Educating Latinos in the United States: The Need for Exposure, Resources, and Cultural Understanding

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Abstract:

Education is essential for better health, a secure, stable income, and personal improvement. Many Latinos are marginalized by the structure of the American education system and do not have access or exposure to the same opportunities as wealthier Anglo-Americans do. Comparing national statistics, Latino research studies, and an in-depth interview with one Latina faculty member, several pertinent issues such as funding, adequate resources, and tolerance of Latino identity emerged as crucial elements of a quality education. The informant’s unique position as a participant, educator, and active parent within the education system provided a positive, objective analysis. This paper explores how many Latino disparities could be alleviated through exposure to quality higher education and the associated benefits.
Introduction

The American education system often diminishes minority potential because it lacks adequate funding, positive cultural exposure, and a deeper understanding of the community’s needs. The educational difficulties that minorities encounter often discourage higher education, trivialize intellectual pursuits, and perpetuate the circular problem of poverty and education. Furthermore, Latino communities are often unaware of their rights to demand quality from their school systems. In order for Latinos to thrive in the United States, they require exposure, access to resources, and respect for their cultural identity within society and the educational system. The Latina professor I interviewed has experienced and overcome the oppression of the educational system, and through her exposure, knowledge, and cultural understanding, she has been able to make a difference in the lives of her children and students.

Background

This Latina faculty member was born in Lockney, Texas, the second oldest of six children. She grew up in Plainview, Texas, in the panhandle and was raised in a modest household. Her parents are of Mexican heritage and are the third generation born in El Viaje. Her parents were farm workers until her father became a self-employed mechanic when she was seven, and her mother became a restaurant entrepreneur when she was about twelve. She was educated in Plainview public schools when segregation was still prevalent. Because there was no category at that time for Hispanics, she was placed in the Anglo school where she experienced prejudice. She entered primary school speaking only Spanish, but was quickly able to learn and read in English. She was placed in the advanced classes where there were few minority students. She did well in school, although she did not participate in any extracurricular activities or clubs.
Although she and her siblings were expected to attend school, there was no real mention of college until her senior year of high school. Her father said she must attend at least two years of college. Without direction, knowledge of the college system, or guidance, she floundered at several colleges, taking a variety of courses and trying to find a desirable career. Although she did not have an understanding of the importance of foundation courses and the subsequent selection of a major, she did maintain her determination to attend college. Eventually, she found her calling in education and earned her bachelor’s degree from Texas Tech University. While working as a classroom teacher in Denton, she earned her master’s degree at Texas Women’s University with the intent of participating in workshops and sharing her knowledge as a teacher. She then earned her doctorate at Texas A&M University. For all of her degrees, she specialized in bilingual education, which she never experienced in her own schooling.

While earning these degrees, she started a family. Her desire to provide for her three children encouraged her pursuit of a higher education. Her professional decision to enter the college setting allowed her to have a more flexible schedule for her children. As a single mother, her children’s needs are extremely important and influenced her professional and academic life. In turn, her academic exposure has positively influenced her children’s exposure to education.

Education Issues for Latinos

The statistics on Latino education in the United States reflect the social and economic disparities experienced by this group. Factors like community support, adequate funding, and exposure to resources affect the success of Latino students. According to the 1999 U.S. Census Bureau, 43.9% of Hispanics do not complete high school, 56.1% finish high school, and only 10.9% earn a bachelor’s degree or more (Paez, 2002). The statistics reflect the experience of the
informant’s family in the education system. Fifty percent of her siblings did not complete a high school education. The two siblings that completed high school did not earn college degrees. Within her family, only 20% earned bachelor’s degrees or higher. She credits her introduction to college to her cousin, a member of the Chicano Club at West Texas State University. She stated, "They came and visited the high school and told us to go to college, and they brought in people that would guide us to apply and all that process we otherwise would not know how to do. So that was how I was able to know about the process to get to college." Without the Chicano Club members, our informant and her classmates would have lacked the exposure, guidance, and resources necessary for academic success.

In recent years, overall dropout rates “have declined; nonetheless, rates for Hispanics have remained higher than those for any other ethnic group” (NCES, 2005, p. 57). Poverty corresponds with lower education levels. Due to the fact that Hispanics make up the largest percentage of high school dropouts, they are also at a higher risk of poverty. Lower education levels perpetuate limited economic opportunities, poor health, lack of exposure to community resources, and future generations of low education levels.

Good health requires knowledge of illnesses and hygiene, access to insurance and healthcare, and a balanced diet and overall well-being. Higher education provides opportunities to access all of these factors that contribute to better health. Education is positively related to health; the better educated a person is, the healthier they report being, regardless of income (NCES, 2004). According to the Education and Health NECS report, lower education levels lowered the percentage of persons who felt they were healthy even among persons in the higher income range ($75,000+).
Adequate funding is another crucial determinant of education quality. Latino students are often placed in schools that lack proper funding to provide the teachers, counselors, and resources to become successful or even pursue college. The 1989 court case *Edgewood ISD v. Kirby* pointed out the inequities between poor and wealthy districts. The amount of money spent on a student’s education has a real and meaningful impact on the educational opportunity offered to that student. High wealth districts are able to provide more extensive curricula, more up-to-date technological equipment, better libraries and better personnel, teacher aides, counseling services, lower student-teacher ratios, better facilities, parental involvement programs, and dropout prevention programs (Chapa, 2002, p. 377).

While our informant was teaching in a disadvantaged Dallas school, she noticed that the facility was of lesser quality than other schools in the district and the school could not provide classroom computers or other items. Students at schools with higher achievement scores tended to have wealthier, well-educated parents, and access to the best teachers, resources, and opportunities all the way through their education (Chapa, 2002, p. 381).

Bilingual education has simultaneously segregated and benefited Latinos. Bilingual education can provide exposure to different cultures and histories and promote diversity. However, in Anglo-dominated schools, diversity and accommodating different cultures can be viewed as invasive and threatening. Because speaking English is viewed as a national identity, incorporating bilingual programs into public education is a threat to American nationalism (Nuñez-Janes, 2001). Some bilingual programs shift to emphasizing English and perpetuate inequalities and often overlook the importance of other languages (Orfield, 2002). Our informant saw the need for bilingual educators and the importance of incorporating culture and history into
the program during her experience as a teacher. She remembered a little boy who did not speak English making a discovery and blurting out his findings in Spanish. She “was so impressed with how he said it....” He just said so much in Spanish that she would have missed it if she were not a bilingual teacher. If she had been an English-only teacher, she would not have seen or recognized his abilities. She also commented that bilingual education was initially intended to avoid segregation, but currently bilingual children are separated from other students: “Latino students were becoming increasingly isolated in highly inferior schools” when schools should promote diversity, exposure, and community involvement (Orfield, 2002, p. 394).

Our informant took her experiences and knowledge and passed them on to her children to provide them with opportunities to which she was not exposed. Because of her involvement with academia and observing the importance of a college education within her family, she encouraged her children to attend college from an early age. Also, her knowledge as a teacher led her to select the best schools for her children and influenced where she decided to live. She remembered apartment hunting in Dallas and thinking:

…[H]ere is this apartment complex and the school is right across the street. There is this other apartment complex and it is cheaper, but look at where my kids have to walk to get to school. So I chose the higher priced apartment because my kids got to go to school right across the street. It was a nicer apartment, but it was a nicer school.

Other Latinos might not have the knowledge to think of housing in these terms, or they might not have the economic flexibility to make a more expensive decision. According to the NCES, students whose parents did not go to college are less likely to go to college than peers whose parents did go to college (NCES, 2001). Also, students whose parents did not attend any college are less likely to seek help applying for schools and are less prepared academically.
Latinos in the United States are less likely to stay committed to college if they do enroll (NCES, 2001).

Comparing her family’s education to that of her children, there are dramatic differences in their success rate. It is probable that her knowledge, exposure, and support contributed to all three of her children completing high school and two of them pursuing a college education. She presented her children with more opportunities in an attempt to give them more exposure to education. She encouraged their school involvement, participation in other activities, and gave them all piano and guitar lessons. These opportunities involve parental knowledge and financial stability, but the rewards are immeasurable. As more Latinos attain bachelor’s degrees and higher education, hopefully they will pass on the values, lessons, knowledge, exposure, and opportunities to future generations of Latinos to mend the inequities in the educational system.
References


