**Dropout Rates of Hispanic High School Students:**

**An Action-Based Research Study**

Chloé Smith & Jaclyn Flinspach

Kansas State University

EDCEP 816: Research Methods in Education

Dr. Craig McGill

July 29, 2021

**Introduction**

This study seeks to examine why drop-out rates for Hispanic students in public high schools are significantly higher than their White counterparts. Throughout this study, we will be using the term Hispanic. By Hispanic, we are referring to immigrants from Central or Latin American countries or individuals with Central or Latin American descent. Statistics continue to show the unfortunate reality that being a minority student in the public school system does put students at a disadvantage. The statistical rationale behind this study shows an increasingly dramatic gap between the percentage of White graduates versus Hispanic graduates. Research done by Burrus and Roberts (2012) states, “In 2009, the proportions of 16- to 24-year-old high school dropouts were 10.7% for African Americans, 15.9% for American Indians, and 17.9% for Hispanics” (p. 3). The statistics are consistent among researchers in this field, and data continues to point in the same direction. As shown in *Figure 11.2* from Ford and Triplett (2019), if race is the only variable, Hispanic students are 148% more likely to drop out than their White student peers.

As educators, it is important to be aware of these gaps in equity and remain aware of our role to close them and prevent them from expanding further. If, as educators, our goal is to enable student success for all students, it is crucial that we take all student experiences into consideration. Looking specifically at Hispanic students for this study, it is apparent that there are a variety of factors that play into the high percentage of drop-out rates among this population. Some of these factors include socioeconomic status, language barrier(s), parental support (or lack thereof), discrimination, and lack of representation. In gaining a deeper understanding of the reasoning behind high percentage(s) of Hispanic drop-out rates, educators will be better equipped to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of Hispanic students in the school system. When examining both Hispanic and White students in public schools, it is clear that there are vast differences between the two. If Hispanic students were presented with the opportunities and support that their White counterparts were given, they would have a higher chance of graduating and succeeding in secondary education.

This research fits into professional, educational documentation of the minority student experience. In this context of research, there have been numerous studies that show Hispanic students are well-below the average graduation rate for high schoolers. Other studies have explored different factors that cause this high rate in Hispanic high school dropouts, but we hope to use individual student stories and experiences to personalize this data.

**Literature Review**

In a study entitled *SEL and Equity: Current Issues and Considerations* by J. Petrokubi, L. Bates, and C. Malinis (2019), it is found that without a solid framework for and explicit attention drawn to equity and cultural diversity, the success of minoritized students within the school system will suffer. Although there are a wide variety of factors that influence the overall experience of a Hispanic student, gaps in equity certainly play a role. Furthermore, in a study done by B. Becker and S. Luthar (2012), a handful of other factors that play into this are teacher support, peer values, underlying mental health complications, as well as academic and school attachment. These gaps in equity are wide, but with the help of federal, state, and local funding as well as professional accountability, significant steps can made to close the gap (Becker & Luthar, 2012). Lastly, in a research study done by E. Camacho at South Dakota State University in 2016, it was found that racially minoritized students are more likely to ask questions relating to their own belonging within the school and within the community at large due to a lack of representation. This seems to be consistent with the themes found in other research in this field. From all these studies, it is clear that social emotional health and racism both play a role in the academic experience and success of a Hispanic high school student in the United States. Further data from a study done by Loftstrom (2007) confirms the struggle that Hispanic students have to graduate high school. This study states that 54% of Hispanic students graduate high school and this is affected by a variety of things including but not limited to family factors, lack of economic opportunity, neighborhood and peer affects, and immigration status (Loftstrom, 2007). A quote a recent study completed by The Education Trust states, “We asked participants what factors, outside of academic knowledge, matter for success. While most participants did respond with some of the more commonly associated social-emotional skills, such as making responsible decisions, they also responded with factors related to racial, ethnic, and cultural identity” (Duchesneau, 2020). The findings from this study went on to explain how cultural identity matters immensely for student success and plays a part in their education experience. Pride in their cultural identity comes largely from representation of their race/ethnicity in adults and educators in the school they attend. Other factors that make it more likely for Hispanic students to drop out include “racial and ethnic identity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic performance, self-concept, family organization, and language fluency” (Turnbaugh-Lockwood, 1996). These varying factors are consistent throughout most research on the academic success (or lack thereof) of minoritized high school students in the United States. The language barrier is one factor that is emphasized the research done by Fry. “Almost 40% of Latino high school dropouts do not speak English” (Fry, 2003). Not only is this an obvious hindrance of academic success, but it directly correlates with a student’s rationale behind not completing high school. In a study from Swaim, completed in 1997, the effect of substance use and abuse on dropout rates of students in a racial minority is emphasized. In this study, it is shown that the abuse of substances (specifically alcohol and marijuana) have a significant negative impact on the academic success of all students. The statistics of Hispanic student dropout rates are impacted by the higher-than-average accessibility that those students have to illegal substances. From all these studies, there are a handful of common denominators that increase Hispanic students’ chances of dropping out of high school. Understanding these common denominators will drive the content of this research project while remaining culturally competent and sensitive to our participants.

**Purpose & Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to discover ways to better the chances of Hispanic student graduation rates and equip our education systems to better educate racially minoritized students. Our hope is that this research can be used to supply teachers with anti-racist educational tools and skills on how to incorporate conversations about race into their curricula. The stakeholders involved in this research project include students, educators, administrators, parents, and community members. Each of these stakeholders play an important role in the identification of the problem at hand as well as the steps it will take to begin closing the academic gap(s). This research will take place at a variety of public high schools across varying regions of the United States. Two schools from each section of the United States including East coast, West coast, Midwest, and the South will be studied. Implementing design principles of cultural sensitivity and social justice will be prioritized in this study. Critical Race Theory will be taken into consideration for the entirety of this study to better understand how race affects success in academia as well. We will be implementing the transformative paradigm to emphasize human rights and social justice in this study. This paradigm will drive our research to be empowering and action-oriented by encouraging participation from all stakeholders and implementing a power-sensitive approach in our collaboration with participants. We will also implement a power-reflexive approach when examining the impact of drop-out rates of Hispanic high school students.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How can educators better collaborate with the Hispanic population to promote the completion of high school?
2. How can educators co-create a safe and equitable learning environment for ALL students?

**Methods**

In terms of data collection methods, we will begin phase one of our data collection with a special purpose online survey for every Hispanic student within the chosen schools regarding their educational experience and satisfaction. Using an online platform to conduct this survey, we will email the link to the survey to each individual student with the expectation that they complete the survey via the link in the email on their own time. Using an online survey is a way of catering to the demographic of our participants. One limitation to this method is that there may be students who do not have access to a “smart” device. In this case, a school computer will be provided for the completion of the survey.

Continuing onto phase two, we will conduct focus groups consisting of six to eight Hispanic students within each of these schools, highlighting their personal experience. These focus groups will capitalize Hispanic student’s perspective on dropping out of school as well as their motivation to graduate high school.

Moving onto the third and final phase of data collection, one on one interviews will be conducted with four Hispanic students from each school. These interviews will hone in on self-efficacy of graduating high school, educational factors impacting their likelihood to graduate, and external factors impacting their overall success as a student. This research is valuable to the education system because it will help researchers gain a better understanding of how demographics play a part in academic success. The data collected from this study can be used as a tool to improve the educational experiences of Hispanic students.

Surveys serve a variety of purposes in the realm of research. The special purpose surveys we will use “allow researchers to collect a breadth of data from large samples and generalize to the larger population from which the sample was drawn” (Leavy, 2017). The evaluation criteria for our surveys involves using questionnaires and at least two open ended questions to gain an idea of the academic services that are (and are not) available to Hispanic students. Our surveys will consist of 20 survey items and will help appropriately form like-minded focus groups. To emphasize the principle of recursiveness, these focus groups will reflect the survey items that participants have previously been exposed to. These open-ended focus groups will create space for students to use their own voice, language, and experiences to articulate the issues that are important to them. “The major advantage of this approach is that you could collect rich data with descriptions and examples, and the participants’ language and concerns would be at the forefront” (Leavy, 2017). The information obtained through these focus groups will guide the direction and content of the one-on-one interviews that will be conducted in phase three. The interviews that will be conducted will be semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Using predetermined questions as well as spontaneous follow-up questions, the hope of these interviews is to gain a deeper and more personalized understanding of the academic experience of a Hispanic student at a public high school. These interviews will also help educators comprehend how the education system can best equip them for success by implementing the participants’ language and emphasizing in vivo coding.

**Reflection**

Putting together this research proposal created a professional and academic partnership that was strengthened by our individual passions to promote equitable education for all students. We found the data to be interesting while also being unfortunately surprised by the staggering statistics. In terms of logistics, we found it helpful to meet, via Zoom, one to two times per week to work on these assignments. Because neither of us have previously participated in professional research, we found it challenging to navigate the research process and the jargon associated with it. Support and encouragement of one another along the way was helpful. In reflecting on the experience of designing this proposal, we found it heartbreaking to learn specific details and statistics about the academic experience of Hispanic students. Although we were saddened by this, we also accessed a bit of hope as we conducted the proposal. In the research done in preparation for this project, we found the idea of mentorship that is beginning to be implemented in several schools across the nation to be a bit of hope amid the sad reality at hand.

Relevant literature taught us that there are significant gaps in equity between Hispanic students and their White counterparts. The experiences of these students reflect a systemic problem that stems from gaps in socioeconomic status, language barrier(s), lack of parental support, discrimination, and lack of representation. Considering these categories, it is crucial to take into consideration the wide variety of factors that impact the experience of a Hispanic student.

**References**

Becker, B. E., & Luthar, S. S. (2010). Social-emotional factors affecting achievement outcomes among disadvantaged students: closing the achievement gap. *Educational Psychologist*, *37*(4), 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3704\_1

Burrus, J., & Roberts, R. D. (2012, February). *Dropping out of high school: prevalence, risk factors, and remediation strategies*. Virginia Association of Secondary School Principals. http://www.vassp.org/VASSP/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Drop-out-factors.pdf.

Camacho, Emily (2016) "Minority student perceptions of mental health," The Journal of

Undergraduate Research: Vol. 14 , Article 6. Available at: http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/jur/vol14/iss1/6

Duchesneau, N. (2020). In *Social, emotional, and academic development through an equity lens*. story, The Education Trust.

Ford, J. E., & Triplett, N. (2019, December 19). *E(race)ing inequities: how does race influence dropping out of school?* EducationNC. https://www.ednc.org/eraceing-inequities-how-does-race-influence-dropping-out-of-school/.

Fry, R. (2003). *Hispanic youth dropping out of U.S. schools: measuring the challenge*. Pew Hispanic Center. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED477379.pdf.

Loftstrom, M. (2007, December). *Why are Hispanic and African-American dropout rates so high?* EconStor. https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/35060/1/561343624.pdf.

Petrokubi, J., Bates, L., & Malinis, C. (2019). SEL and equity: current issues and considerations. *Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction*. https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/studentsupport/sel/pubdocs/Appendix%20M%20SEL%20Equity%20Paper.pdf.

Swaim, R. C., Beauvais, F., Chavez, E. L., & Oetting, E. R. (1997). The effect of school dropout rates on estimates of adolescent substance use among three racial/ethnic groups. *American Journal of Public Health*, *87*(1). https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdfplus/10.2105/AJPH.87.1.51.

Turnbaugh-Lockwood, A. (1996). Caring, community, and personalization: strategies to combat the hispanic dropout problem. *Advances in Hispanic Education*, *1*, 1–11. https://doi.org/https://ncela.ed.gov/files/rcd/BE020770/Advances\_in\_Hispanic\_Educat\_\_.pdf