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Hispanic/Latino Youth's Engagement with North Carolina Public Schools: Students' Perspectives.

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Hispanic/Latino students drop out of school at alarming rates in the United States. With one of the nation's fastest growing Hispanic/Latino populations, the state of North Carolina is currently experiencing this problem. Research studies and local school agencies have attempted to assess the reasons why Hispanics/Latinos drop out of school. However, few studies and reports have reflected the students' perspectives. This report presents preliminary qualitative findings of student surveys and a student workshop gathered at the 2003 Hispanic Educational Summit organized by the North Carolina Society of Hispanic Professionals (NCSHP).

Introduction

Hispanics/Latinos have quickly become the largest minority group enrolled in public schools throughout the country. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center on Education Statistics (NCES 2003), today, one in every 6 children that attends public school in the United States is of Hispanic/Latino origin. Hispanic/Latino student enrollment in public schools has more than doubled over the past three decades. It is projected that by 2025, one in every four schoolchildren will be of Hispanic/Latino origin.

Over the past decade, the greatest growth of Hispanic/Latino school-aged population has occurred in the Midwest and in the South. Recent figures released by the U.S. Census Bureau (US Census Bureau 2000) indicate that in four southern states, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, the Hispanic/Latino school-aged population has grown by over 250 percent since 1990. Among these states, North Carolina, with a 397 percent growth, (from 16,651 in 1990 to 82,689 in 2000) represents the state with the largest increase in the number of Hispanic/Latino school-aged children. As reported by other investigators (Glennie and Stearns 2002), the latest statistics of ninth- and tenth-grade dropouts in North Carolina reflect that Hispanic/Latino adolescents have the highest early dropout rate (7.9%) compared to Native Americans (5.8%), African Americans

(4.5%), and Whites (3.1%). Official reports from sources such as the Department of Public Instruction (DPI 2002) have also provided us with drop out statistics for Hispanic/Latinos in North Carolina. Nonetheless, these reports are generated by school officials and do not necessarily help us understand the Hispanic/Latino youth's perspectives and the factors that contribute to their decision to drop out of school.

Methods

Summary of Procedure

In an attempt to understand the issues that Hispanic/Latino students are facing in NC schools as well as the reasons why they might drop out, the North Carolina Society of Hispanic Professionals (NCSHP) created and administered a student survey and student workshop, wherein these questions were addressed. The information presented in this report was provided by Hispanic/Latino students attending the 2003 Hispanic Educational Summit held on February 19, 2003 at the McKimmon Center at North Carolina State University. The Hispanic Educational Summit is an annual conference organized by the NCSHP whose primary objectives are to promote and disseminate information on the benefits of formal and higher education among the Hispanic/Latino youth of North Carolina.

Participants

More than 650 7th-12th grade Hispanic/Latino students from 26 counties in North Carolina participated in the 2003 summit. Out of these, a total of 197 students answered the questionnaire and 100 participated in the workshop. The student workshop was scheduled exclusively for students in the 11th and 12th grades.

Measures

This questionnaire asked 16 open-ended questions in both Spanish and English as well as basic demographic information such as age, gender, grade level, county of residence, and length of stay in the United States. The student workshop session posed the following general question: "What are the major concerns, issues, and problems you are experiencing in your life, family, and school?"

Procedure

The questionnaires were included in participants' information packets. They included a brief introduction to the questionnaire as well as a statement indicating that participation was voluntary and that all responses were completely anonymous. A chance to participate in a raffle at the end of the conference was offered to students as an incentive for completing the questionnaire.

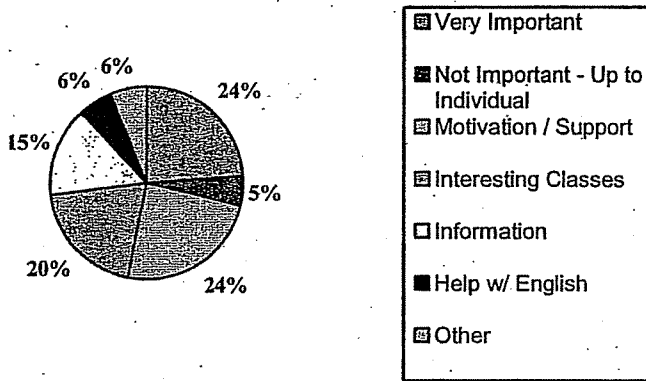
During the workshop, three different boards were set-up with these headings: "Life", "Family", and "School". Students were asked to write on a card their thoughts and reflections about major concerns, issues, and problems they were experiencing in their life, family, and school. Students posted their cards under the heading that they thought corresponded to their answers.

Data analyses

Preliminary data analysis consisted of several meetings with members of the NCSHP wherein common themes were derived. These themes were then grouped into categories, which captured the essence of the selected themes. Following the categorization of responses, the frequency of each response category was estimated and percentages were calculated based on the number of students who answered each particular question. Only responses to the most relevant questions addressing students' perspectives on school drop out and their engagement with NC schools are presented in this publication.

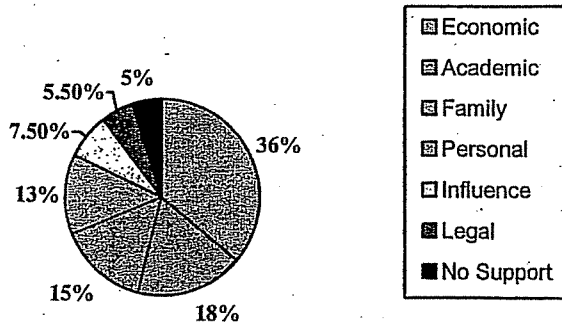
Results

Question: How important would it be to have certain services/classes offered in order to prevent students from dropping out of school?



One hundred seventy-eight (178) students answered this question. Some (24%) of them answered the first part by indicating that "it would be very important" with no elaboration as to the services needed. Others (5%) indicated that "it was not important" and made statements reflecting a belief that the decision to drop out is more up to the individual and not a school issue per se. The remainder of the responses could be grouped into four categories: Motivation/Support (24%); Making classes more interesting (20%); Providing students with information regarding the advantages of staying in school (15%); and help with English (6%). Six (6%) percent of the responses did not fit any of the other categories or addressed the question but indicated that students might be having home or work-related problems that might contribute to dropping out of school.

Question: What are the reasons that you know of or believe to be the cause of students dropping out of school?



One hundred and one (101) students answered and elaborated on this question. Answers reflect that these students believe that the majority of students who drop out do so for economic reasons (36%), followed by academic difficulties (18%) such as not liking or being bored with classes, difficulties with language proficiency, and feeling frustrated in

school. Fifteen (15%) percent of the students believed that students drop out due to family problems such as family pressure to work or not being supported by family members altogether. "Personal problems" such as pregnancy, drugs, lack of interest, low self-esteem, and laziness made up thirteen (13%) percent of the responses. Third person influence (7.5%) was related to peer-pressure, gang pressure, and boyfriends. Five and a half (5.5%) percent of the respondents indicated that legal reasons might contribute to students dropping out of school. Finally, five (5%) percent of the responses indicated that students might drop out of school due to lack of support.

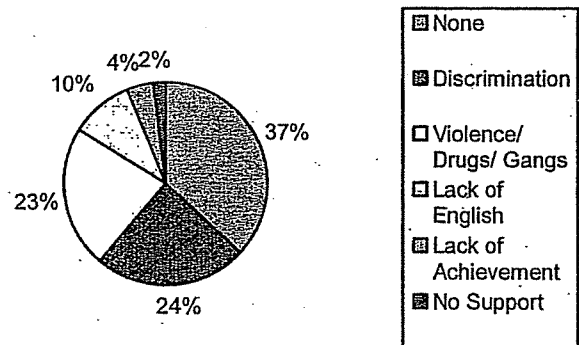
Question: Do you believe that you are getting enough support from teachers?

One hundred thirteen (113) students answered this question. Fifty-nine (59%) percent of the responses indicated that students feel that they are getting enough support from teachers. Some (27%) felt supported at times or only by ESL teachers, and the remainder (14%) indicated that they did not feel supported by their teachers.

Question: Do you feel that you are a part of your school environment? Why or Why not?

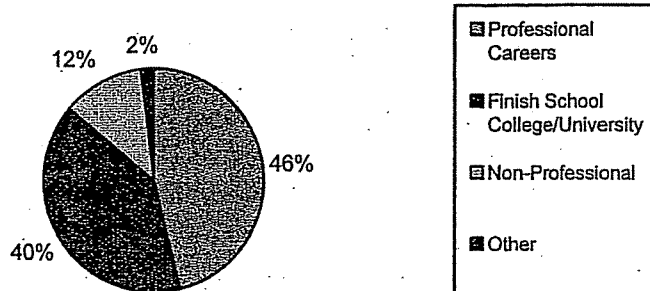
One hundred seventy-nine (179) students answered this question. The majority (63%) answered affirmatively indicating that they did feel part of the school community. Nonetheless, over one third of the students felt that they either did not have a sense of belonging (28%) at all or only felt like a part of the school community at times (9%). Out of those who answered that they did not feel like part of the school environment, the number one reason for feeling a lack of belonging was racism and discrimination. These thoughts and feelings are reflected by statements such as: "No, because the attitude of people in the US makes me feel that the opinion of a resident who does not speak their language fluently does not matter;" or, "No because due to my lack of English people make fun of me or ignore me."

Question: What are the dangers/problems at school that you face, if any?



A total of 152 students answered this question: The majority of students (37%) did not see any dangers at school. Out of those who perceived some kind of danger, a large percentage (24%) saw discrimination as a danger. Interestingly enough only twenty-three (23%) percent of the students perceived physical violence, drugs, and gangs as dangers in their schools. It is remarkable that fourteen (14%) percent of the responses indicated that lack of English, lack of achievement or failure, and not understanding classes were "dangers" at school. Two (2%) percent of the responses indicated lack of support as a danger faced at school.

Question: *What are your goals for the future?*



There were 178 responses to this question. Forty-six (46%) percent of the students indicated specific professional careers such as a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. Forty (40%) percent indicated a desire to finish school and attend college or university with no mention of a specific career. A desire to pursue non-professional careers such as artist, soccer player, auto mechanic, or secretary was indicated by twelve (12%) percent of the students. Finally, two (2%) percent were categorized as "other" indicating either that the students did not yet know what their goals were or an indication that they wanted to help other Hispanics/Latinos but did not mention specific plans to complete school or pursue specific careers.

Question: *Do you feel that your parents will support you in obtaining your goals?*

There were 184 responses to this question. The vast majority of students, ninety (90%) percent believed that their parents would support them in obtaining their goals. Six (6%) percent simply answered "no" and four (4%) percent said they either did not know or only felt that their parents would be supportive sometimes.

Student Workshop

Analysis of answers to the question posed at the student workshop ("What are the major concerns, issues, and problems you are experiencing in your life, family, and school?") revealed the following trends:

- ◆ Thinking and believing that a college education is unattainable, students are discouraged from finishing high school
- ◆ Lack of knowledge and hope about job opportunities post high school
- ◆ Lack of information and guidance
- ◆ Lack of self-awareness, interests and abilities
- ◆ Family economic situation
- ◆ Youth neither understand nor appreciate the values of high school and college degrees
- ◆ Desire for professional growth
- ◆ Interest and willingness to improve the future of the Hispanic/Latino community

Discussion

Results of this preliminary qualitative analysis indicate that Hispanic/Latino students' perspectives reflect both similarities and differences from research studies examining risk and protective factors for mainstream students' dropping out of school. For example it is interesting to note that among the children who elaborated on the question of what classes or services were needed, the majority (24%) believed that support and motivation were essential to their success and achievement in school. This is

supported by studies which have found that support is essential for Mexican and Mexican-American students to succeed (Lopez, Ehly et al. 2002; Prelow and Louksas 2003).

Of similar interest is the fact that 5% of the respondents indicated that the decision to drop out of school is not school related at all, but more a reflection of an individual's choice. This response reflects the notion of some participants that students who drop out do so because of negative personal characteristics. This might be a reflection of the literature which finds that internalization of negative cultural stereotypes may have a damaging influence on achievement motivation in childhood and adolescence (Steele 1997; Hudley and Graham 2001). Only 6% of the respondents indicated the need to have more help with English in order to prevent students from dropping out of school. This is contradictory to common belief that lack of English might be a common cause for students to drop out.

Whereas it is encouraging to note that 59% of the students answered "yes" to the question pertaining to their perceived support from teachers, it is also alarming to note that 41% either felt supported only "sometimes" (27%) or not supported at all (14%). Furthermore, it is important to note that out of those students indicating that their teachers were supportive, the majority of students felt that this support was coming from their ESL teachers. This is also consistent with literature findings demonstrating that the more similar the teachers are to the students the more they serve as role models for their students. As reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 1997) females are more likely to reflect high achievement scenarios in comparison to boys. This was associated with the fact that 73% of teachers overall and 89% of elementary school teachers are female, thus providing a greater number of role models.

Answers to the question of whether students feel part of their school environment also reveal interesting results. It is comforting to realize that the majority of respondents felt that they had a connection with the school environment. Nonetheless, it is disquieting to realize that approximately one third of these students did not feel that they had a sense of belonging. What is more alarming is the realization that many of these students cite racism and discrimination as the reasons why they do not feel they form part of the school community. This sense of discrimination was also evident in the students' answer to a question regarding dangers at school, wherein the number one "danger" was cited as discrimination. These results are also consistent with previous research findings, which have demonstrated a youth's sense of connection to the school has a positive effect on achievement (Brown and Evans 2002).

Themes of the question regarding future goals and aspirations reveal that 86% of respondents have a desire to complete high school and go on to attend college, with 46% of those indicating aspirations for advanced professional careers in medicine and law. If these students are an accurate representation of Hispanic/Latino students in North Carolina, an interesting finding emerges from review of these questionnaires. Namely, that these students are highly motivated but the adversities they are facing, along with a lack of information about resources, have a significant negative impact on their actual success.

Finally, questions regarding students' perceptions of their parents' support also yield remarkable results. The majority of students felt that they were receiving adequate support from their parents and that their parents would support them in obtaining their future career goals. This is consistent with previous research which has found that Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American adolescents felt more parental support in comparison to African-American and

European-American adolescents (Hill, Ramirez et al. 2002). Both the present findings, as well as Hill et al's results, are nonetheless contradictory to popular belief that Hispanic/Latino parents' lack of participation in school activities and meetings is a reflection of their lack of interest or lack of support in their children's education. This might be an indication that Hispanic/Latino parents demonstrate support in different ways.

In summary, answers to both the questionnaire and workshop indicate that Hispanic/Latino students are facing many challenges in their schools. Some of the challenges they are facing are similar to other students at risk of dropping out of school, but some of these challenges are unique to Hispanic/Latino students. For instance, the lack of sense of belonging to the school environment because they are "different" or feeling discriminated against, a general feeling of lack of support and motivation from school personnel other than ESL teachers, need to work to alleviate their families' economic struggles, the sense that their goals are unattainable, and lack of access to information and education programs might be idiosyncratic struggles to Hispanic/Latino students. Schools might not have a direct impact on students' economic struggles. Nonetheless, school systems, administrators and teachers can implement changes to help Hispanic/Latino students create a stronger sense of belonging and a stronger sense that they are supported by all teachers, not just ESL teachers. Additionally, schools and parents can work together to provide Hispanic/Latino students with motivation and information regarding academic opportunities. It is obvious from their answers to these questionnaires that Hispanic/Latino students have high aspirations and goals and that they are asking for our support in reaching those goals. It is imperative that we do all we can to provide Hispanic/Latino students the support, motivation, information, and resources they need and deserve to achieve their goals.

Limitations

Although these students were still enrolled in school and recruitment to the 2003 NCSHP Summit was open to all Hispanic/Latino students, the students who attended the summit and completed the questionnaire might not be reflective of students who will eventually drop out of school. Likewise, given the fact that many of the students completed the questionnaire at the end of their participation in the summit, their responses might be a reflection of the effect of the summit on their perspectives. A different perspective might have emerged if these questions had been posed prior to their participation in a full day event of activities geared towards encouragement in school achievement. Additionally, surveys did not assess respondents' socioeconomic status (SES) or their country of origin. It is assumed that the majority of respondents are of Mexican origin given the general Hispanic/Latino population statistics in North Carolina, but there might be differences in perceptions depending on students' SES and country of origin. Further quantitative analysis of the data will explore differences in response patterns depending on respondents' length of stay in the United States.

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