Current Issues with regard to Latino Youth’s Academic Success, and Policies that could help Improve them

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Abstract

Latino youth in the United States have been reported to face academic barriers in terms of access to necessary educational tools, having lower math and reading test scores, and having higher dropout rates than students from other ethnic backgrounds. This manuscript addresses these aforementioned disparities and provides a conceptual model of these issues, as well as a proposed solution model for these issues.

*Key words*: academic barriers, Latinos, proposed solution, youth
Policy Issue Assignment

**Description of the Population At-Risk**

The largest minority group in the United States is comprised of Latinos (Terriquez, 2013). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2001), between 1990 and 2000, the amount of Latinos living in the United States grew approximately 4.5 times faster than the rest of the overall population throughout the country. The amount of Latinos who are living in the United States is increasing (Hossain, Lee, & Martin-Cuellar, 2015). More than 15% of the United States population is comprised of Latinos (Terriquez, 2013). Approximately two-thirds of the Latinos currently living in the United States are of Mexican descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). According to Hossain, Lee, and Martin-Cuellar (2015), on average, Latino households in the United States consist of 3.87 family members in total, making Latino households the largest households of all of the major ethnic groups in the United States. The majority of Latino children who are currently living in the United States were born in the United States (Terriquez, 2013).

**Description of the Problem/Policy Dilemma**

Of the Latinos living in the United States, approximately 27% of this population lives below the federal poverty line (Guttamannova, 2015). Not surprisingly, the poverty rate of children living in the United States is equally as concerning as the aforementioned rate and this child poverty rate is expected to increase (Lichter et al., 2005).

It is believed that Latino families typically have a lack of access to needed resources to support students’ academic success (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). This lack of access could be negatively impacting Latino youth’s academic abilities (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Many Latino students in the United States attend low-income schools that are not meeting their needs in terms of their ethnic/national diversity and the limited English skills immigrant students often
have (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), typically, fewer Latino youth graduate high school and complete postsecondary education than youth of other ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, it has been reported that other minority students’ presence in schools has negative consequences for Latino students’ academic outcomes (Crosnoe 2005, 2006). Furthermore, Latino students typically have lower math and reading standardized test scores, as well as higher school dropout rates than students of other ethnicities (Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006). Martinez, DeGarmo, and Eddy (2004) report that, “at the group level, high poverty, language issues, and recent immigration status have been shown to relate to higher drop-out rates for Latinos” (p. 130). It has been reported that Latinos who are enrolled in schools throughout the United States are sometimes forced to face “racial isolation” (Lee & Klugman, 2012, p. 978). Lastly, issues in neighborhoods have been used as predictors in studies related to Latino youth’s academic achievement (Guttmannova, 2015).

**School Attachment Theory**

According to School Attachment Theory, when youth experience consistency within a certain environment, they “develop an attachment and investment in the activity and the individuals involved (i.e., school, family, peers, and the larger community)” (Fite, Rubens, & Cooley, 2014, p. 926). This theory directly relates to many Latino immigrant youth, as they likely have not gotten the opportunity to develop an attachment with individuals from the community or school, due to language barriers, racial isolation, limited resources to be able to socialize outside of the school setting, etc. Youth developing a bond with personnel from school or with the institution of school, itself has been reported to be a “protective factor” for youth (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).
**LatCrit Theory**

LatCrit Theory is similar to Critical Race Theory (Kiehne, 2016). LatCrit Theory places an emphasis on the injustices and marginalization the Latino population often faces (Kiehne, 2016). This theory attempts to “expose and challenge the ubiquity of discrimination and oppression that leads to disparate outcomes for Latinos in the United States” (Kiehne, 2016, p. 119). This theory applies to Latino immigrant youth in the United States, given the aforementioned challenges they tend to face more than youth of other ethnic and national backgrounds.

**Why this is Important**

As reported, there is currently a high number of Latinos residing in the United States and this number is likely to continue growing in the coming years. Latino immigrant youth are facing struggles on a consistent basis in terms of their educational attainment and completion. As reported, a large portion of these youth who are living in the United States are also living below the federal poverty line. Furthermore, this population is also struggling with having access to the essential resources to be able to perform to their highest potential. It is unrealistic to expect a population of youth to attain a certain measure of academic success, despite them and their families not having access to the essential resources that are needed to be able to do this. Immigrant Latino students deserve the same educational opportunities as students from all other ethnic backgrounds. By helping this population improve educational outcomes on a wide scale, major life improvements can be made for them.
Conceptual Models

**Conceptual Model for Explaining the Issue:**

Parents’ lack of relationship with school personnel and lack of access to academic resources

No sense of “community” in youth’s neighborhoods

Latino youth/students

Youth’s sense of isolation and lack of outside support

Youth’s academics suffering and higher likelihood of drop-out

**Proposed Solution:**

Parents’ increased access to school personnel and relevant resources

Opportunities for youth to engage more in their communities

Latino youth/students

Youth’s enhanced support from parents, access to academic resources, and sense of community

Youth’s improved academic achievement and lower drop-out rates

**Literature Supporting Conceptual Model**

According to Martinez, DeGarmo, and Eddy (2004), “school success is among the most important correlates of overall physical, mental, and social well-being” (p. 128). Unfortunately for students who drop out of school, their projected life outcomes are projected to be negative (Rumberger & Larson, 1994; Secada et al., 1998). The major projected life outcomes for youth who drop out of school, as compared to people who have graduated from high school, are as
follows: decreased income, higher unemployment rates, and higher likelihood of needing the support of social services agencies (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004).

“Familism” is a term that is commonly attributed to Latino culture (Terriquez, 2013). This term endorses the notion that “cohesion, closeness, and reciprocity” are all highly valued amongst the Latino culture and within Latino households (Terriquez, 2013, p. 664). “Familism” is a value that is highly regarded in many Latino homes (Terriquez, 2013). For Latino youth who are struggling in school, parents’ care and support have been reported to be helpful, supportive factors in mitigating school-related issues (Garcia-Reid, Petersen, & Reid, 2015).

Having ties within the community has been associated with potentially being able to aid Latino youth in feeling more “school connectedness” (Garcia-Reid, Petersen, Reid, 2015, p. 330). Youth feeling a strong sense of unity within their neighborhoods has been reported as being a protective factor in terms of improving youth’s mental health and sense of community (Xue, Leventhal, Brooks-Gunn, & Earls 2005). Satiating baseline needs, such as mental health functioning, can benefit academic performance.

Parents’ knowledge of the “skills to frame the education of their child can have a transformative impact on the future of that child” (Pstross, Rodriguez, Knopf, & Morris Paris, 2016, p. 651). It has been recommended for immigrant parents to be assisted with being familiarized with the American educational system (Zhou, 2009). Parents’ increased familiarity with their child’s formal educational system has been reported to be a potential benefit for their child’s academic success (Lareau, 2003; Laurea & Horvat, 1999).

**Advantages to my Policy Model**

The proposed policy model is relevant for a large minority group that is residing in the United States and that is expected to continue living in the United States for many years to come.
This model aims to serve as a visual explanation for why, according to academic research, Latino youth’s academic success and graduation rates, on average, are lower than students who are from other ethnic groups. According to the aforementioned literature, Latino parents’ lack of resources and Latino youth’s lack of feeling a sense of belongingness or community are two main factors that are estimated to be associated with Latino youth’s lower academic performance, lower graduation rates, and higher drop-out rates.

The proposed policy model can aid Latino youth residing in the United States in graduating from high school, potentially enrolling in college, and hopefully, being more equipped to secure a stable job later in life. This trend could ultimately aid the Latino immigrant population to become more self-sufficient over time. Aiding Latino immigrants with their academic outcomes and further enabling them to be more equipped to secure jobs could also help to build their self-confidence.

Aside from assisting Latino immigrant youth with their academic needs, the proposed policy model can also benefit their mental health. As reported by Xue, Leventhal, Brooks-Gunn, and Earls (2005), youth feeling a sense of unity in their neighborhoods/communities can be beneficial for their mental health.

Implementing the proposed model over time could help to improve the future generations of Latino children. By implementing the efforts that are recommended in the proposed policy model, future generations of Latino children could have higher test scores, higher graduation rates, higher socioeconomic status, etc. than prior generations.

Fortunately, the proposed policy model consists of aiding the immigrant Latino youth population in multiple ways. If it is not possible for a community or a school system to implement the model in its entirety, parts of the model could be implemented and still result in
benefitting Latino immigrant youth. Another benefit of the proposed policy model is that it could likely be applied to other ethnic populations in the United States, as well, such as the African-American student population.

**Limitations to my Policy Model**

Utilizing this policy model on a large scale could be quite difficult, considering the large number of people that it aims to serve. This model is aimed at serving an entire population of people residing in one of the largest countries in the world, making it no simple task to plan for. Additionally, it could be difficult to attempt to create a relevant budget for this type and level of policy model. A large amount of buy-in from policymakers and schools in states throughout the United States could be needed in order to begin implementing this model. Gaining this type of buy-in could be cumbersome, so appropriate planning would be needed.

In an effort to enhance parents’ access to school personnel, it would be recommended for school personnel throughout the country to learn basic Spanish in order to communicate more effectively with their Latino immigrant students’ parents. Funding for this type of effort would be needed at the state level across the United States in states where a higher level of Spanish language proficiency amongst teachers is most needed. It would likely be necessary to inform schools and communities on the reasons as to why Latino immigrant children need extra assistance and the best ways to assist them. Schools’ and communities’ willingness to put extra effort forth to support Latino immigrant students and their families in order for the proper changes to be made on a wide scale would not be guaranteed.

Regarding enhancing a sense of community in Latino neighborhoods, and particularly low-income Latino neighborhoods throughout the country, buy-in would be needed from the members of the community to aid in this effort. These community members would need to be
informed of how they could benefit from this type of effort in order to increase their likelihood of making the effort to be more inclusive of the Latino immigrant youth who are living in their neighborhoods.

**Summary and Conclusions about Crafting the Model**

Immersing one’s self in as much of the relevant literature on the relevant at-risk population and the problem/policy dilemma is essential in order to craft a proposed policy model that can be effective. Effective planning needs to be completed prior to crafting a proposed policy model. For example, one needs to consider what areas of the model are needed the most and the most effective relationship each piece of the model can have with one another. Some areas of a proposed policy model might have multiple connections throughout the model, whereas other parts of the proposed policy model only connect to one piece of the overall model. Another consideration that should be made prior to crafting a proposed policy model is whether each of the elements of the model fit well together. For instance, some parts of the model could have a detrimental effect on the other parts of the model, which is obviously not favorable.

Engaging in crafting a proposed policy model allowed me to consider the fact that proposing a single policy change or multiple policy changes for an entire population can be an incredibly difficult and expensive task to undergo and expect. Crafting this model and completing the research on the relevant population and its aforementioned needs was extremely educational for me. I feel that I now have a much better understanding of the struggles Latino immigrants often face in schools and their communities. I also feel that I now have a clearer idea of some of the major policy changes that are needed in order to improve educational outcomes for the current Latino immigrant population, as well as future Latino generations.
Implications for Social Work Research and Practice

Immigrating to the United States from a different country and/or continent can be a difficult transition to undergo for Latino families (Garcia-Reid, Petersen, & Reid, 2015). Many of the Latino immigrants who are living in the United States are Latino, immigrant youth. These youth are facing a myriad of struggles in terms of their academic achievement and projected life outcomes. Currently, the Latino youth in the United States are at a disadvantage, considering their lower high school and secondary education graduation rates, as compared to youth of other ethnic backgrounds (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). More efforts should be made toward helping this population not only for their benefit, but for the benefit of future generations, as well.

Though information regarding the struggles Latino immigrant youth face in terms of their academics is available, more literature is needed on policy efforts that have been made to advocate for this group. A benefit of implementing the proposed policy level is its potential research implications. A longitudinal study could be implemented via this policy model, as researchers could assess the effects of the proposed model on immigrant Latino youth’s academic performance, drop-out rates, high school graduation rates, and feelings of belonging in the community. Through the single proposed policy model, several qualitative and quantitative research studies could be made possible.

Personnel who work for social service agencies that aim to help Latino immigrant youth and/or their families would likely agree with the aforementioned conceptual model explaining the issue, as well as the proposed solution model. These models and the information based on the relevant literature in this manuscript could be helpful, educational tools for personnel who work for agencies that are intended to help the aforementioned population.
References


