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**CLOSING GAPS FOR LATINO IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE
U.S. EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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Abstract

Utilizing a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) model, a faculty member of a local university school of social work completed a qualitative study of interviewing 25 (U.S. born or those arriving in the U.S. at an early age) Latinos/Latinas college students and college graduates to discover their educational experiences from middle school to college in the Northeastern states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey in the U.S. The interviews incorporated two components: 1) Demographic information and 2) Cultural Congruity Scale (CCS). The study found that in the difficult socio-cultural integration process in school settings, they did not feel comfortable sharing Latino culture with non-Latino classmates, experienced discriminatory college preparation during high school years, and that their parents did have high aspirations to send their children to college/university. These study findings will lead to: 1) develop insight into cross-cultural development for students and teachers in middle and high school and college/university classroom settings, 2) identify Latino students' emotional comfort needs in a predominantly non-Latino middle school to college/university classroom settings, and 3) engage in collegial discussions among middle & high school and higher education personnel to plan how to close quality and educational opportunity gaps for Latino high school students' college preparation as well as how to sustain Latino students in college/university settings.

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Keywords: Latino students, Latino culture, U.S. education system, Discriminatory Pre-college preparation.



1. Introduction

Latinos represent over 20 Spanish speaking countries in the world and Latinos are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States of America. While rates of educational attainment have improved among Latino students in recent decades, Latinos still have the lowest level of educational attainment of any minority group in the United States. As of 2016, the rates of educational attainment for Latinos and other minorities are as follows: 66.7% attained high school graduation; 36.8% some college; 22.7% an Associate degree; 15.5% a Bachelors; and 4.7% an advanced degree. For Asians, 89.1% attained high school graduation; 70% some college; 60.4% an Associate degree; 58.9% a Bachelors; and 21.4% an advanced degree. For Blacks, 87% attained high school graduation; 52.9% some college; 32.4% an Associate degree; 22.5% a Bachelors; and 8.2% an advanced degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016, p.3). This study examined and offered multiple findings of the chronic issues of Latino youth's lower academic performance in high school and college/university through study participants of the U.S. 1st generation Latino/Latina-American college students and college graduates.

2. Problem Statement

The fastest-growing immigrant group is Latino families in rural and/or small-town in America. According to Harklau (2016) and Pong, Hao & Gardner's (2005) study report that Latino children are at a disadvantage in academic achievement due to having foreign born parents who have a language barrier with English, are unfamiliar with the expectations or requirements of the U.S. education system, are least likely to have college-educated parents and have unequal access to resources from the education system. Moreno & Gaytán's (2013) study found that 27% of Latino children live in impoverished homes in comparison to 11% of their non-Latino white peers. Latinos are more likely to attend schools which have lower resource allocation, less experienced teachers, and neglected facilities which impact their college preparation (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010; Oakes, 2002). Also, in an inefficient bureaucratic public-school system, especially toward Latino students, high schools with a majority of Latino students offer fewer advanced placement classes with fewer Latinos enrolled in those classes than schools with a majority of White students. Latinos were directed towards vocational and/or two-year associate programs and community colleges rather than 4-year degree programs (Rodriguez, Rhodes, & Aguirre (2015). A longitudinal study conducted by Reese & Goldenberg (2008) reported that communities that have higher percentages of Latino residents had less literacy resources and less use of materials in English, and consequentially, communities with more high school graduates had more literacy materials. These studies noted that scarce school resources result in limited educational professionals with expertise, limited access to college preparation tools, such as honors and advance placement courses and working technology to facilitate college application process (Carolan-Silava & Reyes, 2013; Ali & Menke, 2014; Nunez & Crisp, 2012). In addition, across all Latino nationalities among Latino countries, the value of "familismo" is embedded from the eldest to the youngest, which included a keen sense of obligation, loyalty and economic responsibility to the household (Telzer, Tsai, Gonzales, & Fuligni, 2015; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Valadez's (2008) study found that family loyalty and obligation have influenced Latino students to drop out of high school in order to work and financially contribute to the household. Others also criticized Latino parents, who do not value education, thus children will drop out of high school and begin to earn money

for household needs. However, study after study has proven this not to be the case. In fact, Olivos and Mendoza's (2010) study found that school teachers and administration have a deficiency view of the Latino culture and home life.

3. Research Questions

Utilizing the Cultural Congruity Scale instrument, the participants were asked the following questions: 1) Did you feel you had to change yourself to fit in at high school and college? 2) Did you feel like a chameleon, having to change yourself depending on the ethnicity of the person you were with during high school and college? 3) Did you feel that you could talk to your friends at school about your family and culture? 4) Were you encouraged to go to college by your parents? 5) Did you feel that your ethnic values were in conflict with what was expected in high school and college? 6) Would you say that you were looked on as an ethnic minority in high school and college?

4. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to: 1) find out Latino/Latina-American college students and college graduates' educational experiences, from middle school to college/university, in the area of Northeastern Pennsylvania & New Jersey in the United States, and 2) provide collaborative university-community's inter-professional services based on the outcomes of the study.

5. Research Methods

Utilizing the Community-Based Participatory Research model, the authors interviewed twenty-five, either U.S. born or those who had entered the U.S. before school age, Latino/Latina-American college students and college graduates and collected their educational experiences from middle school to college in the Northeast Pennsylvania and New Jersey areas in the U.S. *The Samples:* The study samples were chosen using a purposive sampling method. The bilingual (English-Spanish) community leader recruited initial samples from the local church members and participating samples introduced his or her friends to participate in the interview. All the samples self-identified as Latinos or Latinas who had experiential knowledge related to the intended study. The individual interview incorporated two components: 1). Demographic information and 2) the Cultural Congruity Scale which included an additional question on suggested recruitment and retention strategies for colleges/universities in small towns/small cities. (Table 01 and Table 02).

Table 01. Demographics of Latinos/Latinas college students and college graduates: N=25 (Male: 5, Female: 20) U.S. Born:17, Came to the US early age: 8

Primary Language	Spanish only	-	-
	English only	-	-
	English & Spanish	25	100%
Self-ethnic Identity	American	-	-
	Latino/Latina	5	20 %
	No answer	1	4 %
	Latino American	19	76 %
Education Level	In college/university	11	44 %
	College degree	8	32 %
	In graduate school	1	4 %
	Graduate degree	5	20 %

Table 02. Demographics of Latinos/Latinas educational level

In College: Major(s)	College Degree	In Graduate School: Major	Graduate Degree
2= Education,	1= Education	1= Master of Social Work	3=Education
1=Astronomy & Math	1= Computer Science & English Professional Writing		1=Criminal Justice
1= Human Development,	1= Human Resources		1=MSW
1=Medical Billing & Coding	1=Nursing		
1=Pre-Vet	1=Film & Media		
1=Criminology	1=Criminal Justice & Sociology		
1=Psychology	2=Psychology		
1=Political Science			
1=Landscape Architecture			
1=environmental Studies			

The Focus Group Session Interviews: A Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)-certified bilingual (English and Spanish) moderator facilitated individual interviews, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes each. All the participants listened to the Spanish language consent form information which explained the nature of the study, indicated the voluntary nature of their participation, and cautioned participants not to use identifying personal information during the interviews.

6. Findings

The participants shared their experiences of: 1) the difficult socio-cultural integration process in the school settings, 2) uncomfortable sharing Latino culture with non-Latino classmates, 3) discriminatory college preparation during high school, and 4) parents' desire to send their children to college/university.

Theme 1: Difficulty in the socio-cultural integration process in school settings

The participants shared that they felt like outsiders or didn't feel they belonged to their classroom settings. While in school, they always sought and gravitated towards Latino peers during high school and college years. At times, they received an awkward look from their peers when they spoke Spanish.

"I definitely did not fit in and I always looked for Spanish people or other minority people to kind of hang out with or try to fit in with."

Theme 2: Uncomfortable sharing Latino culture with non-Latino classmates

The participants stated that they were cautious not to draw attention to themselves or bring Caucasian peers home because they were afraid of being teased or judged regarding different culture and norms.

"I downplayed my culture. We eat different foods and my home may not meet the American standard of living, so I chose not to bring any Caucasian peers home."

Theme 3: Discriminatory preparation for college

Participants stated that having good and caring guidance counsellors is key for Latino high school students' successful college prep and entrance. Some guidance counsellors discouraged Latino students to go to college, unless the Latino students are taking honors and Advance Placement (AP) classes. College enrolment information is disproportionately distributed to Latino students.

“I was always in the honors classes and AP classes. If I were in regular classes, I wouldn’t have had that extra push to go to college.”

Theme 4: Parents desire to send their children to college/university

Participants shared that unlike the common belief, Latino parents do aspire for their children’s pursuit of higher education. They believe that a college education will prepare their children to have better opportunities and better paying jobs in the future.

“It was both my parents that told me that “this is the only road to go.” “They put so much emphasis on education and said, “We don’t want you working in a factory like we do or working on a farm, or anything like construction.”

7. Conclusion

This study reaffirms the literature in regard to the identification of the issues for small town or city school systems that there is a lack in preparing for college and that Latino students experienced discriminatory preparation for college. This study also found that unlike the common belief, Latino parents do have an aspiration to send their children for college/university. The unexpected discovery is that U.S. born or those who have come to the U.S. at an early age Latino/Latinas have difficulty in cultural integration in educational settings and are reluctant to share their culture with Caucasian peers.

Limitation of the study: The information gleaned from the qualitative data provides an in-depth view of Latino students’ educational experiences in small city/small town in the states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania in the United States. However, every city or town has their own unique composition of system, program and resources for minority students. Thus, the small sample size itself does not claim to be representative of the larger population.

As a result, the university initiated a full scholarship to enrol 55 Hispanic students in two different levels of writing classes and the Social Work teacher collaborated with a faith based institution to provide weekly free 1 on 1 tutoring for Latino children and youth in individual tutoring program for reading, writing, math, and social studies. In addition, a social work teacher and a graduate social work student run the Latino groups as well as information sessions for Latino parents. These activities demonstrate long-term commitment is necessary for community-university collaboration to sustain the viability of the Latino students’ and parents’ outreach.

Recommendations: To achieve the goals of closing the quality and educational opportunity gaps for Latino high school students, it is imperative to: 1) develop insights into cross-cultural development for students and teachers in middle school and college/university classroom settings, 2) identify Latino students’ emotional comfort needs in predominantly non-Latino middle school to college/university classroom settings, and 3) engage in collegial discussions among high school and higher education personnel to develop strategies for first generation Latino students’ equal preparation for college/university enrolment. For example, local colleges/universities would design Latino youth leadership institutes, such as Latino Youth Outreach Programs to support their educational resources; Latino Summer Enrichment Programs to invite Latino high school students to university/college campus to experience university life and Latino Mentorship programs to pair Latino youth with university/college students to help them prepare their university/college application and entrance exams. In addition, teachers’ accessibility and diversity

among teachers and students would create a welcoming experience for Latino and minority students. Thus, Latino based sororities would provide Latino college students with a voice and leadership skills, and Latino and non-Latino professors could serve as role models for Latino students as well as all other students.

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