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Edgar Rodriquez

Vance Vaughn
University of Texas at Tyler

Wesley Hickey
University of Texas at Tyler, whickey@uttyler.edu

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Edgar Rodriquez
John Tyler High School

Vance Vaughn
University of Texas at Tyler

Wesley Hickey
University of Texas at Tyler

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Controlling Hispanic Dropouts: A Leader's Responsibility

Edgar Rodriguez, John Tyler High School,
Vance Vaughn, The University of Texas at Tyler, &
Wesley Hickey, The University of Texas at Tyler

Abstract

The Hispanic population is increasing in the United States and especially in Texas. As the population grows, so does the number of students enrolled in our public schools, and Hispanic students are already the majority in some states. Thus, one would expect a high increase of Hispanic graduates, but this is not the case. Surprisingly, Hispanic students are dropping out of school at an alarming rate. Why are these students dropping out of school? What can educational leaders do to prevent this phenomenon? Qualitative research methods were used to analyze the reasons 21 Hispanic students dropped out of school in an urban high school. The research suggests that the perceived inability of teachers and educational leaders to effectively communicate with the students may have been a dropout factor.

Introduction

The Hispanic population is increasing in the United States. Few states are exempt from this occurrence. When populations increase, student enrollment increases in our public schools, and Texas has outgrown other states as its Hispanic student population has exceeded that of any other race. According to the Texas Education Agency (2006), 54 percent of the students enrolled in public school education during the 2005–2006 school year were Hispanic. These students represent both the highest number of students enrolled and worst dropout rate (Texas Education Agency, 2006). What are student-perceived factors associated with dropping out of school? What can educational leaders do to help these students remain in school? This study focused on a large urban high school in Texas that has a 51 percent Hispanic student population and a 19.2 percent high school non-completion rate (Texas Education Agency, 2006).

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) recently found that 48 percent of Hispanic youths who start the ninth grade in Texas do not graduate after four years. IDRA used attrition rates to arrive at these data. Attrition rates indicate the school's ability to keep students enrolled and learning in schools until they graduate (Johnson, 2005). In addition, attrition rates are useful to study the magnitude of the dropout problem and the success a school has in keeping students in school by measuring the percent change in the grade level between each year. IDRA analyzes these figures each year in the fall when school districts are required to report information to the Texas Education Agency via the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). This information is collected by IDRA and categorized by race, ethnicity, and gender to further inform the public. The national average for Hispanic dropouts who were not enrolled in high school between the ages 16 to 19 is about 25 percent. This is more than twice the national average of 10 percent for all other groups. In Texas, the class of 2005 began with 357,331 students. Of these, 137,424 were lost from public school enrollment between 2001–2005 school years (Johnson, 2005). The attrition rates for Hispanic and black students have been higher than overall attrition rates. Hispanics account for 50.1 percent of those students lost to attrition.

Research studies have been conducted reporting why Hispanic students are dropping out of school. According to Reyes, Scribner, and Scribner (1999), several reasons exist for this occurrence. The following statement sums up their findings:

Substantial evidence exists as to why Hispanic students fail in schools. Low expectations; archaic decision-making structures; ill-prepared teachers and administrators; lack of coordination among schools, parents, and communities on behalf of children; negative self-image; peer group pressures; poverty; tracking and other school policies are some of the major factors that contribute to the vulnerability of Hispanic youth. (p.1)

Martinez and Martinez (2002) reported discrimination as one of the main reasons Hispanic students are dropping out of school. They also reported low expectations and low aspirations for these students. Guerrero, Howarth, and Thomas (1999) asserted poverty as the reason Hispanic students dropped out of school. Their study suggested Hispanic students dropped out of high school to seek employment in order to earn money for their household. In their study, ethnicity, inner-city residence, parental education, father's absence, welfare dependence, pregnancy and parenthood, lack of home ownership, etc., were factors in the dropout rate among Hispanic students.

Method

This study was completed in a large high school in Texas. The Hispanic student population was 51 percent, yet Hispanic students were graduating at a lower percentage

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than other students. During the 2004–2005 school year, the Hispanic non-completion rate was 19.2 percent. The administration in this school district needed to be aware of student perceptions of the school environment that may contribute to the dropout rate. Along with this district need, a local university faculty member was analyzing dropout data as a Texas Education Agency monitor of the campus. Student perceptions of factors associated with the dropout problem were important in determining strategies for completion rate improvement. According to Neuman (2000), there is no better way to understand why people act the way they do other than to ask them. No one understands their story the way they understand their story. Therefore, the educational leaders in the district and the state education agency monitor from the university needed to hear from the students who dropped out of school regarding factors influencing their decision. This data provided student perceptions that could be used to address the dropout issues.

This study was a qualitative narrative inquiry that was designed to illuminate the voices of 21 Hispanic students who dropped out of school. Participants of the study were former high school students located in Texas who were enrolled during the 2004–2005 school year. They consisted of males and females, ages 15 through 19. The students had Hispanic backgrounds — excluding white ethnic backgrounds, obtained from information disclosed on their original enrollment records. Participants also included immigrant students. All students were randomly selected from a list composed by the high school registrar.

Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these students. They were contacted initially by telephone, and an interview appointment was scheduled. If they could not be reached by telephone, they were contacted through the most current information available to the school. A team of bilingual teachers and faculty members who were familiar with the community and the students were formed. They were also responsible for the contacts in the community. In some cases, students were contacted through their place of employment. If a student could not be located for interview, or chose not to interview, the next student on the list was randomly selected. The process continued until 21 students were interviewed.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommend making the interview environment as comfortable and relaxed as possible so that the interviewee feels accepted. In return, the researcher will be able to capture a detailed and accurate script of the story. In meeting their recommendations, three Hispanic bilingual counselors participated in the interview process with the help of a Hispanic bilingual aid. These individuals were used to lessen the intimidation factor involved in the interview process and ensure that the language barrier would not be a limitation of the study.

The interviews were conducted in a specified room on the campus. A bilingual teacher and a bilingual aid took notes in the interview so that accurate responses could

be eventually recorded. The room was equipped with a table, chairs, and writing utensils. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their remarks, that the information would be used only for this study, and that their names would not be disclosed. The participant's name, origin, date enrolled in school, and date he/she dropped out of school were recorded before the first question was asked. This process was necessary in order to make sure the interview was conducted with the right participant.

The interviews began with several general open-ended questions about family and home environment. These types of questions were necessary to establish a rapport with the participants and to encourage discussion and conversation. After the general questions, several focused questions were asked of the participants in order to generate data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested asking questions backward, forward, inward, and outward for a more thorough overview of the participants' experiences. In keeping with this recommendation, the participant responses were guided by, but not limited to, the following questions:

1. What were some of the reasons you dropped out? Please explain in detail.
2. What could the school have done to prevent you from leaving school? Please explain in detail to the best of your knowledge.
3. What would you tell a brother, sister, relative, or friend who is considering quitting school? Please explain in detail.
4. Did you ever enroll in any other program that would substitute for a high school diploma? Please explain in detail.
5. What are you doing now? Please explain in detail.

Data collected were critical life experiences that provided reasons why the 21 Hispanic students dropped out of school. From this qualitative narrative inquiry, commonalities, themes, and patterns were analyzed. The researchers had to carefully and critically analyze the two main questions that focused this research, disregarding unnecessary data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

The interview data were filtered through the lenses of the two research questions that guided this study. The two research questions that grounded the study were:

1. What were the reasons you dropped out of school?
2. What could school leadership have done to prevent you from dropping out of school?

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Research Question No. 1. Three factors, as perceived by the students, were found regarding why these 21 Hispanic students dropped out of school. The most common reason students quoted for dropping out of school was because teachers and administrators could not and would not communicate with them, neither could they relate to them in a professional and respectable manner because of the language barrier. Fifty percent of the students who participated in the study left school because of this communication problem. Another 42 percent stated that upon enrollment, the administration misplaced them in regards to grade level. These particular students were 18 or 19 years old when they arrived at school, and had completed what they thought were the appropriate grade levels in their prior schools, but the administration placed them in ninth-grade classes. The remaining 8 percent of the participants interviewed could not interact properly with their peers, and some eventually became pregnant.

Research Question No. 2. An analysis of the data revealed that 100 percent of the students perceived that the district employees, and especially the teachers, did not care about them, did not attempt to relate to them, and could not communicate with them because of the language barrier. Participants understood the language was problematic, but they could not understand why the teachers and administrators made no effort to correct the problem. These students suggested hiring bilingual aids. They felt neglected and assumed they were expected to dropout.

Implications of the Findings

The implications of this study are important and can be of assistance to educational leaders in attempting to improve the dropout rate for Hispanics. There are four implications from analysis of the data. The first implication is that educational leaders need to be cognizant of placement upon enrollment of Hispanic students when they arrive at the school. Students often perceive that they are placed at the incorrect grade level upon entering the campus. If there is merit to this perception, leaders should pay close attention to student transcripts and prior learning so that students are placed properly in classes and on appropriate grade level as Hispanic students 18 or 19 years old are uncomfortable in classes with 14 and 15 year olds. If students are placed at the appropriate grade level, communication regarding the factors involved in the placement may be important to maintaining a level of understanding and trust.

The second implication is based upon the student perception that teachers have little concern for their welfare. Once these students are placed in the classes, teachers should possess a genuine ethic of care for these students, and this level of concern needs to permeate any difficulties caused by a language barrier. Educational leaders should be aware of this perception and train teachers to address the issue effectively. Superintendents and principals will need to place teachers and bilingual aids in classrooms so that lack of communication is not the reason Hispanic students are not learning.

The third implication is based upon the perception among student dropouts that communication is lacking between the Hispanic community and campus personnel. Educational leaders and teachers need to establish rapport with Hispanic students and stakeholders early in their school enrollment so these students have someone in whom they can comfortably relate. When these students first felt the need to drop out of school, they wanted someone to communicate with, but because they perceived that no one cared, they dropped out of school.

The fourth implication is that unless a more conscious effort is made on the part of educational leaders to correct this language barrier/lack of communication problem, schools will continue to suffer high rates of Hispanic dropouts. Ignoring the problem or pointing fingers will not cause the problem to disappear. Educational leaders must take an aggressive approach to solving this nationwide problem that exists for all stakeholders. Although the problems perceived by the Hispanic dropouts in this qualitative study may be unique in specific ways to the local campus, these appear to be general problems throughout the nation.

Conclusions

Based on the findings, emergent themes, and analysis of the data, the following considerations are presented based upon the perceptions of Hispanic students in this study:

1. Increase bilingual aids in the classrooms.
2. Increase teachers' professional development for improved instruction of Hispanic students.
3. Incorporate more bilingual classes into the schedule.
4. Hire a bilingual translator and document control person for enrollment.
5. Develop classes for Hispanic parents to increase their involvement in the educational process.
6. Conduct informational sessions about college and job fairs on a regular basis.

Consideration to increase bilingual aids. These Hispanic students stated they had knowledge of the subject matter at hand. They understood the content but needed explanations like the English-speaking students did. But they perceived that teachers could not communicate with them because the teachers would give them worksheets or maps to color to keep them busy and out of the way. The students were not satisfied with the responses they would get from teachers when asked for help with assignments. The students understood they were there to work, and they were ready, but they perceived

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that the teachers could not relate. Therefore, educational leaders should hire bilingual aids for classrooms that do not have bilingual teachers, or for which there are no bilingual classes. Money might be an issue, but a high Hispanic dropout rate is a bigger issue.

Teachers should engage in professional development designed to impact Hispanic student achievement. The teaching strategies used by a few teachers led some students to question the value of education in the United States. According to the data, one student responded, "I was not learning anything because the teachers were only sitting at the computers and we had to fill out papers." This response was common among those that questioned the professionalism of the teachers. The teacher was perceived as not able to present the information to the student. Communication between the student and teacher was limited. The easiest solution for the teacher was to present the information at a lower level of thinking. Students reported to have had lessons that targeted lower levels of cognitive reasoning in the classroom. This type of teaching was common in many of the classrooms of the participants. The use of these lower-level thinking skills led some participants to question their purpose in school, and the result for most was dropping out.

Incorporate more bilingual classes. The perceived miscommunication between the teacher and Hispanic students was a result of the language barrier. The students could not complete assignments they could not read. The teachers found it difficult and frustrating at times when they were approached by students for help or guidance. Lack of help with the translation of classes made it more difficult for teachers and students to understand anything that was going on in the class. This lack of communication caused students to fall behind their peers. Sometimes, the students were ridiculed, and this caused them to feel depressed, deprived, depleted, disrespected, and destroyed. Teachers and students harbored low expectations. Eventually, lack of communication within this environment led the students to drop out.

Hire a bilingual translator and document control person for enrollment. Students perceived a high level of miscommunication at the time of enrollment. Many of the interviewed students came from Mexico and other countries in Central America. Students believed they were placed in lower-level classes because of the language barrier. Administration and staff, according to the students, did not seriously review grade reports or transcripts the students presented to the school. As a result, students believed they were not placed properly in grades. The transcripts stated the year and grade the student attended in her/his native country, and perceived incorrect placement created embarrassment for the students. Some of the students placed in ninth-grade classes were already 17 or 18 years old. Their peers were four to five years younger and less mature. A bilingual translator could aid in appropriate placement or in explaining factors involved with appropriate placement if not where the student expected from prior educational experiences.

Parents of Hispanic students must get involved. From the data collected, there was no evidence that suggested parents were or were not involved in the decisions the participants made to drop out of school. Research does suggest that parental involvement improves the chances that any child, regardless of race, will finish high school. Reyes, Scribner, and Scribner (1999) confirmed that high-performing Hispanic schools “consider parent involvement an important way to serve the needs of both the school and the children” (p.41). Therefore, educational leadership should boldly initiate and strongly support parental involvement programs in order to increase the chances of Hispanic children remaining in school.

Conduct informational sessions about college and job fairs. Some of these students wanted to go to college but felt their immediate situation was too stressful to mildly consider college. With college in mind, these students will have a goal toward which to work. Again, educational leadership should focus on conducting informational sessions on college and job fairs so that Hispanic students have reasons to remain in school as opposed to concentrating so hard on dropping out. Bilingual educators need to be available so that communication barriers will not block the intent of the sessions.

Collaboration among educational leaders, teachers, and parents will benefit students immensely. The decisions administrative leadership makes will lead to positive gains in narrowing the graduation gap among Hispanic students and other students. It is the leader’s responsibility to initiate these changes for the betterment of the school, district, and community. For one to understand the problem, she or he must understand the perceptions of students who are making the decision to leave school early. Educational leaders should recognize the importance of student perception and work to change this. This perception occurs as a result of the background and cultural lens brought to the new environment. Leaders who address issues from this new perspective have the potential to impact Hispanic student achievement in an environment that has had little success with this problem.

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