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A Failing System

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to discover the underlying issues that Chicano children have in the American education system. The idea is to emphasize the importance of a good educational backing for all students, giving an equal opportunity to students of all ethnicity. The research will look at the work of Barbara Schhneider, Sylvia Martinez, and Ann Ownes and the idea of economic and social resource disadvantages that Mexican Americans have. This paper will also look at how the home language of immigrant parents affects the learning of adolescence in the American school system. In addition, the research will look at the effect a teachers relationship with a Chicano student has on their success in the classroom. By looking at all these factors, the end goal of the research is to discover why only eleven percent of Mexican American students over the age of twenty-five have a college bachelor's degree (Schhneider 2006).

Basic Argument

This paper is about Chicano and Mexican American students growing up in the American education system. While some Mexican American students go through school and are in the normal range for educational success, many Mexican Americans do not. In the end this paper is intended to find out why only 11% of Mexican Americans over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree. This paper will break down a few of the different reasons why as well as talk about a theoretical solution to the problem.

One issue is language. Many Mexican American households have parents that only speak Spanish. In our education system English is the primary language and the language that is used in the classroom. This paper will discuss how students who grow up without this language in their household fall behind and how hard it is for them to catch back up even when intervention is given at a young age.

Another factor this paper will dive into is financial stability for Mexican Americans and how finances affect the success of a student in school. The paper will show that poorer students especially poorer Chicano students have a harder time succeeding in the classroom and lead to many early dropouts. This can be caused by many factors, such as having big family sizes that force them to quit school to work, but this paper will focus on the language aspect of the poor Mexican American people and the correlation between the two. What this means is there is a high correlation between Mexican Americans who are poor and do not know the language. This leads to drop outs and then when they have kids the cycle gets repeated as intergenerational poverty

The paper will also dive into schools themselves and the things that can be done to help Chicano students succeed. This includes what teachers can be doing to be more relatable to students as well as school districts themselves. At the moment many school districts are cutting programs for ELL students due to budget cuts and this paper discusses why that is something that can not be happening as it will have negative lifelong effect on the students.

Overall the goal of this paper is to shed a light on the issue of dropout rates and lack of school completion in Chicano and Mexican American students in the school system. Studies show that this group of students are graduating from college at a much lower rate than any other ethnic group in the country at just 11% of Chicanos over the age of 25 having a bachelor's degree. This statistic proves that current strategies are not working and that something has to change. This paper discusses the basic problems as well as proposes a few steps towards the solution of moving in the right direction.

Introduction

In today's America we live in a melting pot society, or so we are led to believe. Everyone is expected to conform to society for the greater good of the country as a whole. With this theory in mind all groups, religions, and races should be given an equal opportunity at being successful contributors to the society through the construct that has been laid out. For many groups however, including Chicano and Mexican Americans, this is not the case. There are many contributing factors including immigration, languages spoken in the household, economic disadvantages, as well as a general lack of knowledge about the Chicano culture within the American Education system. The point of this paper is to shed light on as well as find a solution to the low numbers of Mexican Americans over the age of twenty-five with a bachelor's degree.

The Early Problem

For Latino students their experience growing up in the American education system is much different than their white counterparts. The problem actually starts at home as Latino students are at a disadvantage before they are even old enough to begin school. According to Barbara Schhneider, Sylvia Martinez, and Ann Ownes the problem starts at home with many students growing up in a Spanish speaking household, leaving them behind when they reach the school system. Their research has this to say on the issue, “With respect to reading to children three or more times per week, Hispanic families in which both parents speak only Spanish at home had participation rates that were nearly 50 percentage points lower than white families” (Schhneider 2006). At a young age it is important for kids to be read to in order to develop a familiarity with language. Not only are Latino students without an English speaking parent being read to less, they also are given very little or no exposure to English which sets them back when they reach the school system. The research goes on, “By contrast, for Hispanic families in which both parents speak English at home, participation rates were only 15 percentage points lower than white families” (Schhneider 2006). This shows that the gap between white and latino students is not about race, but is at least in part due to a familiarity with the language in which is being used in the school system.

Part of the lack of language development and vocabulary support at home can be traced to a lack of financial stability in many of these Spanish only speaking households. Household that only speak Spanish are less likely to be financially successful in the U.S. According to Robert Crosnoe, Rashmita S. Mistry, Glen H. Elder Jr. “Economic disadvantage has a well-documented association with educational attainment. Early disadvantage is a strong predictor of high-school graduation, college enrollment” (2004). This information shows the correlation between language and economic disadvantages that keeps many Latinos in a cycle of borderline

poverty. Growing up without a familiarity to the language being used in the school system puts you at a disadvantage and makes graduating high school and college a more difficult path. This puts them at an economical disadvantage and makes it harder for their children to break the cycle and get out of the system.

The problem within the school

Disadvantages for Chicano and Mexican American students do not end with a lack of financial stability and familiarity with the language at home. This lack of financial stability usually pushes kids to schools with less resources to help kids succeed. According to NEA.org disadvantages for poor latino students are just as great inside the classroom as they are at home. The organization has this to say on the issue, “According to census data, approximately 80 percent of all English Language Learners (ELLs) in the U.S. are Hispanic. The majority of these students were born in the U.S. Nationwide, approximately 2.5 percent of teachers who instruct ELL students possess a degree in ESL or bilingual education” (Hispanics: Education Issues. 2008). Not only are these students at a disadvantage at home but 97.5% of them are being taught english by someone who does not know the students primary language. A student can not be expected to keep up with students who come into the system knowing the language when they themselves are trying to learn it. The numbers on this are staggering as well at an early age. Since NEA.org also says “By 4th grade, 16% of Latino students are proficient in reading according” (Hispanics: Education Issues. 2008). This means that five years into the education system 84% of Latino students are already behind. This number is super low when compared to their white counterparts who are proficient at a 46% success rate at the same age (Harkrader, M. A., & Moore, R. 1997). When these students do not recover and many of them drop out and do

not finish high school or college it can be traced back to a lack of support from the school systems at an early age that lets them fall so far behind.

Low Expectations

Another factor that has been researched thoroughly regarding Chicano success in the classroom is the expectations they are held to. It is human nature to sink or rise to the expectation level you are held to and Chicano students are no exception. According to *Perceptions of Chicano/Latino Students* “Lower expectations result in limited opportunities for some students. Thus, student motivation and the effort students devote to academic tasks can be circumscribed by teacher expectations. Students recognize the lower expectation level and, over time, their self concept and motivation may decline until the potential to achieve is diminished. This may lead to limited educational success, which in turn affects the desire to remain in school”(Avilés, R. M., Guerrero, M. P., Howarth, H. B., & Thomas, G. 1999). All the things previously discussed tie into this. Due to an economic and language barrier disadvantage students come into the education system ill equipped to succeed. The support these students need to stay on track at an early age is not given to them therefore they come across teachers who expect less and less of them. Overtime these lowered expectation lead to a lack of self worth among many Latino students leading to a lack of academic success.

Along with lowered expectations from teachers for Latino students is the resources that in turn are taken away from them. With teachers lowered expectations and a lack of resources Latino students are seen as the logical budget cut to many school districts. “Schools frequently channel resources away from programs for minority students, based upon the perception that they have less potential for learning. Thus, minority students are routinely “sacrificed” and afforded fewer opportunities to learn challenging subject matter” (Avilés, R.. 1999). This in turn

sets students who are behind even further back from their white english speaking peers. The system is taking away opportunities from the students who need it the most to keep the resources for the students they deem worthy of higher education.

The Solution

The lack of academic success among Chicano and Mexican American students is a complex multilayered issue. While the previous sections laid out many of the issues that set minority students behind, in order to come up with a solution to the problem we must first lay out what exactly it is we are trying to solve. The issue is this, “Despite high educational expectations, Hispanics are among the least educated group in the United States: 11 percent of those over age 25 have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher compared with 17 percent of blacks, 30 percent of whites, and 49 percent of Asian Americans in the same age group” (Schneider 2006). Hispanic students are graduating at staggeringly low rate that has seemed to be at a standstill for the last decade.

The first step is funding. These low income schools are primarily filled with minority students, many of them ELL learners. We can not be taking resources away from these schools we need to be pouring resources into them. This starts with all ELL students being taught by bilingual instructors. A student who speaks spanish cannot be taught english by someone who does not know the students primary language. Having all ELL students being taught by bilingual reading instructors will help speed up their ability to learn english and put an end to the days where 84% of latino students are not proficient readers by the fourth grade.

The other part of this problem the education system has control over is the expectations of its students that the teachers hold. Teachers need to be held accountable to hold all students to the same standard. Minority and ELL students can not be disregarded and given lower

expectations just because they struggle. This only leads to a lack of self worth and declining motivation. If a change is going to be made to the number of Latino students who graduate college it starts with the teachers who teach them and the standard they hold these students to.

Conclusion

Chicano and Mexican American students are being set back in the American education system because of a variety of factors. Immigration, language barriers, and economic stability are a few of the many factors that make it hard for Chicano students to succeed. At an early age Chicano students are set back by their lack of reading skills and familiarity with the english language and it hinders them as they continue through school. There are ways to fix this problem and get these students on the right track at an early age but it takes a commitment from our education system to these students in order to help them succeed.

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