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THE ECOLOGY OF A CHICANO STUDENT AT RISK

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While the nation contemplates what to do about our "failing" education system, researchers and educators continue to examine the most important component of the education system, the students. Most students seem to progress through school with a minimum of difficulty. However, other students have so many academic, psycho-social, and economic problems that they seem doomed to failure despite the efforts of school personnel to help them. Given the disproportionate numbers of at-risk youth found in ethnic minority groups, it is not surprising that Hispanics have been the subject of research and intervention strategies, as indicated by Bande (1992) in the Progress Report to the Secretary of Education from the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans.

The current educational, family, economic, and employment status of Hispanics reveals that they face serious obstacles in meeting the current and future occupational challenges of a high-technology economy. A study on dropouts by the National Center for Educational Statistics (1989) indicated that while dropout rates for Blacks and Anglos have declined in recent years, the dropout rate for Hispanics has remained high during the last 15 years. The national dropout rate of Hispanics in 1988 was 22%, and about one-third of Hispanics ages 16-24 had not graduated and were not attending school. In western states, where Chicanos predominate in the Hispanic group, Hispanics constituted the majority of dropouts in 1988 (Frase, 1989). Vargas (1988) indicated that, using the traditional standard measure of illiteracy-completion of fewer than five years of schooling - 15.4% of Mexican Americans over 25 years of age may be considered illiterate. The National Commission on Children found in 1987 that 39% of Hispanic children were living below poverty guidelines (Brazelton, 1990; Duany & Pittman, 1990). These statistics on the status of Hispanic youth are alarming when one considers that by the year 2000, 57% of the labor force will be composed of African Americans, Hispanics, and other ethnic groups, which is in sharp contrast with the 20% they currently constitute (Whitman, Shapiro, Taylor, & Auster, 1989). Therefore, it is in the highest national interest for policy makers and public institutions to understand and to begin to address the socioeconomic and educational problems faced by what appears to be a growing underclass if the nation is to effectively compete in the world economy.

Education constitutes the principal avenue for escaping poverty by Hispanics and other groups. The education of Hispanics needs to be analyzed at the macro and micro levels in a comprehensive manner, i.e., in the cultural, socioeconomic, and community contexts, including the family unit. It is particularly

important to obtain qualitative, not just quantitative, perspectives of Hispanic students and their families, to determine why they succeed or do not succeed in the American educational system (Trueba, 1989). The objective of this case study was to identify, in a holistic manner, the individual, aggregate, and interactive effect of socioeconomic status (SES), cultural, psychosocial, and academic factors that shaped the at-risk status of a Chicano fourth grader. A prescriptive dimension of the study was to provide a set of recommendations to the family and to the school staff that could be used to place the subject on the path of academic and social recovery.

AT-RISK YOUTH AND ECOLOGICAL RESEARCH

A review of the literature on at-risk students by Barber, Carriedo, Denton, Frymier, Gansnedor, Johnson-Lewis, and Robertson (1988) revealed many factors are related to at-risk status in children. Listed among the most serious factors were attempted suicide, drug/substance abuse, physical/sexual abuse, negative self-esteem, academic deficiencies, and dysfunctional home environment. Much of the recent research on at-risk students has linked these and other factors as contributors to school failure (Cooper & Speece, 1988; Juel & Leavell, 1988; Payne & Payne, 1989; Shinn et al., 1987).

Casanova (1988) conducted a case study in which she stressed the importance of examining all aspects of a student's background to avoid what she terms "an asymmetric relationship" between parents and school personnel. The case study approach can provide a clearer profile of the individual or phenomena being examined and "enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomenon that previously were ineluctable" (Ellen, 1984, p. 239).

According to Stake (1978), the case study approach is often used by anthropologists, psychoanalysts, historians, and others to delve deeper into all areas of human existence. Heath (1982) demonstrated the "desirability of long term research" in a five-year ethnographic study that examined the lack of cultural congruence between Black children and Anglo teachers (p. 104). Heath stressed that the purpose of collecting ethnographic data in an educational setting was not to make judgments or to effect immediate changes, but rather to help parents and school personnel view students from other perspectives and then determine if changes are necessary.

Castro and Romero (1990) used 90-minute and follow-up interviews as part of a study on families at risk of disruption as a result of unemployment. The results of that study will be used to determine what immediate interventions are required to reduce disruption of Anglo and Latino families. Montero-Sieburth (1990) conducted ethnographic research on eight at-risk, Hispanic high school students designed to identify, among several factors, the sociocultural constraints and enhancements operant within classrooms and the criteria employed to identify or tag Hispanic students as being at risk of dropping out of school. The methodology employed by Montero-Sieburth can be partially construed as case study methodology. Case studies can enable researchers and practitioners to better understand how Hispanic families and individual family members interact with the larger society and its institutions. Such information facilitates the identification of interventions that can be employed by schools and social agencies with at-risk youth. This ecological approach promotes a holistic understanding of individuals within their social context and on tracing the connections between individuals and the environmental forces that affect them (Cochran, 1988).

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

In 1988 the subject for the case study was unanimously selected by the fourth grade teachers and the researchers after an exhaustive review of his school records, interviews with current and former teachers,

ancillary school personnel, and a preliminary interview with his mother. Teachers were given a list of previously mentioned at-risk factors that was developed by Phi Delta Kappa regional Principal Investigators (PI) at a meeting in Kansas City during the fall of 1989 as a general guide for the selection process (Frymier, 1989). Their initial task was to find five to ten candidates with the higher-ranked factors from the list. Based on their initial selection, a consensus on the most at-risk fourth grader emerged. José (name changed to protect student and family confidentiality), a ten-year old Chicano male, was identified as the subject of the case study.

The case study treated the school and the home/community as two distinct but interrelated societal domains that merited individual assessments. In the school setting, videotaped interviews were conducted with every fourth-grade teacher on José's schedule in 1988-89 over a three-day period. In addition, his third-grade teacher and the janitor gave interviews. The janitor and José's fourth-grade teacher were the primary informants for the school setting. José was videotaped in most of his classes and free periods. José's mother, José, his brother, and his sister were interviewed and videotaped at home. The video crew and the PIs also captured on tape José's immediate community. José's academic progress and patterns of behavior were reviewed on subsequent visits to the school and his home.

RESULTS

Several at-risk factors were present in the initial investigation of the case study student. These factors will be presented in the following sections on the subject's family and background, academic history, a section on salient psychosocial and academic factors, and follow-up findings.

José's Family and Background

José resides with his mother, older brother, and younger half-sister. The father of José and José's older brother left home when they were infants. His mother indicates that José does not know his biological father who never showed any interest in meeting him. José only knows his stepfather, whom she married when José was a year old; he is the father of José's sister. Reports to teachers by José suggest the stepfather was incarcerated for drug trafficking. During the initial home interview, the mother confided that her estranged husband would often go into fits of rage and direct violence toward her. Fearing that one day he might direct his violence on the children, she made him leave. However, she allows him to visit their daughter. According to her, these visits have often resulted in both verbal and physical confrontations. Although José had been interviewed several times on this point, he had never acknowledged to the researchers that violence occurred in the home. However, José sometimes confided to his homeroom teacher that violent incidents occurred at home and that he was attacked when he attempted to protect his mother.

José has a 15-year-old uncle who communicates with him about twice a month. The mother claims that both of her sons look up to their uncle who gives them a lot of positive support. The uncle shares with José an interest in wrestling and often instructs José and his brother on various wrestling holds. José also is in contact with the maternal extended family; at Christmas, José normally visits his grandparents, from whom he receives some of the presents on his Christmas wish list. Sometimes the mother cares for some of her relatives' children in her home, which allows José to socialize and establish rapport with his extended family.

José loves and respects his mother. She in turn demonstrates great concern over his well being but is at times unable to obtain for him necessary school services or community services, such as taking him to the public library, swimming pool, or recreation center because of the burden of using public transportation in a

suburban area-she does not own a vehicle. The mother does attempt to provide a home environment where the family can function with limited excursions into the new neighborhood. Most of José's outings are limited to the homes of family members.

The mother related that she uses a system of charts to monitor and control her children's behavior; her children collect points for showing good behavior and performing household chores, while points are taken away for misbehavior. José does well at home under this management system.

José's academic history

The relationship between school and José's mother was filled with conflict from the onset, yielding negative academic results for José. José attended preschool for only a few months, since his mother had trouble picking him up on time due to employment and transportation constraints. When the assistant principal threatened to not allow José to return, she withdrew him from school. This meant he did not attend preschool or kindergarten. His formal schooling began in the first grade, indicating that he may have started out in school with academic and socialization deficits.

There was no information in José's cumulative folder regarding first-grade academic performance. In the second grade José had a B average in math, social studies, science, art, music, and PE, but was below grade level in reading. He transferred 16 days before the end of the school year to his current school, where he completed the remainder of the term.

The home language survey completed on José in second grade indicated that English is the language spoken most often in his home. We corroborated this finding via direct observation and an interview with the mother at home; she used fluent English with us and with her children. José and his siblings also have a good command of English, which they use almost exclusively among themselves at home and with peers in school during noninstructional periods. In addition, present and former teachers never indicated language among the at-risk factors associated with José's academic standing.

About six months into the third grade, José was administered a state-mandated test of minimum skills. He met minimum third grade competencies in mathematics, reading, and writing, but he scored below the 20th percentile in the Metropolitan Reading Test. These data, along with teacher recommendations, were used to justify placing José in the reading resource classroom. The time and patience the reading resource teacher devoted to him paid off, as his reading level improved enough to warrant his return to the regular reading classroom. According to his fifth grade teacher, José's work was just about on par with that of most of his classmates toward the end of the year. She reported that he seemed to have a better attitude about himself, although he still managed to get into trouble while engaging in horse play with other students. Two of his former teachers continue to partially monitor his progress and stress to him the importance of maintaining good grades or resuming remedial reading classes.

In the area of sports his mother reports that José is the "outdoors type," who would rather go out to the park than watch TV. She said that, although he would like to participate in organized sports, she cannot afford to have him join due to the cost involved. Before moving to this school, José had participated in sports activities that did not require fees or uniforms. The school José now attends has a very good physical education program but no organized sports activities at his grade level. The physical education teacher identified José as a natural athlete who behaves like most of the other fourth grade males. He reports that in his class José follows the rules, obeys the teacher, and does not pick fights.

Psychosocial and Academic Factors

The fourth grade teacher considered José to be more at risk than other students in her classroom and believed his behavioral problems stemmed from the home. She said he brought his problems to school, could not cope with major problems, and became violent when things did not go well. This seemed to build up more hatred of the adult world and, thereby, caused a chain reaction. She depicted him as a "time bomb ready to explode." She felt he was a strong candidate for failure, because he had so many problems, lacked social skills, and did not possess skills for coping with stress.

The third grade teacher commented that José's reading attainment was below grade level, that he was not easily motivated to work, and that he displayed aggressive behavior in class. In time, however, she was able to have a positive influence on him by frequently talking to his mother and providing recommendations for counseling and placement in a reading resource class- a program designed to help students improve their reading ability. But she felt that others may have given José a negative attitude about attending the reading resource classes, and she was right. José told us that his older brother often teased him about being in the reading resource class; so did some of his school mates, who often told him he was going to class with the "dummies." That type of exchange frequently resulted in altercations between José and his classmates. The resource teacher reported that she was aware of José's negative feelings about being pulled out of the regular classroom and sent to the reading resource class. She had several conferences with him about the importance of completing his classroom assignments and trying hard in reading class so that he could pass the tests.

Follow-up Findings

During the follow-up research conducted in 1990, we interviewed the fifth-grade teacher and suggested that one way to continue helping José might be if he were part of a sport team in the school or neighborhood; football is José's favorite sport. At first she thought it might be a good idea, but after giving it further thought, she stated that he might have trouble being a team member and probably would not last long. This opinion of José's potential for participation in group sports may have been shaped by his continued horse play in class, which she found annoying. Conversely, when the remedial reading teacher was asked to speculate about José's joining a sports team, she said it would be good for him. She added that because of his love of football he probably would be a good team member. The difference of opinion may be due to José being viewed from different perspectives and circumstances. The remedial reading instructor works with José in a close and strong support role in a manageable small group, while the regular teacher instructs groups of 20-25 students in situations that leave little time for attention to individual pupils. We found that José had a lower incidence of behavior problems with teachers who were nurturing than with those who were more detached. The latter he perceived as "mean," while the former he viewed as "friendly." This finding indicates José's human-relational and incentive motivational styles are in the field sensitive or global modality (Ramirez & Castaneda, 1974; Carbo & Hodges, 1988).

DISCUSSION

In order to gain an understanding of José's difficulties at school, it is necessary to examine the relationship between home and school factors that have affected his academic and social standing. First, the family leaped across socioeconomic and cultural boundaries when it moved from a low-income, inner-city area to a middle-class suburban neighborhood within the same metroplex- a difficult social task to accomplish in a short span of time. The mother expressed feelings of inadequacy and fear in the new surroundings. Second, José's classroom and hallway behavior seemed in sharp contrast with that of the vast majority of students' and teachers' tolerance levels. Pushing and shoving were not acceptable, and José had to adapt to stricter

behavior standards. The ensuing conflicts with the mother were often the result of poor communication and perceptual differences, which for Chicanos can often result in family alienation from schools according to Romo (1984). Third, remedial reading helped, but its stigma complicated José's emotional problems and affected his self-esteem. Last, José's language and ethnicity (Chicano), did not constitute factors associated with being at risk. He was proficient in English and functioned in English at home and in school. Therefore, adapting from a low-SES environment to a middle-class SES one, coupled with detrimental psychosocial characteristics of his home environment and subsequent conflictive interactions with the school culture and conduct standards, the detrimental social effects of dropping to remedial learner status, and the lack of holistic assessment and counseling were the major contributing factors to his at-risk status.

The relocation of José and his family to a middle-class neighborhood has not been easy. The family did not feel comfortable in the new surroundings. After a year, they were unaware of the location of basic service facilities such as libraries, recreation programs, and community centers. Their community acquaintances were virtually nonexistent. Instead, the children socialized after school almost exclusively among themselves and on weekends with extended family members. The mother expressed a lack of confidence in venturing from the home into unfamiliar surroundings; she preferred to keep her children directly under some form of family protection to prevent problems in their new neighborhood.

It is not surprising that when José's family moved to an unfamiliar neighborhood and school, where Chicanos were no longer the overwhelming majority, that his family relied on the immediate and extended family for support, nurture, and protection, particularly when the latter were slow in materializing in school. Familism is a cultural value associated by most social scientists with Mexican and Chicano culture that has many complex manifestations (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1990; Williams, 1990). In this case, the family network was an asset to José's immediate family, enabling them to cope with the cultural and socioeconomic shock of a residential and school relocation.

José's misunderstandings with teachers were often compounded by conflictive perceptions of his problems by his mother, the teachers, and the principal. These came on top of prior mother-principal conflicts in José's previous school. José quickly tested teachers' behavioral norms; they felt he was prone to disruptive and aggressive behavior that emanated from home. José's teachers were not aware of José's fabrication of an imaginary father, while José's mother was not aware that he had reported to teachers incidents of violence against her by her previous spouse. Overall, there is a lack of perceptual congruence between the home and the school, which may result in the wrong intervention for José. While the teachers believe that José's aggressive behavior is the result of the violence he has experienced at home, the mother believes his problems originate in school. Her impression is that the teachers are short tempered and indifferent to her son's needs. José, in her opinion, is a sensitive child who does not respond well to overly critical teachers whose posture exacerbates his aggression. His homeroom teachers are Chicanas who have demonstrated a genuine concern for José, as have the former counselor and janitor, all of whom eventually won his trust and confidence. However, many of the parent-teacher and parent-principal interactions have been antagonistic. Insufficient care has been given to provide José and his family, including his brother and sister at school, with positive feedback in the instances when José's progress warranted it. The teachers' differences with José did not appear to stem from a cultural base; a socioeconomic and behavioral one is the more logical source of differences. Evident in this case is the school's lack of active concern for the subject's home problems, coupled with a low-SES parent's difficulties in having the school personnel respond effectively to her child's needs.

José perceived his placement in remedial reading as one more failure, one that his peers would notice. He appeared proud and relieved of not having to be pulled out of his regular classroom for remedial reading

instruction anymore. His exit from remedial reading enabled him to shed a stigma associated with being classified as an underachiever. It meant that he no longer would have to endure the taunts and ridicule of his peers and older brother; he became a "regular" student. His homeroom teacher perceived that clearing remedial reading resulted in an improvement in his overall demeanor and that his self-confidence had received a much-needed boost.

In 1988 José was on his way to becoming one more casualty of the education system when he reached junior high school, as a result of his behavior and below grade level reading. This finding is consistent with the Frase (1989) results from the study of dropout rates in the United States in 1988, which indicated that 86% of the 1980 sophomore class of dropouts had an English-language home background. Therefore, English usage at home is not an assurance that literacy acquisition problems will not be encountered or overcome when they occur.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROGNOSIS

In this case study, violence at home, student aggressive behavior, student low self-esteem, reading difficulties, limited socioeconomic adaptation, discontinuous monitoring of the student, and school-home conflicts were the leading factors that contributed to José being at risk of educational failure. It is important to note that the linkage between some of these factors surfaced as a result of the case study; the perceptions of José by the school and his mother often differed and were not reconciled until each side had a chance to compare notes which were based on our findings.

The most significant at-risk factors for José in 1990 are exposure to violence in the home, lack of continuous positive adult contact in school in the form of a mentor, continued referrals to the principal for recurrent disruptive behavior, and lack of academic and social monitoring and counseling.

The follow-up research conducted in 1990 indicated that José had exited from the reading resource class and that a permanent counselor was now assigned to the school, should José have need of her services. However, during an inquiry in 1990, the new counselor reported she had no knowledge of José's at-risk status, illustrating the aforementioned lack of communication with at-risk students.

We believe it is essential for José and his family to receive counseling and empowering social skills. The school should also consider the intervention of social agencies to ameliorate situations out of the realm of school responsibility. In addition, he should be provided with a part-time tutor to help him continue to improve his reading ability. The stable presence of supervisory and counseling personnel is essential for José and students like him. We feel José has an excellent chance of succeeding in school if his progress continues to be monitored during the critical transitions to middle school and high school and active steps are taken to meet his academic and emotional needs.

This study suggests at least two fundamental changes that schools could make to improve the education received by students like José. First, schools need to become more like communities where students gain a sense of belonging, and parents and teachers have a strong sense of joint ownership, responsibility, and accountability. Second, once students have been identified as being at risk of educational failure, mentors should be assigned to these students to lead them through the path of academic success.

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