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ABSTRACT

This paper examines methods that can help prevent a rise in the dropout rate of Hispanic students in the United States, focusing on five principles that form the basis for research by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence. The first principle states that learning should be facilitated through joint productive activity among teachers and students. The second principle highlights the importance of developing students' competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities. The third principle is to contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of the home and community, making it relevant to students and their life experiences. The fourth principle is to challenge students toward cognitive complexity, encouraging them to reach within their zones of proximal development so they may perform with teacher guidance. The fifth principle is to engage students through dialogue, particularly in the instructional conversation. Beyond the five principles, there are other things that schools and educators can do to support at-risk Hispanic students, including: monitoring their performance; providing curricular congruence; rechanneling gang members' interests and leadership skills; and avoiding the cultural deprivation model or deficit view of at-risk Hispanic students. (Contains 29 references.) (SM)

Dropout Prevention Strategies for Hispanic Students [1]

by John Purcell

There are certain students in our schools who are in great need of social intervention and thus have usually been referred to as "at-risk." Sosa (1990) defines "at-risk" students as those with reading achievement two or more grade levels below grade placement, repeated retention in grade, or high rates of disciplinary referral and absenteeism. "At-risk" students are more prone to dropping out of school. Ascher and Schwartz (1987) define a dropout as "a pupil who leaves school for any reason except death, before graduation or completion of a program of studies and without transferring to another school or institution" (p.1). At-risk students are generally from economically disadvantaged and non-English speaking backgrounds. Cadenas, Montecel, Supik, and Harris (1992) found that youth from non-English-language backgrounds are 1.5 times more likely to leave school before they graduate than those of English-language background. Vaznaugh (1995) discovered that although the dropout rate has declined in recent years especially among Whites and Afro-Americans, the trend for Hispanic students is the opposite. In 1992 alone, roughly 50% of Hispanics aged 16-24 dropped out of high school.

Duran (1988) looked at test scores of Hispanic students and found that many read two or more grade levels below grade placement. Only a handful of students are able to score at advanced levels on standardized tests. Where nearly half of all Anglo eleventh-grade students proficient in English scored at the "adept" reading level according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only 27% of Hispanic students did so. Duran (1988) also found that the families of 60% of high school dropouts have incomes

below $15,000. 40% of Hispanic children and 72% of Hispanic single mothers live in poverty. Furthermore, the poverty rate for Hispanics has been rising.

Female Hispanic students seem to be more at-risk than males. Keith and Schartzer (1995) found that male students may stay in school longer than female students despite the fact that the females may be experiencing more parental involvement and doing better than males in school. De Leon (1996) claims that gender-role attitudes in U.S. society, schools, and Latino families all contribute to the educational performance of Hispanic females. Family, school and the media reinforce the stereotype of Latinas as being submissive underachievers. Romo (1998) found that Latina mothers have powerful influence over their daughter's education and career choices. Mothers from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are depressed about their own livelihood and uncertain about the future may not even talk to their daughters about pursuing a career or continuing their education. Many Latinas, even those who are above-average in school, think about dropping out as a result.

There is a great deal that can be done inside and outside the classroom to prevent many at-risk Hispanic students from dropping out of school. This paper will look at many methods and ideas that should help prevent the rise in the dropout rate for Hispanic students in the United States.

Tharp (1997) reports on five generic principles that provide the basis for research being conducted by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE). There is a broad consensus to make these principles an organizing structure for continuing research and for immediate implementation into programs for at-risk children. Principle 1 states that learning should be facilitated through joint productive activity among teachers and students. Joint productive activity between teacher and students helps to create a common context of experience within the school itself. Such experience is especially important when the teacher and the student are not of the same background. Teachers, particularly non-Hispanic ones, should try to have more joint productive activity between them and their students.

Tharp (1997) reports that the second principle of CREDE is to develop students' competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities. Collier (1995) reports that studies of English as a second language indicate the strong ties between language development and both academic achievement and cognitive growth. Tharp (1997) believes that language development should be a metagoal for the entire school day. He states that language and literacy development should be fostered not through drills and decontextualized rules but instead through meaningful use and purposive conversation between teacher and students.

Richard-Amato and Snow (1992) lists many strategies for content-area teachers of language minority students. For beginning English-speaking students, teachers should use lots of gestures, facial expressions, objects, pictures, charts, and speak slowly with concrete references and repetitions. Students need visuals and real objects to aid their understanding along with effective questioning and task-oriented strategies designed to help them attain higher order levels of thinking in English.

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) stress the importance of initial reading instruction. They write that initial instruction should focus on using reading to gain meaning from print, develop an understanding of the structure of spoken words, help children understand the nature of the orthographic system, provide practice of regular spelling-sound relationships, and provide many opportunities for reading and writing.

Quatroche (1999) lists four successful interventions which can be used to help underachievers in reading. 1 Letter-sound relationships and word identification strategies should be taught explicitly. 2. Teachers should provide repeated exposures to words to encourage mastery and should scaffold for struggling readers by presenting words in small practice sets. 3. Teachers should explicitly teach strategies for understanding text and monitoring comprehension. Such strategies would include self-questioning, K-W-L, visual imagery, ReQuest, retelling, and Question-Answer relationships. 4. Teachers need to provide multiple opportunities for repeated reading of connected text to develop fluency.

Such opportunities would include modeling, direct instruction, choral reading, and paired reading.

Hispanic at-risk students are generally language minority students. Slavin and Yampolsky (1992) found that language minority students saw greater success with English language proficiency when the staff and services of an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) program were integrated into the regular classroom program. ESL instruction was then focused on the skills needed for success in the English reading programs.

Classrooms should be print-rich environments for students. Teachers should have bookshelves filled with all types of books, magazines, and newspapers. Students should be allowed to choose from a wide variety of options and be allowed to read at their own pace in the classroom during reading time. Sanacore (1997) found that students respond more positively to reading and books when they are allowed such freedom and choice.

Tharp (1997) writes that CREDE's third principle is to contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of home and community. He states that research consistently recommends an increase in contextualized instruction and that schools need to assist at-risk students by providing experiences that show how rules, abstraction, and verbal descriptions are drawn from and applied to the real everyday world. He adds that contextualization must be addressed at three levels: instructional level, curriculum level, and at the policy level.

Richard-Amato and Snow (1992) state that teachers should relate what students are expected to do to their past experiences. Students need to share what they already know about a subject. "There is often a tendency to underestimate what language minority students already know about a topic or concept" (p.152).

Teachers need to utilize their language minority students' experiences and skills learned in their homes and communities since it not only helps them academically but boosts their self-esteem. O'Halloran (1995) found that a strong ethnic identity and bilingualism can enhance school success and can empower female students to overcome

gender barriers. Reep (1996) reported on the views gang members in northeastern cities have on schools. Many gang members said they were discouraged in school because of the low expectations of teachers. Reep (1996) concluded that prevention and intervention strategies should include empowering students and encouraging a sense of belonging.

Educators must develop a respect and understanding of the culture and experiences of their language minority students or for any cultural or racial minority they teach. In reference to Hispanic students, Trueba and Bartolome (1997) write that "Latino experiences and cultural capital need to be counted as strengths...Teacher and students jointly construct knowledge, building on what students bring to class...Teachers must convey in their daily work the conviction that they are committed to humanizing the educational experience of students by eliminating hostility, and replacing messages of distrust or disdain with respect for all" (p.6). Liontos (1991) found that successful programs for at-risk students learn about other cultures and respect their beliefs. They accept that cultural differences are both valid and valuable. "They find ways of building on the loyalty and obedience, for example, that Hispanic parents instill in their children" (p.3).

A great way to help empower Hispanic students and give them a sense of belonging is by empowering their families by getting them involved in school and the community. Keith and Schartzer (1995) found that parental involvement positively influenced their Hispanic child's academic achievement. Parental involvement is especially important for at-risk students because their home and school lives are so different. Hamilton-Lee (1988) writes that such situations usually cause the child to embrace the home culture because it is familiar and reject the school culture because it is unfamiliar. Liontos (1991) points out that school needs to become more home-like and home needs to have a school component.

However, getting parents of at-risk students involved is sometimes difficult. Liontos (1991) found that at-risk parents can have poor self-worth, feelings of inadequacy and failure, and negative past experiences with school. Language, economic, emotional, and time constraint barriers may create further problems. Liontos (1991) discovered that

schools can overcome these obstacles by seeking out parents and giving them active instead of passive roles in the classroom, by realizing that all parents have strengths that should be emphasized and valued, and by understanding that parents can learn new techniques. Schools should also seek out grandparents, step-parents, or other members of a student's family. To empower an at-risk family, educators should train members and invite their active participation in the school's decision-making groups.

Parents and other family members of students can provide many great aids to learning in the classroom. Sanacore (1997) found numerous ways they can help support a language arts program by reading to students, nurturing learning by functioning as effective role models, listening to students read, listening to students' retellings after silent reading, asking challenging questions concerning their reading, coaching their efforts, sharing and monitoring reading and writing activities, developing instructional materials, organizing a classroom newspaper, assisting with bulletin boards and classroom displays that encourage reading and writing, and serving as a resource during field trips.

The community around the school should also be partnered with at-risk students and their families. Liontos (1991) writes that schools can't provide all the services at-risk families need. Schools need to collaborate with community agencies to help at-risk families get such things as parenting education, counseling, health care, and housing.

Community programs and groups are also a great help in preventing at-risk students from dropping out. Some programs start when the children are in preschool by enriching their experiences in affective, cognitive, and motor domains. Other programs look for talented youth and help aid them through advanced instruction they may not be getting in their regular classrooms. There are some programs that primarily train parents to help their own children. Sosa (1990) writes that community programs make at-risk students feel valued and supported by addressing "the precursors of students' achievement by increasing their internalized sense of competence and by enhancing their self-esteem" (p.2).

Tharp (1997) writes that the fourth principle of CREDE is to challenge students toward cognitive complexity. He states that the consensus among researchers is that at-risk students require cognitively challenging instruction that requires thinking and analysis. Teachers need to challenge students to reach within their zones of proximal development so they may perform with teacher guidance. Many Hispanic students are bilingual and according to Collier (1995) a bilingual cirriculum itself provides cognitive challenges that are in many ways superior to the approach of a monolingual cirriculum.

There are many ways teachers can challenge at-risk students. Trueba and Bartolome (1997) lists such approaches as language experience, process writing, reciprocal teaching, and whole language activities because many of these approaches use students' existing knowledge and experience in addition to being cognitively challenging and enriching. When prior knowledge is accessed and linked to new information, learning occurs. Heterogeneous learning groups also allow for opportunity for at-risk and lower-level students to been seen and heard in an equal democratic context.

Tutoring at-risk students, especially at the early grades, can help challenge them toward cognitive complexity. Wasik and Slavin (1993) reviewed 16 studies of 5 one-to-one tutoring models used with at-risk first graders. The five models included Reading Recovery, Success for All, Prevention of Learning Disabilities, the Wallach Tutoring Program, and Programmed Tutorial Reading. They found that there was substantial positive effects to tutoring, that these effects were usually lasting, and that the results were more positive when certified teachers were used. Slavin (1991) looked at research on the impacts of alternative early intervention programs for at-risk students including those involving substantial reductions in class size, provision of instructional aids in the early grades, extended-day kindergarten, preschool for 4 year olds, retention in kindergarten and first grade, extra-year programs for immature or at-risk children, and one-to-one tutoring. He found that of all these strategies, the most effective for preventing early school failure involved one-to-one tutoring in reading for first graders using structured models with

trained certified teachers as tutors. This method produced the greatest immediate effects on reading achievement and was the only strategy that produced lasting effects at least through the third grade. Rogers (1995) studied eight preservice teachers who tutored four third-grade and four fourth-grade at-risk students with reading and language arts problems and found that tutoring made a difference in these children's lives. Instructional strategies the tutors found most successful with the students were making and using word walls, and drawing and producing story maps. Quatroche (1999) writes that tutors need to coordinate their individualized instruction with the regular classroom instruction so that instruction will be congruent and more effective for the at-risk student.

There are also benefits from having tutors who are not certified teachers. Gaustad (1993) found emotional and learning benefits resulted for both the tutor and the tutee when peer and cross-age tutors were used. Cross-age tutoring is where the tutor is older than the tutee whereas peer tutoring consists of two students the same age. The advantage of using these tutors is that they are better than adults at relating to their tutees on a cognitive, emotional and social level. At the same time tutors can benefit themselves because it allows them to review material and improve their own thinking and communication skills. Montecel (1994) describes a program where Hispanic middle school students at-risk for dropping out were trained as tutors for elementary school children. After a two year evaluation it was found that the tutors had improved self-esteem, improved reading grades, improved school attitudes, and were less likely to drop out. Vaznaugh (1995) found that tutor programs that used middle and high school Hispanic students as tutors for at-risk elementary students in turn could help prevent dropouts from both groups. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program's philosophy is that tutors will improve their self esteem and academic performance by being put in positions of responsibility.

In addition to tutors, paraprofessionals and other classroom aids and volunteers can also help challenge at-risk students to cognitive complexity. Sanacore (1997) writes that

these people make valuable contributions to the classroom and that their support is needed to accommodate the large increase in the diversity of learning needs.

Tharp (1997) explains that the fifth principle of CREDE is to engage students through dialogue, especially the instructional conversation. This is something not usually found in most schools in the United States. Dalton (1989) write that teachers need to reduce the distance between themselves and their students to make teaching more of a collaborative and warm activity. Teachers should construct lessons from common understanding of their own and students' experiences and ideas. Tharp (1997) writes that dialogue reveals to the teacher the skills, knowledge, and values of the student and thus allows the teacher to contextualize teaching to fit the student's base of experience. Dialogue also develops the ability to form, express, and exchange ideas in writing and speech.

Beyond the five principles of CREDE there are additional things that schools and educators can do to help prevent at-risk Hispanic students from dropping out. Asher and Schwartz (1987) suggest that schools need to identify and help at-risk students by monitoring their performance. They suggest monitoring attendance, testing, and educational history. Poor attendance can foreshadow dropping out and school should give attention to students who display excessive absenteeism. Testing, when done correctly, can identify the strengths and weaknesses of a student so that action can be taken early to correct problems. Educational history assists educators in helping to get a student proper assistance based on past experiences. It can also facilitate the transfer of a student to a new program or school. Freeman, Gum, and Blackbourn (1999) found that third and seventh grade were two hot spots for at-risk students. 50% of the students who had eventually dropped out were retained in third grade or had great difficulty in it. 90% of dropouts experienced great difficulty in or failed seventh grade. Schools can attempt to alleviate these problems through block scheduling, grade level teams, looping teachers, success rooms, and using an accelerated school model. Asher and Schwartz (1987) found ninth grade to be a very difficult time for at-risk students because most were facing the larger challenges of

high school while dealing with a critical stage in their adolescence. They suggest that schools assign these students more experienced teachers who will be sensitive to the needs of at-risk students. Schools should provide counseling for the at-risk students and work with their parents to help in the transition. Schools should also consider shifting more difficult classes to later years to prevent added frustration on the at-risk student.

Schools need to provide cirricular congruence. Many at-risk students find that they are getting separate instruction in the classroom and learning centers. Sanacore (1997) writes "at-risk learners are more likely to be successful when classroom and learning center teachers provide them with congruent goals, resources, strategies, and skills" (p.1). Teachers and tutors and learning center specialists need to organize and plan congruent activities so that at-risk students can learn more effectively.

One of the strategies that Reep (1996) suggests to prevent at-risk students from becoming involved in gang culture at the expense of school is to rechannel these students' interests and leadership skills. Teachers and administrators need to try to help in this process. A great way to rechannel at-risk students' interests is to seek out effective role models for them. Vaznaugh (1995) describes a dropout intervention program called Project Adelante which helps Hispanic middle and high school students receive academic instruction, personal and career counseling, peer tutoring and mentoring by Hispanic professionals. These professionals serve as role models for the students who later become role models for a new younger set of students. This type of program seems very effective especially since it uses as mentors adults from the same ethnic and academic background as the at-risk students.

Ortiz (1995) found that many Hispanic females experienced conflicts over the traditional roles of motherhood and family responsibilities and academic success. This has led to many dropping out. Valenzuela (1993) found out that when attitudes towards male-female roles were equal, high school girls had greater self-esteem, self-image, and achievement. Girls were able to think freely about the possibilities of work, career and

family. Romo (1998) suggests that Hispanic mother-daughter programs have helped many at-risk Latinas. In such programs, mothers and daughters do activities which help both of them maintain interest in school while also raising education and career aspirations. Programs targeting Latinas in 6th grade who come from families where no member has graduated from college have greatly benefited. Mothers learn to become more involved in their daughter's education and in turn become better role models. There are also many programs that help families support their teen daughters to stay in school even after they have had a baby.

One of the greatest prevention strategies that teachers can do for at-risk Hispanic students is to not promote the cultural depravation model or "deficit" view of such students. Trueba and Bartolome (1997) write that teachers must not reinforce the existing asymmetrical power relations among cultural groups. They must be careful not to unintentionally promote tracking and segregation in the school by equating low socioeconomic status, minority or ethnic background, or language minority students with low academic achievement. When teachers play into this "deficit" view by lowering their expectations of certain students, they end up harming these students potential for academic success. Liontos (1991) writes that "teacher attitudes play a large part in the academic success of at-risk children. Teachers who have low expectations for at-risk children, or who believe that at-risk parents don't care about their children and don't want to be involved in their education may contribute to children's failure" (p.2). Instead teachers must be educated in cultural sensitivity and active engagement of students from diverse backgrounds. They must learn to see Latino culture and experiences as strengths not deficits.

The Hispanic population in the United States is growing very rapidly, yet the Hispanic dropout rate still remains very high. This problem can only become more serious as time goes on. Yet we have a great deal of knowledge and resources at our disposal to prevent at-risk Hispanic students from dropping out of school. By using strategies both

inside and outside the classroom we can keep students in school where they may truly reach their potential.

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