

## **Male Hispanic High School Dropout Dilemma: Self-Reported Perceptions**

**Donna L. Ortiz**

Hispanic students are dropping out of high school at an alarming rate. The consequences of young Hispanics leaving school before graduation affect both the individual's potential as well as the nation's economic and social well being (Velez & Fernandez, 1994). In 1990, Nicolau and Ramos addressed this high attrition rate by stating, "If special steps are not taken to help Hispanic parents prepare their children for school...the gap between their skills and those of their peers will continue to widen as they go from grade to grade" (p. 9). Leaving school prematurely becomes more of a disadvantage as time goes on because dropouts have fewer opportunities to remain competitive in the job market (Perez & Salazar, 1993). Measures need to be taken to assist these young people

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Donna L. Ortiz, EdD, is an assistant professor of elementary education in the Teacher Education Department of Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas.

to stay in school and to become better educated in order to be successful citizens of the future. However, before measures can be taken to ensure students remain in school, reasons for dropping out need to be identified and remedied (Ramos & Nieto, 1991).

Perez and Salazar (1993) examined recent research and Census data and found socioeconomic status (SES) and aspects of family background as factors most consistently linked to Hispanics dropping out of school. Their research supported earlier studies by Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock (1986), Rumberger (1987), and Watt, Guajardo, and Markman (1987). Students who repeated a grade were behind their age peers and tended to feel ashamed for being older than their classmates which correlated with dropping out of school (Fernandez & Velez, 1990). The National Council of la Raza (1990) indicated grade retention among Hispanic students was a major reason why they dropped out, and they were more likely to be retained for two or more grades than any other racial group. Other researchers reported a loss of interest in school, boredom, personal reasons, and the need to work as factors contributing to dropping out (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986; Orum, 1986, 1988). Poor grades were linked to issues such as poor living conditions, family difficulties, or negative school experiences.

School-related problems such as discipline problems, suspension from school, cutting classes, absenteeism, and poor academic performance were all related to decisions for leaving school. Mainstream dropout research tended to blame the dropouts for these school-related problems projecting the dropout image as deviant, deficient, or negligent with regard to education and schooling. Ramos and Nieto (1991) claimed that these factors may have been a result of poor schooling and a lack of academic success rather than reasons for dropping out.

Ramos and Nieto (1991) reported that traditional dropout research has focused on individual student and family characteristics and has largely neglected social and political problematic areas such as school policies and practices, the value placed on race, ethnicity, language, and students' feelings of not belonging. Testing was found to be a barrier to positive educational experiences for Hispanics (Valencia & Aburto, 1991). Almost 50 percent of the Hispanics who took the "High School and Beyond" achievement tests in both 1980 and 1982 scored in the lowest quartile of those tested (Bureau of the Census, 1985). School athletic participation strengthened rather than interfered with the academic achievement according to Steinberg, Blinde, & Chan (1984) and Melnick, Sabo, & Vanfossen (1992).

Kramer (1990) measured at-risk Hispanic learners' self-perceptions and

beliefs about school and concluded that students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers affected their educational experiences. Academic performance was poor, and students were unsure how they were supposed to go about the learning process. Students' interaction with teachers was negative, feedback concerning lessons was infrequent, and students could not name a teacher or counselor they felt free to ask for assistance with school work or personal problems. Valdivieso (1986) claimed school reforms have not worked for Hispanics because many students are not being prepared to be active adult citizens in our democracy; however, Pulido (1991) indicated a multicultural environment, Hispanic staffing, preventive dropout programs, strong instructional leadership, accepted discipline practices, and caring staff members as well as the promotion of effective school practices enhanced retention rates for Hispanics.

My study concentrated on the perceptions of Hispanic males ages 18-23 who had dropped out of high school. Although potential dropouts have been studied, little information seemed to be available concerning the perceptions of those who have actually dropped out of school. The goal of the study was to examine a combination of self-reported individual and family characteristics and self-reported perceptions concerning school conditions responsible for the decision to drop out. The purpose of studying the self-reports by dropouts was to design and implement retention enhancement programs.

This qualitative research study sought to analyze and interpret personal testimonies regarding male Hispanic school dropout experiences. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to generate theory through discovery. Interpretive-ethnographic methods provided the basis for analyzing and interpreting social interaction. Geertz (1973) and Denzin (1988) defined interpretivists as going beyond mere reporting to describing and probing the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations, and circumstances of the action. They further stated that an interpretivist emphasized experience is not only cognitive but also includes emotions.

## **Method**

Participants for this study were 7 male Hispanics ages 18-23 from Southwest Kansas who have dropped out of high school. These Hispanic males were from two Southwest Kansas counties and attended two of the area's largest high schools which both had approximately 25% Hispanic populations. Approximately 12% of the students in the two schools dropped out during the 1993-94

school term. At least 45% of these were Hispanic.

The population of the two counties is approximately 50,000, and one third is under age 18. The Hispanic population in the two counties is approximately 20% according to a project of Kansas Action for Children, Inc (1993).

I contacted friends, relatives, and acquaintances in Southwest Kansas to locate Hispanic males who had dropped out of school. I located eleven potential participants, and seven met the interview criteria of being a male Hispanic dropout in Southwest Kansas and under the age of 25.

I interviewed the participants with the first interview lasting one and one-half hours with the participant doing most of the talking. At the beginning of the interview, I explained the purpose of the study. The interview was informal with the participant explaining his background and school experiences. Questions were used as a guide only if the participant had difficulty thinking about what to say. I debriefed the participants during the last fifteen minutes and assured them that their conversation would be handled confidentially. During the first interview, the participant chose a nickname to be used in the research to further assure confidentiality. The second interview lasted thirty minutes and focused on clarifications of specific items from the first interview. Two participants met a third time with me for fifteen minutes to provide information missed during the first two interviews. I recorded the first interviews, and I documented the later interviews through descriptive and analytic field notes.

## **Results**

Individual and family characteristics were similar for all participants in the study. They were all from lower middle class, blue collar working families. Most families were middle to large size with five to nine members. These findings are supported by Perez and Salazar (1993) as factors relating to dropping out of high school. One participant lived in a single-parent home which was a factor linked to dropping out according to research by Reyes & Valencia (1993). Orlando was typical of participants in the study. He stated, "Both my mom and step dad work and still there isn't enough money, so I help take care of my five brothers. I sometimes got in trouble because I didn't take that gooda care of 'em. I have my own thing to do, too. I guess it gave me an attitude...maybe it carried over to school, too."

Education of parents of participants did not support earlier studies as being a factor of dropping out. Mothers had a higher average of years of schooling than the fathers, but fathers had a wider range of years of education. Five mothers

attained a high school diploma; the other two dropped out of high school. Two fathers attained college degrees, two had high school diplomas, one dropped out of high school, and two had four years of schooling from Mexico. The first language of most parents was Spanish, and the second language was English.

Language factors were not reported as reasons for dropping out of school. All participants' first language was English. Jose and Orlando spoke Spanish as a second language; they were the two whose fathers had a fourth grade education. Even though language did not seem to be a problem at school, getting teachers to understand the participants' point of view was. Tomas reported, "I tried to explain what I meant to the teacher, but she would just ask me more questions. I just decided, 'don't say nothin, just keep my mouth shut, and maybe I won't get embarrassed no more.' It worked, but I think the teacher thought I was dumb. How can my mom understand me and the teacher not?" Even though language at school was not cited by the dropouts, cultural/language communication issues may be underlying factors relating to retention.

Retention has been noted by many researchers as attributing to dropping out. Findings by National Council la Raza (1990) and Fernandez & Velez (1990) were confirmed by all participants because they reported repeating one or more grades. Javier, Orlando, Roberto, and Tomas repeated grades in the primary years, Javier and Jose repeated grades in middle school, and Juan, Miguel, and Roberto tried the grade they dropped out of twice in high school. Grade point averages for all participants began slipping during the middle school years, and most had failing grades in high school when they dropped out. Six participants reported they did not perform well on standardized tests or teacher-made tests. Roberto and Tomas stated that they were better at "showing" people what they knew and would like for teachers to consider other ways of finding out what they knew other than testing. Jose said, "I flunked tests and never got a second chance. I felt dumb in most classes cause I knew more than the test said." Most participants were not involved in extracurricular activities, nor did they want to be because they didn't feel they were wanted. Jose and Juan said that extracurricular activities helped them to like school which supports findings of Melnick, Sabo, and Vanfossen (1992).

When discussing aspects they liked and disliked about schooling, participants had a variety of responses. Most reported either a class or activity they liked while others reported liking to be around friends. Orlando said he couldn't think of anything he liked about school. Aspects not liked about school were more numerous. The majority reported not liking homework or school work. Participants cited problems with individual teachers as a major cause of not liking school. This supports Kramer (1990), who concluded that students'

perceptions of their relationships with teachers affected their educational experiences. Juan's perception of teachers supported this research when he said, "In some classes, I didn't feel like I should be there. I didn't feel they (teachers) wanted me. Teachers want you to listen and to be able to do work. Sometimes I think they are there to put you down. They put me down a lot. I think they should be there to help you, not to put you down. They won't help you if they don't think you pay attention in class. If you sit in class and don't act like you know what's goin' on...the teacher will just look at you like you don't belong." Roberto also perceived his teachers as not liking him. He said, "Teachers don't like me cause somehow I made 'em mad all time. I didn't even know how. I guess it was because they thought I was a troublemaker or somethin'. Most of the time I felt like a troublemaker cause they acted like they thought I was." Participants named teachers and coaches as things they did not like about school 13 out of 19 times. They complained that teachers did not care and would not help students understand lessons. Tomas thought teachers discriminated against Hispanics. He said, "I feel teachers should be fair and treat you nice no matter what race you are. I can't think of a teacher who I think did that. Teachers did not treat me fair. An example is like when someone did something wrong in class, I'd be the first one she would blame." Even though teachers were cited most often as a reason participants didn't like school, six had positive comments to say about teachers. Jose, Juan, Orlando, and Roberto reported having a favorite teacher, and Miguel and Javier reported having some nice teachers. Tomas couldn't think of a single favorite or nice teacher. The most mentioned reason for liking a teacher was that the teacher cared enough to explain a problem in different ways until the students understood.

Participants told of traits and characteristics of favorite and least favorite teachers. Favorite teachers were caring, encouraging, likable, helpful, welcoming, and had a good sense of humor. Least favorite teachers were described as being mean, sarcastic, prejudiced, or hateful. They made 11 comments about how teachers "treated" them that caused them to feel badly. Discussions from dropouts supported Kramer (1990), who concluded that students' perceptions of their relationships with teachers affected their educational experiences.

Participants spoke of the instruction in the schools as being the job of the teacher. Jose explained, "I think it (instruction) is tied up with the way the teacher is. Most don't teach. I think they like to hear themselves talk...just havin' a conversation with themselves." Orlando summed up the way instruction was handled as, "Teachers talk, students listen, the teacher asks a few questions, then we had tests...mostly on Fridays." Juan thought that part of the problem of the instructional process was himself: "I think I was just hardheaded.

The teacher would explain work and then have us do it. I didn't learn much. I didn't always know what was goin' on. I didn't really want to learn, so it affected how they taught me." Javier indicated he had little motivation from his teacher. He said, "Teacher talks, you listen...I slept...take a test...I flunk. I didn't learn much cause I didn't want to. Nobody made me want to." Instruction could not be separated from the teacher for the participants. If the participant felt good being in a class, learning took place. If not, there was no motivation, and participants had a mind- set against learning.

Participants felt strongly that administrators did not want them in school any longer. Feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and being singled out as bad were reasons participants gave for acting out and becoming discipline problems which resulted in suspension from school, cutting classes, absenteeism, poor academic performance, and ultimately leaving school for good. This supports findings of Ramos and Nieto (1991). The effectiveness of the principals' leadership solicited negative as well as positive comments. Most participants didn't believe the principals were very effective. Jose stated that he thought the principal should "make sure that teachers teach, I mean 'really teach' because I didn't see much of that happening." A positive comment from Orlando was, "Maybe he can't help it that the teachers aren't all nice." Miguel stated that he liked the principal personally. He stated, "The principal is the leader, and I like him. He cracks down when students get rowdy. I'd rate him as average for his leadership." Roberto told how he thought administrators could have helped him stay in school by saying, "I think I coulda passed if I had been in In School Suspension all year. There was nothin to do in there but work. I coulda' passed before the year was up. The teacher there was nice, and we could use computers and I like that. I like workin' with my hands, not just listening to teachers talk and read and write."

Five of the participants reported the school administration suggested they quit school and work on their GEDs. Orlando thought the administration wanted him to leave. He said, "They simply didn't care. They were rid of a troublemaker, no encouragement, none. They could just look at me, and I knew. So, they suggested I drop out and get my GED." Juan had a similar story: "The second time I dropped out, they told me I wasn't goin' to pass anyway, so I should just drop out and get my GED. They just didn't want me there, guess I wasn't puttin' my best foot forward. So I just decided to drop out. I just told him, 'OK, I'll do it' and I did." All seven participants felt the principals had an important job, although most didn't think the principals did a good job of improving the quality of instruction or keeping students from dropping out.

The climate of the school was identified by participants as being a lonely place

to be. Most participants mentioned feelings of being alone, being frustrated, not belonging, and not feeling wanted. Juan described his feelings: "I wasn't wanted, so I got in fights. I knew I had to go, but I didn't like going and how I felt when I was there." Roberto said, "School caused my attitude to be bad. I felt like fighting a lot." Jose stated, "In school I was all alone, and after school I had my friends. Pressure was always on me for one thing or another like grades and assignments. School was NOT friendly." Tomas also told of his dislike for being in school. He said, "I felt like I didn't belong; I didn't want to be there. It was frustrating then, and now just talking about it." School climate was all but unbearable for these dropouts. They had no place to turn. No participants were referred for counseling. Pulido (1991) reports that preventive dropout programs focus in part on counseling.

The three most reported problems participants faced were not doing school work, fighting, and absenteeism. These factors were supported by research done by Ramos and Nieto (1991) as factors of dropping out. Poor grades and talking back to teachers were also problems for participants. Miguel reported being a class clown. Other reasons for problems included pressures from teachers, boredom, and not being able to read. Five participants reported self-related reasons such as having a short temper, being hardheaded, not paying attention, peers, and drugs. Juan gave his reason for dropping out: "I began missing classes and then whole days. They would call me to the office; I would write myself a note to be excused. One day they called me in and said I had too many absences, and I was getting into too much trouble, so I was suspended. They didn't want me in school anymore. At first, they told me I was suspended and when I came back from suspension. . .that is when they told me I had too many absences from suspension and that I was kicked out of school for good." Orlando told of a particular situation that haunted him, "I had a lot of homework and stuff and just couldn't handle it. I was on probation from doing dumb stuff. . .for a year. My friend just died and the pressure was just too much. I watched him get beat to death with a ball bat. He was my best friend. I couldn't think. . .my mind was a blank. The pressure was just too much." Most participants blamed themselves for their problems. Pressures were great for dropouts to endure, and school personnel may have contributed to the problem by not acting as if they cared, although participants tended to blame themselves for their problems.

Most of the participants had future plans which required more training or education. Javier, Miguel, and Orlando received their notification of passing their GEDs before their graduating class graduated. Roberto had passed two of the six tests required for the GED and expected to be finished within two months. Jose and Juan expressed a desire to obtain their GEDs and then take college

classes. Tomas stated that he didn't plan to pursue a GED at this time. He has a job working in his father's business and hopes to become partners in the future. Javier and Roberto had no idea what they wanted to do in the future. Roberto stated, "I have no idea what I might do in the future; I just get from day to day. I don't like to think about the future." Juan, Jose, and Roberto spoke of living day to day. Orlando said not thinking about his future was the only way he could survive the day without being depressed.

Tomas explained his frustration about the high school he attended by saying, "I think schools give up on kids too soon. They just let you go along...like floatin' in a boat with no oars, to get no place. I wish they would have let me have the oars, so I could have done some good. I wish they would have said, 'We can help you... and whatever it was...I would have tried...maybe.' It makes you feel awful when they say you might as well leave...you are not doin' any good here. I probably didn't try, but I didn't know what to do to try...then I had a bad attitude and talked back to teachers cause they didn't care about me." Asking students to leave school might alleviate problems for the school but may cause more problems in the future for society as dropouts become frustrated about employment and life in general.

Participants of this study reported experiencing many negative situations in and out of school. Perceptions of these dropouts were unanimous in describing school as a negative experience for them. They discussed negative as well as positive aspects of school personnel and instruction. Participants did not make a connection of their situation and their individual or family characteristics. All participants became discipline problems, had high absenteeism, cut class frequently, and demonstrated poor academic performance at the time of dropping out; yet, none of the participants was referred for counseling. These problems became apparent after they perceived school was an unfriendly, hostile place to be, and success was unlikely. Their actions resulted in being asked to leave school or dropping out because the cost of an education for them was so painful that it was not worth the possible benefits of a quality life for the future.

## **Conclusions**

This research study developed a basis for understanding the perceptions and attitudes of male Hispanics who have dropped out of high school in Southwest Kansas. The interviews with the dropouts provided insights into problematic areas that parallel those areas identified by current research. The two areas

identified by participants as causes for dropping out of school were feelings of abandonment prior to making decisions to drop out of school and the perceived lack of two-way communication between the student and those trying to help him. These findings were inferred by all participants.

Traditional research focused primarily on personal, family, social, and economic factors to develop theories about why Hispanics drop out of school. This study supported the findings of traditional researchers except for the area of parent education as most parents were well educated. The areas of traditional focus are relevant to understanding the dropout problem, but only in part. Additional research needs to be more comprehensive by focusing on schooling experiences and perceptions of dropouts as well as school personnel for comparison. This needs to be done in addition to the traditional factors in order to gain insight into the total context of the dropout problems.

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