The Examination of Success Factors in the Academic Achievement of Latino High School Students in the United States

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

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By:

Christopher N. Castellano

May 2013
Abstract

When the current situation of Latino high school students in the U.S. is examined as a whole, a quick and simple conclusion is logically drawn: There is a problem. The problem lies in the fact that the largest and fastest growing minority population in American schools is underachieving academically at a disproportionate rate (Pew Hispanic Research Center, 2011, Padilla & González, 2001). In 2007, only about half of the Latino 12th grade students in this country graduated high school, and at a 24% lower rate than their white classmates (Amatea & West-Olatunji). In this body of work, the history of this achievement gap in American schools is reviewed, as well as the unique needs and challenges facing Latino students. Success factors in improving their achievement are identified and used to inform possible interventions. The objective is to discover how educators working with Latino students can contribute to the remediation of this dire situation.
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The Examination of Success Factors in the Academic Achievement of Latino High School Students in the United States

Our nation’s schools are failing to meet the unique needs of our poor and minority students. Recent statistics indicate that our country’s two largest minority populations – Latino and African American students – graduated high school at a rate of 54 and 56 percent, respectively. The high school graduation rates of the majority white population during the same year was 78 percent (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). Similarly, our students that live in poverty have a higher incidence of school failure, lower standardized test scores, and lower graduation rates than their middle-class peers (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). The academic achievement gap in American schools was defined brilliantly by Danielle Lavin-Loucks in her 2006 article on the subject: “The term “achievement gap” denotes a somewhat kinder way of discussing pervasive racial and socioeconomic disparities in student achievement and savage inequalities in America’s schools.” Furthermore, the academic achievement of Mexican American students, which comprise two thirds of America’s Latino population, is disproportionately lower than that of white, African American, and Asian students (Padilla & González, 2001). Not only are their levels the lowest among these population groups, but once these students reach high school, they fall even further behind than their classmates and drop out of school at higher rates (López, Ehly, & Garcia-Vasquez, 2002). Low high school graduation rates have crippling implications for students and for our country. Individuals that do not finish high school are 40 percent more likely to be unemployed and not enrolled in college, and will earn considerably less money in their lifetime resulting in the cost of billions of dollars worth of social services, lost wages, and taxes (Stanard, 2003). According to Hodgkinson (1998), these students will go on to experience poorer mental and physical health, and have significantly
higher chances of needing welfare, being imprisoned, and abusing drugs (Stanard, 2003).

According to the Pew Research Hispanic Center, the Latino population in the United States grew to more than 52 million by 2011, which represents a 48 percent growth since the year 2000 (Pew Research Hispanic Center, 2011). The poor academic achievement of our country’s young Latinos proves to be a complex and multifaceted problem that must be addressed. As the Latino student population continues to grow, their lower achievement rate has significant implications for America’s social and economic future (Madrid, 2011). This body of work specifically addresses Latino high school students in the United States, and the circumstances, success factors, and challenges present when Latino students encounter the American educational system. We will also be exploring interventions that educators and school counselors, specifically, can implement in order to narrow this achievement gap in our schools.

Limitations

The use of the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” in this literature review refer to individuals whose heritage and culture is derived from Mexico, Central or South America, or the Spanish-speaking Caribbean island nations. When using the terms “majority culture” or “dominant culture”, the writer intends to address the white, Eurocentric population group in the United States.

Certain articles cited by the writer pertain to studies on sub-populations of Latino high school students: Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Latino immigrant students. However, this information is appropriate and relevant to the subject of this review as all of the groups referred to consist of Latino high school students. The focus group of Latino high school students is the umbrella term under which each of the aforementioned sub-populations fit. This matter is being raised early in the review simply for clarification.
Academic Achievement Gap

The achievement gap has always been present in the American educational system. This phenomenon dates back our school system’s beginning, which was essentially the result of the Massachusetts school laws of the 1640’s (Sass, 2013). The targeted demographic of America’s first public schools was white males (Allen, 2008). America’s minority populations, especially African Americans, began receiving education later than white students, and were not allowed to participate in the creation of their own school system. It wasn’t until the late 1950s that federal laws were put into place that required schools to integrate (Sass, 2013).

School segregation cases such as Alvarez vs. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District in 1931, Mendez vs. Westminster and the California Board of Education in 1946, and Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka in 1954, exposed the inequality in the American school system for Mexican Americans and African Americans in those years (Sass, 2013). In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was created in order to improve educational opportunities for poor children. Title I of ESEA refers to the funds allocated to each state that are dispersed to local school systems based on poverty data, and the percentage of a school’s students that qualify for free or reduced price lunch. This was also proof that continuing action was needed in order to alleviate the gap in the quality of education for poor and minority students (Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 2001). Title I funds are still influential in today’s education system, with about 90% of American school systems receiving them. The need for ESEA and its Title I funds illuminate the fact that the achievement gap is not only a racial gap, but a socioeconomic one as well.

In the early 1970’s the federal government was still being called upon to bridge this gap,
and responded with the Equal Education Opportunities Act. This law specifically aimed to prohibit the existing discrimination in schools on the basis of race, gender, or national origin (Sass, 2013). Studies show that in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the achievement gap between minority students and white students narrowed in the areas of science, reading, and math (Williams, 2011). In the following decade, all student groups made slow and steady improvements in math and science. Although that was great news, the gap between white and minority students had still not narrowed significantly (Williams, 2011).

This leads us to our nation’s most recent across-the-board attempt at alleviating the achievement gap – the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. President George W. Bush described this act as the way in which American elementary and secondary schools would improve their performance, while also ensuring that no child is trapped in a failing school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Despite a few amendments and waivers, this law is still operating in full force in 2013, and in the vast majority of cases is affecting urban schools with a large population of poor and minority students.

The main component of NCLB is essentially enforced through the analyzing of a school’s standardized test scores. Schools with test scores that do not meet the state standards in reading and math are put on probation. School districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress toward their state’s proficiency goals will be subject to corrective and restructuring measures, and possibly shut down (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Schools that are placed on probation that do make adequate yearly progress or narrow their achievement gap are eligible for financial awards.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005), NCLB may be starting to raise the overall achievement level at a very minimal rate, but results are mixed. This
statement refers to studies done between the years of 1992 and 2005, before and after the creation of NCLB. There is no evidence, however, that any significant changes have occurred in national student test performance as a result of NCLB (Ellis, 2007). There is also much criticism around the idea that this law forces teachers to base what they teach strictly on what will be covered in the standardized tests. The criticism is that students learn little else than how to take the tests, and are denied the opportunity to obtain other valuable knowledge that can be used in the broader context of society and in the workplace (Ellis, 2007).

Summary

Narrowing the academic achievement gap in our country has proven to be quite a daunting and complex task, and progress in this area has been rare and hard to come by. Until we gain a clear understanding of how to address it, these tragic circumstances will continue for poor and minority students, and especially for Latino students (Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001).

Latino Students in the United States

Of the 52 million Latinos living in the US, 33 million of them were born here, and the other 19 million were born in Latin America and migrated here. Roughly 12 million Latinos were enrolled in school in 2011 (Pew Research Hispanic Center). The Department of Homeland Security reported in 2012 that there were 11.5 million undocumented people living in the US, and that the vast majority of them were Latino. Undocumented refers to an individual who is “a non-citizen who entered the United States without legal immigration status or who stayed after the period he/she was authorized to be here” (Storlie & Jach, 2012). The undocumented population is likely much larger than this, due to the need or desire of undocumented families to maintain a certain level of privacy. The combined result of the burden of discrimination, and trying to balance the assimilation into a new culture and environment while not leaving behind
one’s own cultural norms and lifestyle can be quite overwhelming for migrant and undocumented students. These circumstances have been shown to cause stress, depression, anxiety, family conflict, sleep deprivation, and low self-esteem for Latinos (Villalba, Akos, Keeter & Ames, 2007).

A large number of school age undocumented individuals have migrated in the recent past, leaving behind family and friends who have been their support network for a long time. Often completing a cross-continental journey under extremely stressful circumstances, many undocumented students enter our schools burdened with trauma, grief, and loss. These students relocate to a place that in which they are unfamiliar with the language and culture, and adjusting to the new environment is a very difficult process (Thorn & Contreras, 2005). Many Latino students that come to the US are also lacking an academically sufficient educational preparation due to differences in formal education of their home country, including laws that only require school attendance up until the 6th grade (Villalba et al., 2007).

Roughly 65,000 undocumented students graduate from American high schools each year (Storlie & Jach, 2012). Among the challenges these students face upon transitioning out of high school, two daunting ones stand out: The inability to receive financial aid from the government to pay for college, and the inability to work legally. Unless an undocumented student is near the top of his class and is able to obtain multiple large private scholarships, paying for college is going to be a barrier to receiving a college education. For the average or below-average student that pursues a college education, one is left with little other option than starting out attending part-time at an affordable community college. The student will likely need to spend a large amount of time working to be able to afford his education.
The other option is testing his luck in the job market, but he faces a couple challenges there as well. Until this year, an undocumented individual would not have had the opportunity to work legally in the US. However, on June 15th, 2012, president Obama took action to allow qualifying undocumented individuals to obtain a legal work permit for two years, subject to renewal (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2013). This made it possible for many undocumented individuals to gain employment, but there is a list of requirements one has to meet which disqualify many potential applicants. Nonetheless, possessing only a high school diploma is going to be a barrier to earning a living wage that can support one’s future family. According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s living wage calculator, an adult with a spouse and two children in Minneapolis, Minnesota must earn at least $20.11 per hour to be able to support this family (2013). However, in 2010 the median income for young adult males with only a high school diploma was $15.77, and for females it was $12.02 ("The condition of education 2012," 2012). These numbers only apply to high school graduates that qualify to work legally in the US.

The language barrier for Latino students is most prevalent in recent arrivals to the US, and in younger children. When Spanish-speaking children first enter the school system in preschool and kindergarten, having limited English is a challenge, but these youngsters develop English skills quite rapidly. For Latino students that are not immersed in the English-centered environment of American schools until middle or high school, which is the case for undocumented recent arrivals to the US, the language barrier proves to be quite problematic. Studies suggest that it takes five to seven years for English learners to establish academic fluency (Villalba et al., 2007). This barrier can have an academic, personal, social impact on students. Communication between students, their families, and adults in school is strained. This can create frustration and misunderstanding on both ends. Non-English fluent students and their families
may find themselves unfamiliar with school rules, attendance policies, and graduation requirements. Limited English proficiency can also result in lower academic performance in reading and math. Also common for students with limited English skills, according to Villalba et al., is a feeling of frustration or shame in speaking English with a thick accent in front of peers and adults at school (2007).

The Achievement Gap for Latino Students

Among the factors adversely affecting the academic achievement of Latino students are the conditions of the schools in which they are enrolled, the quality of the curriculum and how teachers deliver it, the perception of Latino students by school staff, the states’ allocation of school resources, and parent involvement and expectations (Madrid, 2011). Home to 28 percent of the country’s Latino population, California has the largest amount of Latino residents numbering almost 15 million (Pew Hispanic Research Center, 2011). California, then, is an appropriate place to evaluate the conditions of the education that our Latino students are currently receiving.

More than 300,000 Latino high school students in California are attending schools that are characterized by overcrowding (Madrid, 2011). An overcrowded school inhibits each student’s access to resources and learning, and creates an unsafe environment. Many of these high schools are also suffering from a lack of qualified staff members. According to Madrid (2011), a 2007 study performed by Flores discovered the unfortunate reality that Latino students are more likely than white students to be taught by teachers who are not prepared in the subject they are teaching. Additionally, a study done by Esch et al. in 2005 found California schools with a high minority population have four times as many underprepared math and science teachers than low minority school. These schools are also finding it challenging to find and
attract new qualified teachers to hire. More than 600,000 Latino high school students in California are attending schools that fail to offer the number of college preparatory classes that accommodate all of the students who want to enroll in them (Madrid, 2011).

In 2009, the California Department of Education identified over 1.5 million students who were English learners, with 85% of these students having Spanish as their first language (Madrid, 2011). Some of these students are brand new arrivals from another country, while some have been learning English since their first years in school. Clearly this puts unique instructional and educational challenges on certain California schools. However, all of our public schools are instilled with the duty and the responsibility, especially under the Elementary and Secondary Education and the No Child Left Behind Acts, to ensure equal access to quality education for all students. But the reality for countless Latino English learner students is that they are not receiving appropriate education due to poor instructional practices that are not relevant to culturally and linguistically diverse students. According to Madrid (2011), an American Federation of Teacher study performed in 2004 revealed that English learners are often being delivered instructional programs that lack rigor and do not meet national content standards.

One instance of silver lining among these cloudy statistics is that between 2003 and 2009, Latino students in California have achieved an increase in proficiency on the math and English language arts California standards tests. On the English test, the amount of Latino students scoring proficient or better rose by 17 percent, and on the math test – 13 percent (Madrid, 2011). However, these data still represent a staggering achievement gap, with California’s white students outperforming Latino students at a proficient level on the English test by 31 percentage points, and by 21 percentage points in math (Madrid, 2011).
Another hazard for Latino students is the fact that some school staff have an inaccurate perception of the poor academic achievement of Latino students. A 2005 study by Bol and Berry discovered that high school teachers identified work ethic, peer relationships, laziness, and a lack of discipline as the basis for the lower achievement (Madrid, 2011). Another study sadly concluded that Latino students were perceived by their teachers to have less potential than their white classmates (Plata, Masten & Trusty, 1999). Through the analysis of much research pertaining to the academic achievement of Latino students, Flores (2007) found that Latino students are frequently placed in lower level courses despite having scores that are as good as or better than their white or Asian classmates. Flores (2007) also found that Latino students are less likely to be recommended for enrichment and accelerated programs.

**Family System**

Familismo, or familism in English, is a highly valued social pattern in Latino culture in which the family holds a higher level of importance than the individual. It is quite common for a tightly knit family of parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins to guide children together as they mature into adulthood.

When educators seldom communicate with, or perhaps never even meet the parent or caretaker of a student, it becomes easier for the educators to assume that said parent is not involved with or engaged in the student’s education. Unfortunately, parents of Latino students are not in communication with their child’s educators or seen at school as often as the majority culture parents, and in turn are perceived as uninvolved or uninterested in their child’s education (Valencia & Black, 2002, Quiocio & Daoud, 2006). However, multiple empirical studies have shown that Latino parents care deeply about the education of their children, and desire to be

There are many real barriers that prevent many Latino parents from engaging in their child’s education. The language and cultural barriers between Latino parents and their child’s English-speaking school staff prove to be significant barriers to involvement at school (Reese, 2002). When parents see that their children are able to learn English more quickly than themselves, it is quite common for them to become discouraged and leave their children in charge of their own educational responsibilities (Orellana-Faulstich, 2009).

Latino parents often operate on different cultural experiences or beliefs in regards to the educational system. Many parents that are new to the way schools operate in the U.S. may fear or experience the unfamiliar environment as unwelcoming, intimidating, or even disrespectful to them (Carreón, Drake, & Barton, 2005). Latino parents will also question the appropriateness of interacting with or questioning school personnel directly, and may simply be demonstrating respect by deferring to their child’s teachers for all issues pertaining to education (Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008, Valdrés, 1998). Studies show that Hispanic parents are intimately involved in their children’s lives, but in many cases this involvement looks different than that of the dominant culture or the culture of most educators in the U.S (Espinosa, 1995). These parents likely view their role as that of the nurturer, and teacher of morale, respect, and behavior at home (Carger, 1997).

A different topic that rose to the surface when researching Latino high school students was the role of gender, and its influence on academic achievement. Studies have examined results separately for Latino males and females, and in many cases the results showed differences
(Alfaro et al., 2006, Plunkett & Bámaca-Gómez, 2003). Studies of these students have revealed that Latina females exhibit more academic motivation than Latino males (Plunkett & Bámaca-Gómez, 2003). One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the fact that the level of discipline referrals and suspensions for Latino males is disproportionately higher than for females. Although this is sometimes true of other cultural groups, the uniqueness of the Latino students’ situation is that culturally, Latina females are traditionally more submissive and obedient, whereas males are more dominant and willful. Receiving discipline referrals and suspensions takes away from precious time in the classroom.

Male Latino students have jobs at a much higher rate than females. Many of these students work upwards of 30 hours per week, and some even work night shifts before coming to school. Many Latino students and their families prefer to, or must work many hours, as opposed to choosing or being able to invest time and resources into education. It is also important to acknowledge that Latina female high school students face educational barriers as well, causing them to achieve at lower levels than their fellow dominant culture students. Since Latina females have traditionally been socialized to be in charge of domestic and family responsibilities (Ojeda & Flores, 2008), they may be expected to devote time to this type of duties, taking away time from schoolwork, or receiving extra help from educators outside of class. This traditional role may also cause Latina female students to feel pressured to attend to domestic responsibilities after high school instead of pursuing a post-secondary education.

**Low Average Socioeconomic Status**

The term socioeconomic status (SES) refers to social standing or class, most commonly measured by income, education level, and occupation. The regrettable truth of the SES of Latino families in the U.S. is that it is much more likely to be low when compared with other families
Out of necessity or a desire for an improved economic situation and quality of life, Latino families migrate to the U.S. from Latin America. The migrating family enters this country’s workforce at a very low level. This reality is in no part due to the characteristic Latino family being under qualified for higher-level jobs. Instead, this is due to the reality that a family will most likely not migrate to a different country and culture if it already possesses economic security at home. Highly educated and affluent Latino’s do not necessarily have a reason to leave their home country and search for better opportunities in the US. Those that do migrate generally have a lower socioeconomic status and have a lower level of education.

According to Smith, Stern, and Shatrova (2008), Schmid (2001) showed low SES to be among the factors having the most influence on the relatively low academic achievement of Mexican American students. There are multiple variables of low SES that have a potential influence on family engagement and academic achievement. One of these variables is a lack of dependable transportation resources. Many of these families operate with one vehicle for two working parents and multiple children that go to school and work. Non-traditional work shifts, long hours, and the inability to secure or afford childcare are other variables that will prohibit even willing parents and caretakers from being involved in their children’s education (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2010). Circumstances such as these will surely make it more difficult for the student’s family to get to school for appointments, events, parent-teacher conferences, and even discussing or helping with schoolwork at home.

Summary

Due to the combined result of the burden of discrimination and balancing a new lifestyle and cultural values with old ones migrant and undocumented Latino students are subject to a higher risk of distress, depression, anxiety, family conflict, sleep deprivation, and low self-
Latino High School Students

Esteem (Villalba, Akos, Keeter & Ames, 2007). Among the factors adversely affecting the academic achievement of Latino students are the conditions of the schools in which they are enrolled, the quality of the curriculum and how teachers deliver it, the perception of Latino students by school staff, the states’ allocation of school resources, parent involvement and expectations, and limited English proficiency (Madrid, 2011).

A highly valued social pattern in Latino culture is familismo, in which the family holds a higher level of importance than the individual. Educators will do well to be aware of this when working with Latino students and their parents. Latino parents will also often operate on different cultural experiences or beliefs in regards to the educational system. There are real barriers that prevent many Latino parents from engaging in their child’s education. However, Latino parents care deeply about the education of their children, and desire to be involved and engaged, even though it may not appear so to educators (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001, Martinez et al., 2004, Quiocho & Daoud, 2006).

The SES of Latino families in the U.S. is much more likely to be low when compared with other families (Schmid, 2001). Low SES is among the factors that most influence the relatively low academic achievement of Mexican American students (Smith et al., 2008). The burdens of having low resources and working many hours make it more difficult for the family to get to school for appointments, and even to discuss or help with schoolwork at home.

Success Factors

Family Engagement

The forms of family engagement at home that are relevant to this research include discussing school-related matters with the student, help with homework, household rules regarding schoolwork and leisure time, attitude toward education, and educational aspirations.
According to Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & de Lardemelle (2010), Henderson & Mapp (2002) showed that parents’ involvement in their children’s education at the school, as well as in the home, has been linked with higher student test scores, fewer disciplinary issues, and lower dropout rates. Although family involvement at school is valuable, parents and caretakers have the opportunity to have a great impact on their student’s schooling through the amount of time they are able to spend with the student outside of school. Parents can develop a multidimensional relationship that supports their student academically, socially, and emotionally all year long.

In a study performed by Altschul (2011) aiming to discover what kind of parental involvement matters most when it comes to the academic achievement of Mexican American 10th grade students, the findings unequivocally showed that the positive impact occurs specifically through home-based involvement. The parenting factors related to home-based involvement in education that were measured in Altschul’s study are the following: Discussion of school-related issues between parents and students, parental help with homework, parent and child involvement with enriching activities, educational resources in the home, and allocation of resources to extracurricular instruction. One of the models used by Altschul’s study measured the impact of these factors on certain students’ 8th and 10th grade test scores. It is important to note that none of these parenting factors were related to changes in test scores during these two years.

However, it is important to note that the parents’ presence in their child’s school gives them the unique opportunity to witness their child in an educational environment as well as observe their interactions with adults at school. This opportunity can also serve as a sort of education for the parents, exposing them to professional educators and other adults who are
demonstrating effective teaching skills that can in turn be applied at home (Lara-Alecio, Irby, & Ebener, 1997). Studies indicate that continuous engagement starting at the first years of schooling is much more likely to result in the high academic achievement of the child than if the family only becomes engaged in middle or high school, even if at a high level (Altschul, 2011).

**Supportive Relationships**

The literature regarding successful Latino high school students points to the imperativeness of positive relationships with adults inside and outside of the school community (Guzmán, Santiago-Rivera, & Hasse, 2005). Strong connections with teachers, parents, family members, and other adult community members will offer the support that these students need to achieve at a high level. For many students, this support is offered to them in school, at home, and in the community, and all they need to do is take advantage of it. Unfortunately, some students are matched up with unsupportive teachers, scarce community resources, or parents that are unavailable or simply don’t know how best to help their children. Securing a support network in school or the community is very important for Latino high school students. As mentioned earlier, Latino students may lack informed or highly educated parents when it comes to navigating the American school and post secondary education system (Thorn & Contreras, 2005).

Another relative study examined the success factors of high-achieving Puerto Rican males at a Milwaukee high school (Garrett, Antrop-González, & Vélez, 2010). Two out of the three young men in the study reported very little support from their teachers and school counselors, and instead found this support through religious communities and extra-curricular activities. This support came in the form of youth group activities that provided opportunities to meet new people, see new places, and learn new things. It also came in the form of coaches’ or
teammates’ parents serving as mentors, and offering resources and advice to the students that they couldn’t otherwise access. According to Suárez-Orozco et al. (2010), Wills (1985) showed that these relationships with adults in school and in the community provide students with positive reinforcement, a strong sense of belonging, and necessary emotional support.

Several recent studies indicate that Latino high school students’ perception of their environment, as well as their perception of their support network play a role in their academic achievement (Altschul, 2011, Brewster & Bowen, 2004, Henry, Merten, Plunkett, & Sands, 2008, Ojeda & Flores, 2008). A study on teacher support and the school engagement of Latino middle and high school students at risk of failure showed that the strongest factor in whether or not these students believed that education was meaningful in their lives, was the degree to which they felt their teachers supported them (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). In another study on career development performed by McWhirter, Larson, & Daniels (1998), it was shown that Mexican American males’ perception of barriers to high achievement in school has an influence on their educational outcomes (Ojeda & Flores, 2008). This relationship was not present for Mexican American girls. Another study on the career development of Mexican American female students found that those who perceived fewer barriers to a successful career after high school had higher educational aspirations (Flores & O’Brien, 2002). Another study recognizes the influence that Latino adolescents’ perception of the security of the neighborhood of residence has on their GPA. In this study that focused partly on the neighborhood factors’ effect on the academic achievement of Latino adolescents, it was discovered that their perceptions of the lack of security of their neighborhood is negatively associated with GPA (Henry et al., 2008).

This same study reveals that Latino adolescents’ perception of their parents’ concern for them and involvement in their lives has a positive influence on their academic performance.
Using GPA as a measurement again, it has proven to be higher for students who perceive that their mothers have high academic aspirations for them (Henry et al., 2008). Another factor contributing to higher academic motivation and GPA for these students was perception of parental monitoring. Specifically, the degree to which students perceived their parents’ desire to know their peers and friends, as well as where the students were and what activity they were doing caused this motivation (Henry et al., 2008).

**Acculturation**

Acculturation is defined as the process of change that occurs when members of different cultural groups interact with one another, which results in a change to one or both groups (Cuéllar, Nyberg, Maldonado, & Roberts, 1995). The use of this term here refers to the change that Latino students undergo when coming into contact primarily with the majority culture in the U.S. However, some studies also referred on occasion to contact with the country’s other large minority cultures. A pattern that appeared in the literature was the positive influence of acculturation on the success of Mexican American high school students (Carranza, You, Chhoun, & Hudley, 2009, Domino & Acosta, 1987, Griffith, 1983, Garza & Gallegos, 1985, López, Ehly, & Garcia-Vasquez, 2002).

Among the factors of acculturation that were found to shape educational outcomes of Mexican American students, were the level of literacy in the English language, language preference, and peer selection based on ethnic identity (Domino & Acosta, 1987, Griffith, 1983, Garza & Gallegos, 1985, López et al., 2002). Another study found the most positive influential factor of acculturation to be length of time the student has been exposed to American schooling (Carranza et al., 2009).
A student coming to school every day from a dysfunctional home environment will tend to struggle academically as well. A family systems study performed by Rueschenberg & Buriel (1989) showed that there is indeed a link between Mexican American family functioning and acculturation. It turns out that a family that displays a low level of acculturation is more susceptible to dysfunctional behaviors in the home. In a 2002 study on the family environment and achievement of Mexican American high school students, Rodríguez points to the possibility that greater levels of family involvement in their child’s education can also be attributed to the degree of acculturation.

A multicultural counseling approach can encourage acculturation through leading Latino students to develop a multicultural identity. However, just like multicultural counselors, students should have a firm sense of acceptance of their own unique cultural identity before being encouraged to expand their identity (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006).

School Programs and Practices

According to Madrid (2011), a study by Dynarsky (2008) identified a couple key strategies that schools had success with in improving the achievement of Latino students. One strategy was ensuring that the school’s principal was a visionary and collaborative leader. This individual possesses effective staff leadership skills, and especially, demonstrates support for teachers and maintains a climate of mutual respect. Dynarsky’s philosophy was that in the end, the teachers will likely not be motivated to work for change if they are not led by a visionary and collaborative leader to do so.

This same study highlighted practices that foster higher academic achievement and also, re-engage students in their classes and in their school. These practices are creating small class sizes, providing tutoring and homework assistance, offer opportunities for credit recovery, as
well as offering Saturday schooling and summer enrichment programs (Madrid, 2011). Other studies performed by Hoxby, Murarka and Kang (2009), and Haycock (2001), emphasize the effectiveness of extending the learning time for low performing students. They suggest that this be done through the doubling or tripling of the instructional time devoted to reading and math, and that a longer school year has positive effect on student earning and achievement (Madrid, 2011).

Another key finding is the importance of teachers’ efforts to establish meaningful relationships with their Latino students. A 2009 study on the perceptions of Latino students and white students found that teachers who maintain meaningful and respectful interactions with their students foster in them an invaluable sense of belonging, which positively effects the student’s motivation and interest (Garza). These meaningful relationships have the potential to increase student attendance and participation, and their general attitude in class. School staff members who advocate for the inclusion of Latino culture and history in the school community will provide meaningful support for Latino students. This has the potential of creating in Latinos students a sense of pride, while also creating an environment and a curriculum that reflects the diversity of the student body (Villalba et al., 2007). School counselors are in a great position to act as a liaison between Latino students, their families, and school staff. Counselors have the opportunity to spend time with the students’ families, and can use the experience and knowledge they gain to inform school staff of Latino culture through professional development and in-service activities (2007).

It is important for school counselors to be aware that many Latino and other minority students may often not seek help from the school counselor when needed. This is particularly true if students are feeling discriminated against in school, or are not confident in their English
fluency (Villalba et al., 2007). School counselors should be proactive when working with Latino students, facilitating interactions and a safe environment even when it appears the student is doing just fine. When meeting with Latino and other minority students, counselors must consider that they will get a higher level of responsiveness when using culturally sensitive strategies (Clemente & Collision, 2000).

We are aware that cultural differences between Latino students and the majority culture, or the culture of the schools these students attend, can strongly affect their academic achievement. According to Trusty (1996), Pittman (1986) saw this cultural conflict leading to increased dropout rates as well. An appropriate response from school counselors would be to employ the best practices of multicultural counseling. In short, multicultural counseling consists of the counselor’s astute awareness of his own cultural values and biases, an awareness of the student’s worldview, and the use of culturally appropriate intervention strategies (American Counseling Association, 2013). A way in which the counselor could gain an awareness of the student’s worldview would be to get a picture of his life history. Through this conversation, the school counselor will make a meaningful connection with the student, as well as gain insight into the way in which the student interprets his world.

Group counseling is an invaluable tool when working to improve the achievement of Latino students. Uniting these students in the group setting can produce feelings of mutual understanding, belonging, and cohesiveness. This helps Latino students realize that they are not alone in their experiences and hardships in dealing with discrimination, cultural assimilation, and English-language difficulties (Villalba et al., 2007). Helpful topics for these groups to discuss are school and cultural adjustment, self-esteem and the development of a healthy self-concept, cultural identity, and coping with discrimination. When a school counselor demonstrates and
encourages the equal treatment of all group members, not only does this create a positive example for everyone, but it can be empowering for Latino students as it appeals to the collectivistic values that they already possess (2007).

Research on the use of psychoeducational groups with Latino students has proven to be effective through providing these students a chance to share themselves and identify with certain peers, gain self-awareness, become more comfortable with the English language, and improve their self-concept (2003). There seems to be a benefit in creating groups for Latino students that are comprised entirely of students that identify with this culture/ethnicity. According to Villalba, a 2002 study by Merchant and Butler suggests that a group that is structured this way fosters a safe environment in which students feel comfortable discussing culturally specific issues. It also provides them with an opportunity to further develop their cultural and ethnic identity, as well as their self-esteem (2003).

Ethnic identity is a component of one’s self-identity, and it describes an association with and sense of pride in one’s ethnic group. School counseling groups that are centered on developing a stronger and more positive ethnic identity have proven to be effective for Latino students (Malott, Paone, Humphreys & Martinez, 2010). According to Malott et al., studies by Portes and Rumbaut (1990) and Bracey, Bámaca, and Umaña-Taylor (2004) showed that strong ethnic identities have been correlated with positive adaptation for immigrant students and an increased self-esteem in immigrant students (2010). A stronger ethnic identity has also been shown to positively affect academic outcomes as well. Students with stronger ethnic identities have been found to more easily adjust to a new school environment, be more engaged at school, and have higher overall academic achievement (Malott et al., 2010).
Bilingual and Bicultural School Counselors

According to a national survey of school counselors collected in 2012, 6 percent identified themselves as being of Mexican or Puerto Rican decent, and 7 percent identified themselves as being of other or partial Latino decent (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center). The vast majority of these counselors are in schools in California, Texas and Arizona (2012). Latino students currently make up the largest and quickest growing minority population in our nation’s schools, including areas of the country that are unaccustomed to a large Latino population (Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba & Indelicato, 2006). With nearly a quarter of all 2010 births in the US being to Latino women, our school age Latino population is quickly growing, and is under represented by culturally and linguistically similar school counselors (Pew Research Hispanic Center, 2011).

Being an adolescent brings its own set of challenges, and the need for support and guidance during this often-confusing stage of life. Many Latino students are susceptible to additional psychosocial difficulties due to the impact of language and cultural barriers and a low average SES. Latino students may also face discrimination within school systems and a lack of knowledge and access to support resources in the school and community. Many schools are not prepared to accommodate the unique needs of their growing Latino student population. One study revealed this fact through surveying school administrators from 36 school districts in the state of Florida (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006). The administrators agreed that Latino students and families in their districts are at risk for not receiving critical services and acknowledged the need for an increase in programming to address these needs. More than 80 percent of those surveyed also perceived the need for more Spanish-speaking school counselors, stating that this would benefit their schools through their ability to better deal with Latino students’ personal, academic,
and career needs. Another need the administrators identified for their schools was professional development opportunities that offer cultural awareness training for the school staff (2006). In this specific example, schools will benefit from counselors that not only are bilingual, but if they are bicultural or culturally Latino, they will have the knowledge and experience to educate school staff on the cultural barriers of Latino students. A 2006 study aimed at identifying culturally responsive school counseling practices for Latino students and families showed that services that address the language barrier are much more common than are programs that address specific cultural barriers (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006).

Latino bilingual and bicultural school counselors improve the academic achievement of Latino students. For Latino students whose first language is Spanish, being able to convey their thoughts and feelings in Spanish has been proven to aid in overcoming issues common to them. Some of these issues include being hesitant to discuss personal matters, feeling a lack of support, and lacking skills to communicate in English. Being able to communicate in Spanish allows these students to feel less pressure to adapt rapidly to their new culture, and feel more comfortable integrating their cultural values with those of their new environment (Thorn & Contreras, 2005). This same 2005 study on Latino students that recently arrived to the US, showed that when given the opportunity to work with Spanish-speaking school counselors, these students frequently reported feeling more at ease and happier in their new environment after meeting with this counselor once or twice (Thorn and Contreras). Smith-Adcock et al. (2006) explain that when schools provide services to Latino services through counselors that share their cultural background and language, the students and their families are more likely to seek help. When a language barrier exists, this prevents the school counselor from being able to build a quality counseling relationship with the student. Establishing a relationship and building trust
between the counselor and the student happens more frequently with Latino students when culture and language are similar (2006).

According to Smith-Adcock et al., a 1998 study by Gopaul-McNicol & Thomas-Presswood demonstrated that counseling services that are available to Latino students and their families are often underutilized or not used at all, simply due to the fact that they are unaware of their availability or how to secure them (2006). Bilingual and bicultural school counselors have the ability to reach out to the Latino student population and their families to extend these available services Spanish. They also have knowledge of the Latino culture, and will know how best to reach out to these families and educate them about the available resources. A lack of access to existing programs will prevent many Latino students from benefitting from educational opportunities, and contributes to this population’s already high dropout rate and low academic achievement (2006).

Summary

In review of the different factors that have proven to be successful in improving the academic achievement of Latino students, one factor is a collaborative school leader who possesses effective staff leadership skills and demonstrates support for teachers and maintains a climate of mutual respect. School have also been successful with Latino students when offering small class sizes, tutoring, and opportunities for credit recovery (Madrid, 2011).

Teachers who maintain meaningful and respectful interactions with their students foster in them an invaluable sense of belonging, which positively effects the student’s motivation and interest (Garza, 2009). Also, educators who inclusion of Latino culture and history in the school community will provide meaningful support for Latino students (Villalba et al., 2007)
When meeting with Latino and other minority students, school counselors must consider that they will get a higher level of responsiveness when employing the best practices of multicultural counseling (Clemente & Collision, 2000). Group counseling is also an invaluable tool when working to improve the achievement of Latino students. Helpful topics for these groups to discuss are school and cultural adjustment, self-esteem and the development of a healthy self-concept, cultural identity, and coping with discrimination (Villalba et al., 2007).

Parents’ involvement in their children’s education at the school, as well as in the home, has been linked with higher student test scores, fewer disciplinary issues, and lower dropout rates (Suárez et al., 2010). The literature regarding successful Latino high school students also points to the imperativeness of positive relationships with adults inside and outside of the school community (Guzmán, Santiago-Rivera, & Hasse, 2005).

Several recent studies indicate that Latino high school students’ perception of their environment, as well as their perception of their support network play a role in their academic achievement (Altschul, 2011, Brewster & Bowen, 2004, Henry et al., 2008, Ojeda & Flores, 2008). Research also shows the positive influence of acculturation on the success of Mexican American high school students (Carranza et al., 2009, Domino & Acosta, 1987, Griffith, 1983, Garza & Gallegos, 1985, López et al., 2002).

Latino students and families are at risk for not receiving critical school services, and an increase in programming is necessary to address these needs. Surveys of school administrators indicated the need for more Spanish-speaking school counselors, stating that this would benefit their schools through their ability to better deal with Latino students’ personal, academic, and career needs (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006).
Implications

As a society that is concerned about the success of every student, and the implications that has on the entire community, we need to acknowledge the fact that our children are not simply failing in school, but that our schools are failing our children. Educators, and especially school counselors have the unique opportunity and responsibility to help lead our schools in the direction of bringing about effective change. Based on the literature on the success factors in improving the academic achievement of Latino students, the writer has recommended the two following interventions.

Contracting Bilingual and Bicultural School Counselors

The American School Counseling Association (ASCA) national model, a comprehensive tool to guide and unite school counseling programs across the country, identifies four predominant themes as part of it’s framework: Leadership, advocacy, collaboration and teaming, and systemic change. This model mandates school counselors to ensure equity and access to quality education for all students. As advocates, school counselors believe, promote, and support each student’s success in school. School counselors work with students to remove systemic barriers that impede the academic success of any student.

With this theme in mind, it is clear that our school counselors have the utmost obligation to strive to meet the needs of students that are on the low end of the achievement gap. These are the students that are most at risk for not receiving or utilizing school counseling services or dropping out school. These students have the greatest need for someone to advocate for them. We counselors need to pay close attention to research that tells us we are leaving these students behind.
Latino students, being the population plagued with the most severe achievement gap, are many of the students we are talking about here. A way in which the research has suggested to address this problem, is through the services of bilingual and bicultural school counselors. And based on the results of a 2000 study on the relationships of school counselors, ESL teachers and students, school counseling programs are strongly encouraged to incorporate multilingual approaches (Clemente & Collision). Now, clearly it would not be seen as ethical to start replacing non-Latino school counselors with Latinos wherever they are lacking. But there needs to be some kind of action taken in order to raise the level of Latino school counselors up to a number that is more proportionate to the very large and growing Latino student population.

My suggestion for achieving this is to work with local, state, and national school counseling associations to push school counseling educational institutions on a pair of issues. The first being to increase their recruiting efforts for Latino students, and provide more services that cater to them. Another would be to advocate for the idea of a school counseling program that partners with another educational institution that offers a minor in the Spanish language and/or Latino culture. Additionally, school counselors that work in schools with a Latino student population should use research to urge their administrators, when possible, to contract bilingual and bicultural Latino school counselors when positions turn over.

**Academic Seminar Combined with Group Counseling**

Just like with any specific cultural population, Latino students achieve all across the spectrum academically. However, Latino students on average are achieving lower than their other minority and majority population counterparts (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007). For the lower achieving students, this can cause them to feel a sense of inadequacy, and feel as if they do not fit in or belong in the class or school community. Because of this phenomenon, many of our
country’s Latino students are operating on the fringe of their school communities, or dropping out of school all together (Lopez et al., 2002). Since we know that the low academic achievement of Latino students is an academic and a personal/social issue, the intervention implemented to address the issue needs to have both an academic and personal/social component.

The intervention the writer is suggesting involves groups of ten 9th grade high school students that are co-led by classroom teachers and school counselors. The term “first-year students” refers to ninth graders in a ninth through twelfth grade high school. In a school that has six school counselors; six different 9th grade teachers will be selected to participate in this intervention for each school year that it is implemented. This intervention operates within a class schedule that includes a traditional six period day on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, and a block schedule with three periods on Wednesday and Thursday.

Between the first and second periods on the block schedule days, students attend an extra hour-long class, which is called “advisory” on Wednesdays, and “academic seminar” on Thursdays. All of the students in the high school are assigned to an advisory class that meets with the same teacher each Wednesday, all year long. The advisory class consists of teachers checking in with individual students about their grades, time for students to get caught up on missing assignments or tests, or an academic study hall environment. Also during the advisory class, the school counselors will have a rotating schedule in which they will visit advisory classes to deliver classroom guidance lessons. The academic seminar class allows all teachers to choose 10 students each week who are struggling in their subject to receive a review session and the extra attention from the teacher that the small class size affords. As previously mentioned research suggests, small class sizes foster high academic achievement, and re-engage students in
their class and school (Madrid, 2011). Students that are not chosen by a teacher will report to the school cafeteria for a supervised study hall period. The intervention as described up to this point is currently being implemented at John F. Kennedy High School, a large urban public high school in Bloomington, Minnesota. According to the school principal, “Kennedy staff is very positive about the implementation of academic seminar.” Of the 152 educators at the school, 91 percent indicated that they feel very positive or generally positive about the intervention, and 87 percent believe that it is positively or somewhat positively impacting student learning. The principal also states, “Students are thrilled about academic seminar.” Approximately 35-50 students that are not chosen by a teacher, and are therefore assigned to be in the cafeteria during the academic seminar, are advocating for themselves and seeking out a teacher and obtaining a pass to a teacher from whom they feel they need additional support (Beaton, 2012).

The writer will now outline an adaptation to the aforementioned intervention, taking into consideration the research on the academic achievement of Latino students. In a school operating on a trimester schedule, the Thursday academic seminar class will change after the first trimester for certain 9th grade students. At the end of the first trimester, the six participating 9th grade teachers will make note of the ten students that have appeared in their academic seminar class most often, and these students will be assigned to one of these teachers’ academic seminar class for the entire second trimester (about 12 weeks). At the end of the second trimester, this change will terminate, and the academic seminar will operate as it did during the first trimester.

At this point, the academic seminar class will now include 30 minutes of the teacher reviewing concepts and working with individual students, and 30 minutes of group counseling led by the school counselor. Depending on the population and the needs of the school, at least one of these groups will consist of all Latino students. Ideally, the school will have a bilingual
bicultural school counselor that will work with this group. The group counseling sessions will cover the following themes, which, as this body of research has identified, are pertinent to improving the academic achievement of Latino students: Establishing a stronger and more positive ethnic identity, seeking out positive relationships with adults, improving self-esteem and self-concept, and addressing students’ perceptions of barriers to achieving their goals (Malott et al., 2010, Guzman et al., 2005, Ojeda & Flores, 2008).

The co-lead structure of this intervention is one of its key characteristics. Both the teacher and the school counselor will be on board with each other’s lesson plans and goals for each session, assisting each other with their implementation. This will promote collaboration, common goals, and further develop positive relationships among educators in the school. As the research points out, both collaborative leadership and maintaining a climate of mutual respect among school staff have proven successful in improving the achievement of Latino students (Madrid, 2011). This structure also provides teachers with the unique opportunity to spend time getting to know their students better, further developing relationships with them and building trust. The research on this topic highlights the importance of teachers’ efforts to establish meaningful relationships with their Latino students, as well as these students building relationships with adults in the school community (Madrid, 2011, Guzman et al., 2005). This intervention will be most effective if implemented with the first-year students within a school. Being new to the school, they can benefit from establishing relationships with adults and being connected with a group of peers right off the bat.

**Adlerian Implications**

Adler claims that all individuals, especially school-age children and adolescents, strive to gain a sense of belonging within a community, as well as the feeling that they are contributing in
a meaningful way to this community. The consideration of a sense of belonging and contributing are essential when working with Latino students in schools. This body of work has discussed how a Latino student’s identification with peers, especially in group work, can improve their academic achievement, as well as their self-esteem. Once discouraged students are part of a counselor-led small group, a school club or sports team, or are able to contribute to the school community through tutoring or spending time with a student in need, the level of discouragement that they once displayed greatly and quickly decreases. The literature also points out that when Latino students gain a sense of belonging, it has a positive effect the student’s motivation and interest (Garza, 2009).

Generally speaking, the Latino culture has highly collectivist ideals. Adler would credit this to the family values that are commonly held by Latino families. Adler ascertains that family values are those that are shared by both parents, and are perceived to be of great importance by the children (Griffith & Powers, 1984). It is common for multiple generations the Latino family to have their lives closely intertwined, as well as to live in the same household. Important decisions are not made without considering their effects on loved ones. School counselors will do well to consider this when helping students to make decisions about their future. As professional school counselors in the 21st century, we are trained to push students to achieve their highest potential, which usually involves the student making decisions about college and careers. When talking with Latino students about these important decisions, the idea of how the decision will affect the student’s family, or how it will be accepted by the student’s family, must be included in the conversation.

The Latino culture does not yet seem to have embodied of the Adlerian concept of masculine protest. The masculine protest describes one’s striving (usually a female’s), for the
perceived male position of status and dignity, and the perceived power and advantages that come with it (Griffith & Powers, 1984). Latino families are still predominantly led and influenced by males, and the role of the man and woman at home are still quite traditional. This perpetuates the concept that women are the inferior gender, and it is generally uncommon for Latina women to protest the traditional role that they hold. This cultural factor may want to be addressed by the counselor, especially in conversations with female Latina students, to get an idea of their perspective on the issue, and how it would be most appropriate to proceed.

The belief or feeling of inferiority in comparison with others is something that Adler says we all experience. He defined inferiority feelings as the universal human feelings of incompleteness, weakness (Griffith & Powers, 1984). However, just because we all experience them does not mean they cannot be attended to and used to promote learning and self-improvement. In fact Adler claims that inferiority feelings can serve as a source of motivation to overcome personal obstacles (1984). And although we all have inferiority feelings at some level, the more discouraged individual will feel more inferior. This applies directly to the experience of Latino students in American schools. As earlier noted by Villalba et al., the combined result of the burden of discrimination, and trying to balance the assimilation into a new culture and environment while not leaving behind one’s own cultural norms and lifestyle can result in lower self-esteem for Latinos (2007). Many Latino students that migrate to the US lack an academically sufficient educational preparation, and possess limited English skills. Both of these circumstances can create problematic feelings of frustration and shame (Villalba et al., 2007).

**Final Summary**

The writer chose to research Latino high school students because when their current situation is examined as a whole, a quick and simple conclusion is logically drawn: There is a
problem. The problem lies in the fact that the largest and fastest growing minority population in American schools is underachieving academically at a disproportionate level.

Narrowing the academic achievement gap in our country has proven to be quite a daunting and complex task, and progress in this area has been rare and hard to come by. Until we gain a clear understanding of how to address it, this reality will continue for poor and minority students, and especially for Latino students (Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001).

When working with Latinos students in schools, educators must be sensitive to, and accommodating of their unique needs if there is any hope of narrowing the academic achievement gap in their school. Latino students face several real challenges while pursuing their education in American schools. These include, but are not limited to discrimination by peers and school staff (Madrid, 2011), being forced to balance cultural values and lifestyle with those of their new environment, being culturally misunderstood by school staff, limited access to resources due to an undocumented status, the language barrier (Villalba et al., 2007), unfairly poor school conditions (2011), and a low average socioeconomic status (Scmid, 2001).

The body of work has identified the ways in which the academic achievement of Latino students has been successfully improved. These include, but are not limited to collaborative school leadership, small class sizes (Madrid, 2011), the teachers’ effort of establishing meaningful relationships (Garza, 2009), school inclusion of Latino culture and history (Villalba, et al., 2007), the contracting of bilingual/bicultural school counselors (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006), multicultural counseling practices (Clemente & Collision, 2000), family involvement in their child’s education at home and at school (Suárez et al., 2010), and acculturation (Carranza et al., 2009, Domino & Acosta, 1987, Griffith, 1983, Garza & Gallegos, 1985, López et al., 2002).
It is vital that educators take this research into account, and take swift action to address the inequality in our schools by implementing appropriate interventions. Doing so is absolutely necessary if order for us, as educators, to be able to say that we aim to meet the needs of all of our students, and that we care about the academic achievement gap. Doing so will be a treasured benefit to Latino students, their families, anyone working with this population, and our society as a whole.
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