures (Olsen-Phillips, 2018). The school and district leadership in Deming focus on more than just student learning. The strengths of social, resistant, and navigational capitals are epitomized in this borderland community particularly during this time of crisis. To understand this community and to underscore the contribution of our research, it is important to focus on the strengths of the families and districts in the face of adversity instead of deficits in the community (Valencia, 2012). To echo Darling Hammond (2020), education in a time of crisis has uncovered the abyss of inequities in accessing formal education because of the digital divide and lack of infrastructure. This community located on the border of the North and the South is no different from any other in this respect.

**Policy implications: E-inclusion beyond frontiers**

The findings in this research suggest that through building strong navigational skills and tight community ties, this rural border town sustained a productive quality education of online teaching and learning. Community members struggled with limited knowledge on technology, insufficient number of computers, poor Internet infrastructure, and minimal resources. These efforts were carried out through relationships among and between the local educational leadership and the people
they represented. The transfronterizos/as, educational leadership, and the researchers were bonded together in efforts to provide equitable access to education to all children in the borderland. This was made possible by accepting and acknowledging the voices, views, and dilemmas of transfronterizos/as’ daily lived experiences. It is through the realization of the complex political reality of borderland education that policies can avoid the use of essentializing tags, which render the voices, identities, and experiences of transfronterizos/as and their families as flat and static. Such policies do injustice to the aspirational, familial, social, resistant, linguistic, and navigational richness borderland communities bring. Policies in borderland geographies must be owned by and be in the interests of the members of the community. To that effect, we need to work together with members of borderland communities so that they can introduce systemic change without relying on outside experts.

During COVID-19, adequate infrastructure was needed to ensure that transfronterizos/as students could continue their U.S.-based education. Students were unable to cross the border to attend school. Access to the Internet and computers was limited or altogether unavailable on the Mexican/Palomas side of the border. It was through immense efforts in and between aspirational, familial, social, resistant, linguistic, and navigational capitals that allowed for some, however insufficient, level of contact through ongoing collaboration between the Palomas mayor, the Deming Superintendent, and the school principals, teachers, and staff.

As local businesses allocated space for students and their families to use the business’ Internet, infrastructure and supporting policies need to be put in place to allow businesses to continue to provide larger spanning hotspots post-COVID-19 or for future crises that may necessitate school closure. Such infrastructure and policies should focus on bridging over the digital divide to reach marginalized populations (Helsper, 2011) and combat social exclusion (Estivill, 2003) by achieving digital inclusion (Mancinelli, 2008). Such policies should ensure children and families have enough digital devices to allow student–teacher interaction and teacher–parent connection for those parents who are unable to travel across the border for various reasons. The pandemic of COVID-19 compounded the one of racism and the inequities faced by the borderland students in the Palomas/Deming area. Our work as social justice leaders in education identified and surfaced avenues to create more equitable access to schooling by taking a critical and pressing focus on the need for counter-stories that emphasize, highlight, and humanize border-crossing students and communities.

Further research that builds on the affordances of collaborative work across disciplines such as education, social work, health, policy, and law needs to be supported. Critical research carries with it the promise to supplant the crude tools available to the borderland community and to refine and further define strategies to scale up asset-based and liberatory educational change efforts in borderland communities. There is a demonstrated need in research to critically examine the reproduction of systemic inequities and further understand the negative outcomes of deficit thinking faced by non-dominant groups in our education systems (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Yosso, 2005). This research challenges deficit thinking by sharing a counter-story of resistance through resilience, and social and navigational capitals during the dual pandemics of racism and COVID-19. Anzaldúa (2012) reminds us that border crossers have learned to become a part of both worlds and do not belong entirely to one group or the other. The Palomas/Deming community embodies the idea that a “border” is not a divide and calls for us to challenge Western hegemonic practices of division and to foster the growth of a mindset that embraces and nurtures community uplift.

Understanding community strengths can help prevent or buffer strains of crisis-related school closures. Research and praxis that underscores a community’s capabilities of coping with emerging challenges can inform policy about what it is that needs further scaffolding. This, in turn, can provide critical information so that borderland communities are better equipped during crises. Notably, a focus on deficits leaves no room for acceptance and growth; a focus on colonial tenets
misses the many opportunities educational change can occasion equitable access to schooling; a focus on racial bias shuts down platforms to dismantle policies that use deficit perspectives. These may result in diluting counter storytelling of social, resistant, and navigational resilience and render efforts for change inutile. It is thus paramount that policy makers ask themselves whose voice is directing policy; whose perspectives guide policy; and whose story and history is at the center of decision making.

Concluding comments

This paper pushes forth what, too often, remains in the blind spots of scholarly work. As in much of the research on the exacerbation of worldwide inequities during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that this borderland district, with its system of capitals still needs better infrastructure and equitable access to resources. Up-to-date technology, e-inclusion, professional development on how to use the technology, and basic supplies and training for the use of personal protection equipment will ensure more equitable access for students on both sides of the border. We echo Yosso’s (2005) call to focus on “community cultural wealth [that] involves a commitment to conduct research, teach, and develop schools that serve a larger purpose of struggling toward social and racial justice” (p. 14). When research inadvertently assigns to and imposes on individuals and a community’s specific identity, we unwittingly “centralize particular positions and purposes over others, subtly accepting or reinforcing the value and potential assigned to these through research” (Akkerman et al., 2021: p. 419). To redirect educational research to spaces where real change can happen, be supported, and sustained, we agree with Akkerman et al. in acknowledging that “not only educational settings but also family, peers, and neighbourhoods create positions, purposes, and project futures along with ideas about how to engage in school subjects, how to make educational, vocational or alternative choices” (Akkerman et al., 2021: p. 419). We also agree with Yaar-Waisel (2021) who calls for the need for joint planning “to evoke the border as a bridge rather than a separation” (p. 390).

The twin towns of Palomas and Deming experienced challenges with the Internet, technology, funding, and transportation to school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the pandemic hit and the border and schools were closed for face-to-face instruction, these challenges were compounded with new ones. The Palomas/Deming story is important to share as the work done by critical researchers, educators, and policymakers needs to consider the ramifications of the larger systemic issues of racism, privilege, and access to resources. Projected plans within the larger community initiatives with the DPSD include finding a wider array of solutions to ensure that all students can have steady and equitable access to resources over time. This can only happen with collaboration that involves stakeholders on both sides of the border to augment already strong cultural and community capitals and draw on the forms of capital that students bring from their homes and communities into the classroom (Yosso, 2005: p. 14).

Patel (2016) warns us against the deeply colonizing practices in educational research and calls for critique and the identification of inequities to deconstruct knowledge systems for societal change and transformation. The reality is that societal change and transformation are unlikely to occur without engagement and an understanding of the realities of those who are disenfranchised. Based on the insights we garnered through our research and critical analysis, we purport that much of the larger agenda and media coverage regarding the borderland community is misinformed and this peaceful and quiet community that exists, half in the United States and half in Mexico, is indeed one space occupied by transfronterizos/as, nationals, and citizens living in two countries.
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