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Being Good at Being Bad: The Puerto Rican Student Overachieving at Underachieving

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Puerto Rican students are as a group "at risk": Contributing factors, suggested remedies.

BEING GOOD AT BEING BAD
The Puerto Rican Student
Overachieving at Underachieving

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The fact that Hispanics, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, among others, constitute the fastest-growing ethnic group in the nation has been well documented. Their numbers increased 61% between 1970 and 1980, compared to 9% for non-Hispanic ethnic groups (Valverde 1987). Along with this rapid increase in the Hispanic population has come an increase in the Hispanic unemployment, poverty, and drop-out rates. The hardest hit of any Hispanic population group has been the Puerto Ricans. They are more frequently unemployed (13.4% during the second quarter of 1986); more likely to be poor and dependent on government assistance (41.9% of Puerto Ricans were considered poor in 1985;

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74.4% of Puerto Rican female-headed households were poor); and have consistently been the least well educated (the national drop-out rate for Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans is 40%, but in some cities 80% of Puerto Rican youths drop out [Barreto et al. 1986]).

Many factors, independent of sex, race, and family background, have been associated with students, dropping out of school. Primary factors are (a) school related (poor performance, dislike school, expelled or suspended, school too dangerous); (b) economics (desire to work, financial difficulties, home responsibilities); and (c) personal (pregnancy, marriage; Rumberger 1987).

Other factors such as low self-esteem, low educational attainment level, and peer influence play heavily in the Puerto Rican drop-out rate. The purpose of this article is to review the current literature to determine what issues influence these factors.

It has been noted that dropouts have lower levels of self-esteem and less sense of control over their lives than do nondropouts (Rumberger 1987). Therefore, students who are identified as potential dropouts can be classified as at-risk students. As students, they are generally low achievers. They also display low self-esteem, show inadequate task performance, have limited aspirations, do not engage in classroom and school activities, and often exhibit disruptive or delinquent behavior. A great proportion of them are from families at the poverty level, and many are from minority backgrounds (black and Hispanic). Many are victims of family trauma or physical, emotional, alcohol, or drug abuse. Many have poor attendance records or drop out of school, become inadequately prepared teenage parents, or threaten or attempt suicide. In short, they are failing to acquire the knowledge, competencies, and credentials to fit them for success as adults (Pennsylvania Department of Education 1989). This profile of the at-risk student is evident among the Puerto Rican students.

FINDINGS

Gutierrez and Montalvo (1982) found no correlation between dropping out and delinquency for Puerto Rican girls. Only 7% of

female dropouts displayed delinquent activity. However, dropping out was strongly associated with pregnancy (37%). The female Puerto Rican dropout was characterized as likely to have repeated a grade, easily overlooked as a problematic student, bored, unchallenged, and unmotivated by school. Yet she tended to go unnoticed until she became actively truant or pregnant. At home she was more likely to run away, sleep out without permission, and to have tried alcohol and marijuana.

For the male Puerto Rican dropout, there was a significant relationship between dropping out and delinquency. Significantly more dropouts than nondropouts were involved in some type of trouble with law-enforcement agencies (27% versus 12% during year 1 and 30% versus 15% during year 2) during the first two years of a three-year study (Gutierrez and Montalvo 1982). While in school, they tended to boast about their attendance/truancy records, discipline files, low test scores, and drug use (marijuana and alcohol). They also planned to continue their drug use, as if expressing a commitment to a negative path (Gutierrez and Montalvo 1982).

Velez (1989) reported that the accelerated taking on of roles, on behalf of the female, and confrontational tendencies, on the part of the male, are factors in the decision to quit school. Having to care for an infant or a young child, whether her own or a brother or sister, can be a burden too difficult to overcome for the female.

Displaying confrontational behavior, behaviors that oppose or violate specific rules established by the school, is a more common problem among the male student. It would appear that with the exceptions of females who are required to care for their siblings, these young men and women place themselves in negative situations that lead them to dropping out.

Arguments that cultural and behavioral patterns learned at home and in the community are viewed as sometimes conflicting with those promoted at school are justified. If a child is surrounded by failure at home — broken home, abusive parents, chemically dependent parent(s), low-income housing projects, ghettos, high crime rates, and drug-related activities — he or she may come to expect failure. This pattern is likely to cause conflicts for the student who

is expected to be successful in school (Eisenhart 1989). Individuals who do overcome the limits placed on them by their home situation (e.g., low socioeconomic status and a poor home environment) by graduating from high school, furthering their education, and becoming productive members of society are exceptions to the rule. As stated by Velez (1989), sociopsychological factors have an influence on whether or not an individual becomes an exception to the rule or conforms to the negative expectation with which he or she is often surrounded.

It appears that an individual's self-expectation can lead him or her to overcome the odds. It was reported that students who expected to attend college were more likely to complete high school than those who did not plan to attend. Leonetti and Muller (1976) concluded that a direct link does exist between the learner's self-concept and academic achievement. Furthermore, parental expectations were also influential in determining whether a child dropped out; students whose mothers expected them to go to college were more likely to finish high school. But again Puerto Rican students were at a disadvantage, as their parents were less likely to communicate with school personnel and monitor their children's progress and needs in school (Velez 1989).

One could speculate that the reason for this lack of communication is a language barrier (English-Spanish). Although this may be true, research indicates that children born of families who emigrate to America from Mexico have a lower drop-out rate than those Mexican-American children born in America (Valverde 1987). This finding lends support to the study of Gutierrez and Montalvo (1982), which found that parents of Puerto Rican delinquent dropouts exhibited less closeness to Puerto Rican culture than parents of nondelinquents who graduated from high school. Thus, while so much attention is focused on the language barrier, it is the limited English proficient (LEP) students who graduate at a higher rate than the non-LEPs (Valverde 1987). One reason for this may be that non-LEPs, most often born in America, have experienced the job ceiling and have set low occupational expectations for themselves. They know and believe that their chances for employment, job advancement, competitive salaries, and other benefits of education

are not good. They also state that discrimination against them is the primary factor for the lack of equal opportunity. In view of these negative perceptions, a strong argument can be made that the attitude of the Puerto Rican student toward education and his or her efforts in school are more of a problem than the language barrier (Valverde 1987).

This notion can be further substantiated by looking at the differing reports given by the peer groups of graduates as opposed to dropouts. The graduates' peer group stated that school assumed a central place in their life, while the dropouts were surrounded by a peer group not wedded to success in school (Valverde 1987). Whereas 40% of all Hispanic students drop out of school before reaching their sophomore year, there is a sense of optimism (Valdivieso 1986). Stern et al. (1986) reported that in schools with fewer dropouts, the male Hispanic sophomores were more likely not to dropout. But in schools with a high drop-out rate, it is the dropouts who are more likely to be male and Hispanic.

RECOMMENDATION

If a student's negative attitude toward school affects his or her performance, as seems to be the case for a large portion of Puerto Rican students, then an effective approach must be developed and implemented to help curtail this cycle of failure. But where do we look for the resources that are needed to assist these students in overcoming this trend? Levin (1986) wrote that it is important for children to be surrounded by persons who have succeeded both educationally and economically so that the connection between education and future success can be made. But unfortunately there is a severe shortage of Puerto Rican teachers and other professional people to serve as role models for today's youth.

One alternative that has proven to be effective with many different population groups is the use of peer counselors. Since adolescents are more likely to accept attitudes and values shared by peers, it would seem logical to elicit the services of those students who "have their act together" in an effort to reach the troubled students who are more apt to drop out (Blain and Brusko 1985).

Rhodes, Duncan, and Hall (1987) found that peer counselors could positively influence the lives of the peers they interacted with, even those who proudly admitted having engaged in delinquent activities. Furthermore, Anderson and Palmer (1988) concluded that students who were exposed to this helping approach developed higher self-esteem and increased their liking for school.

CONCLUSION

Now that employers are demanding even higher academic credentials, the 1980 census reported that only 39% of Puerto Rican females and 41% of Puerto Rican males living in the United States had graduated from high school. Of those who do complete high school, less than one-half enter college, and only 28% go on to graduate (Perez 1985). These numbers strongly indicate that the Puerto Rican student is underachieving in our school system. Countless speculations have been made in an attempt to explain this shortcoming, and the blame has been passed on. It just may be time for this student to become more responsible for himself or herself. An effective peer counseling program, to assist the troubled adolescent in overcoming his or her negative attitude toward education and life in general, may prove to be part of the answer (Blain and Brusko 1985).

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