

CHAPTER ONE

The High School Dropout Phenomenon

CON CARIÑO Y GANAS

Jaime Escalante was able to effectively teach low-income Latino/a students in East Los Angeles. As documented in the movie *Stand and Deliver*, poor Latino/a students, from whom nobody expected much, achieved great scholastic heights. Delpit (1995), drawing on an interview with this famous teacher, provided the missing factor in the equation of why some teachers succeed where others fail. Successful teachers, like Escalante, lovingly respect and care for their students and therefore are able to motivate their students to succeed. They inspire *ganas*: “the desire to do something—to make them believe they can learn” (p. 139). The subtitle of this chapter is *Con Cariño y Ganas*, which means “with loving respect and motivation to succeed.” Once students recognize caring and respect on the part of the teacher, they are motivated and willing to learn. Success will follow. In combination with a sound knowledge of subject matter, this key pedagogical talent of the teacher who knows students, their backgrounds and culture, and how to connect with them *con cariño* results in powerful learning.

In the United States, students of color are increasing in number, but their teachers and administrators are predominantly White, as exemplified in the book *White Teachers/Diverse Classrooms* (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Today, of the 74 million children in the United States (defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as those under age 18), the ethnic groups are as follows: White 59%, Hispanic 19%, Black 15%, Asian 4%, and Other 3% (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006, p. 1). The 41% students of color and 90% White teachers nationwide (National Education Association [NEA], 2006b, p. 1) means that some teachers may lack the cultural knowledge to connect with their students and to inspire the motivation and confidence

students need to succeed. Another report (NEA, 2006a) placed the figures at 60% students of color and 90% White teachers (5). Drawing on 2003 data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, the NEA noted that “some 40 percent of all public schools have no minority teachers on staff” (NEA, 2006a, p. 5). Although there is some variation in the numbers, it is clear that there is a sizable gap between the ethnicity of students and their educators.

Howard (2006) stated the problem well in the title of his book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. According to census data trends, by the year 2050 the United States will become a “nation of minorities” with less than half of the population being non-Hispanic White (G. Marx, 2002). This is already the case in California, where, currently, more than half of the students attending urban schools are members of “minority” groups (Orfield, 2001, p. 5). Latinos make up one-third of California's population of 35 million (Tiedt & Tiedt, 2005, p. 357). In the United States, 21% of elementary and high school students have at least one foreign born parent, and approximately 300 languages are spoken. Children between the ages of 5 and 17 who speak a language other than English at home total 9.8 million, with 6.9 million speaking Spanish (Israel, 2005).

Although Latino/a children represent only 19% of the total, 40% of all dropouts aged 16 to 24 were Latina/o in 2004 (Child Trends Data Bank, 2006, p. 1). The present state of affairs in which Latina/o students do not achieve in an equitable manner and subsequently drop out of school affects individuals, schools, and the larger society. Teachers and school leaders are in a powerful position to effect change by becoming more culturally responsive to meet the needs of their students. How can teachers teach when they may know little about their students' family, language, and cultural background? In Idaho, where this study was conducted, Latina/os make up 13.42% of the public school population (Idaho State Department of Education, 2006, p. 2). Nationwide, Latino/as account for 19% of the U.S. school population (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006, p. 1). However, “Hispanics represent only 2.9% of public school teachers and 2.8% of private school teachers” (Hodgkinson & Outtz, 1996, p. 26). This will not change rapidly and so schools are clearly in need of leaders who are well prepared to be culturally responsive in their leadership.

School dropout rates in the United States are a concern for educators, policy makers, and parents. Ladson-Billings (2006) and Orfield (2004) referred to current school dropout in the United States as a “crisis” (p. 1). Despite efforts to raise the achievement level of students in this country through new programs, curriculum innovations, and sincere efforts by policy

makers and educators who want to engage students, there is still a rising percentage of Latino/as who are dropping out of high school. Latino/as drop out in larger numbers than any other ethnic group (Larson & Rumberger, 1999; Lichtenstein, 2003; Mehan, 1997; Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2001). Statistics, such as one in two Latino/as and African Americans drop out of school, are becoming accepted (Thornburgh, 2006, p. 30). This comes at a time when prior research confirms that every element of our nation's economy requires higher levels of math and reading skills than ever before (Fry, 2003; Lichtenstein, 2003; Swanson, 2003).

Moreover, the achievement gap or disparity between subgroups of students based on ethnicity seems to be widening (Education Trust, 2003). A recent study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported by the National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability (2004) showed that White students scored significantly higher than Black and Latino students in 8th- and 12th-grade mathematics and science (p. 10). Only 10% of Hispanic fourth graders and 8% of African American fourth graders scored at the proficient level in writing skills, compared with 27% of White fourth graders (p. 13). A number of factors both inside and outside of schools are thought to be responsible for the achievement gap. Educators can blame the students themselves or forces outside the school (e.g., lack of funding, the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], parents, or poverty). Alternatively, educators can focus on those aspects that they can directly influence, including school personnel, school climate and culture, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Some students who drop out of school are gifted. Colangelo and Davis (2003) noted that one in five or 20% of U.S. students who drop out of high school test in the gifted range (p. 533). The students in this study were not tested for giftedness. However, they all demonstrated an ability to succeed in school, as shown by their earlier performance, by banking sections of the state test, or by passing the state exit exams outright. Gifted, average, and struggling students are all reflected in the dropout rate statistics.

Dropout rates are sometimes ignored or hidden. The NCLB policy requires all schools, districts, and states to report to the public the academic progress of all students, including high school graduation rates. This reporting is the basis for the accountability required by the education reform law. In 2006 there was still no national database on school dropout reported by subpopulations and no systematic plan to address the challenge. In 2006 school district reporting hid real dropout rates by not reporting home-instructed students and students who transferred or moved. In Idaho, for 2004, the reported *estimate* of the cohort Hispanic dropout rate was 25.14% (Idaho State Department of Education, 2005).

Analysts called into question the methods used by states and suggested that their graduation rate calculation methods portrayed a rosier, less-than-honest picture than what actually exists. "Communities cannot make progress on this issue unless they know, without a doubt, which students start 9th grade and graduate four years later, and which do not" (Education Trust, 2003, p. 5). Accurate dropout rates counted by subcategory, though, will not fix the problem. Principals, teachers, and counselors in each of these rural schools already knew which students were dropping out: Latinos and economically disadvantaged Whites. Addressing the problem starts with an understanding of what is occurring in schools that leads to students' decisions to leave school. Then, a leadership plan needs to be implemented and its success evaluated.

WHAT IS THE DROPOUT RATE AND WHY DOES IT VARY?

It is difficult to get accurate figures on the dropout rate. Statistical methodology, observations, interviews, and surveys have previously been employed when looking at dropouts as a whole (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004; Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2001; Wehlage, 1989). Researchers have found calculating the dropout rate difficult because some students return to school, and schools and states differ in their definitions and calculation methods (Bhanpuri & Reynolds, 2003; Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Orfield, 2004; Riehl, 1999; Swanson, 2003; Valverde et al., 2002). In Idaho, it was reported that 19% of ninth graders do not graduate from high school (Idaho Kids Count, 2005, p. 34). However, students who graduated from eighth grade but did not return to school are not counted as dropouts, therefore the dropout rates may be even higher than reported. Moreover, the State Department of Education does not provide the dropout figures by ethnicity so dropout rates are obscured. Swanson (2003, p. iii) noted that "graduation rate estimates that are heavily dependent on dropout counts should be viewed with considerable skepticism" because of the largely inadequate national system for defining and collecting this information. The NCLB Act has refocused attention on official statistics about high school graduation and dropout rates, but to date no official system is in place.

An example of how difficult it is to accurately calculate high school dropout rates was reported by DiMaria (2004). He offered a case in point from the state of Texas, where "students who cannot be accounted for are removed from the calculation of dropouts as if they never existed. Often, incarcerated students or those who have left school but are over the mandatory attendance age (16) in their high schools are not counted" (p. 21).

Riehl (1999), in a study of 250,000 students from 93 high schools, found that school discharge policies may be important factors in the dropout phenomenon. Schools, Riehl explained, may establish admission and release criteria that correspond with social or cultural expectations. If society deems it necessary to produce fewer dropouts, schools make sure that students graduate, whether or not students are performing satisfactorily. Conversely, a school may increase the number of dropouts by adopting policies, such as requiring a minimum GPA in order to play sports, but without offering tutoring or study halls.

Based on my interviews with school personnel, it is clear that student discharge is not a strict, rule-governed process. The staff members responsible for discharging students do have a great deal of latitude in deciding who to discharge, and there may be no simple factors to explain how they arrive at those decisions. (Riehl, 1999, p. 264)

Schools could do a valuable service to Latino/a students by examining the policies and procedures used (or not used) when deciding whether a student stays in school.

WHY DO LATINO/AS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL?

A question that has been explored by many researchers is just why do Latino/a students drop out of school? Some of the usual explanations include unequal life chances and lack of belief in the achievement ideology. There is wide-spread belief in the adage “hard work brings success” that drives much of the work in schools. However, one must also look at schooling from the viewpoint of one who has worked hard at school and failed or worked hard all their lives to just get by.

At the core of this ideology lies the belief that life chances are determined not by politics and structures of race and class privilege, but by educational achievement. Schools are sold as exit ramps out of poor communities and into the middle class. (Fine & Burns, 2003, p. 2)

Poor, hard-working, immigrant farm laborers who have not graduated from high school may not appreciate the adage. As Bolgatz (2005) so aptly put it, “Pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps is simply easier to do if you are white”

(p. 33). Anderson (2006) added that no one pulls themselves up by their bootstraps; everyone has had assistance from others. However, for Whites the assistance may be more easily gained because Whites are in positions of power and authority in our school system.

Despite the achievement ideology promulgated in our schools, individuals who realize that the connection between effort and reward are not clear-cut may make the decision not to play the game.

No matter how the students from the lower classes respond, the dynamic of the race for jobs of wealth and prestige remains unchanged. Although a restricted number of individuals of lower and working-class origin may overcome the barriers to success, the rules of the race severely limit and constrain the individual's mobility. (MacLeod, 1987, p. 148)

Ogbu (1987) concluded that students of color have higher school failure rates because they have learned to disbelieve the folk theory about education being the ladder to success and have instead adopted an attitude of skepticism that makes it harder to accept and follow school rules and standard practices that are required for success in school. As researchers Kozol (1991, 2005) and Nieto (2004) noted, major changes must be made in school organization, climate and culture, and policies and procedures to eliminate the social, political, and economic inequities rampant in society at large. Although they studied urban schools, the rural schools we studied need the same attention.

Family factors

Other dropout predictors in the literature included children in families with frequent patterns of moving and inconsistent school attendance, stressful family circumstances, and parental attitudes toward school. Kerr, Beck, Shattuck, Kattar, and Uriburu (2003) concluded in their study of Latino/a youth and family involvement that the family is critical to the prevention of problem behaviors of Latino/a youth, and that "monitoring and familial connectedness may be equally important for deterring adolescent risk and facilitating positive youth development" (p. 562).

Latino/a students are more likely to need to be employed and contributing to family household income than their White peers, thus reducing potential educational resources (Fry, 2002). Family socioeconomic factors play a role in whether or not youth stay in school. Until middle school, the lines between poor and rich, White and students of color are often blurred

(Aronson & Good, 2002; Erikson, 1968). Starting with middle school, according to the students in our study, the divisions manifested themselves and with each passing year became more impenetrable until the students dropped out in high school. For Latina/o students in rural Idaho the answer to why they dropped out lies partially in the complex bureaucratic school system that favors the “haves” and neglects and disadvantages others. For instance, one of the students in our study referred to herself and her Latino/a peers as the “lesser kids” (Silvia). The answer also lies partially in the school community where Latino/a students face class and social obstacles. In rural Idaho, Latina/o students are often the minority ethnically, religiously, and economically.

School-based factors

The literature pointed to poor academic performance, negative behavior, disciplinary infractions, dysfunctional student relationships, and negative attitudes of students toward peers. Nesman, Barobs-Gahr, and Medrano (2001) found, when comparing the factors of students who remained in school and those who dropped out, significant differences in attendance rates, discipline referrals, suspensions, and grade point averages. In their focus groups with Latino/a youth, participants cited personal motivation to succeed, parental support, interest in school, and involvement in school activities as crucial to successfully completing school. Other important contributing factors were supportive school staff and a clean and safe school environment. Our study both confirmed and extended their findings.

Some researchers believed that key indicators of future dropouts can be detected as early as first grade (Lockwood & Secada, 1999). The students in our study did well in elementary school and held expressed aspirations for professional careers, including attending college. Yet we found that by the end of ninth grade, these Latina/o students were becoming aware that they would not have enough credits to graduate with their peers and this awareness, coupled with negative experiences in school, helped tip the scale for them in the decision to quit.

Most researchers agreed that retention is one of the leading indicators of eventual school dropout, and some groups are retained more often than others. Hodgkinson & Outtz (1996) found that Latino/a students had been retained at least one grade more often than non-Hispanics. Hauser (2000) found that nationwide for students aged 15–17, retention rates for Black and Hispanic students are 40%–50%, compared with 35% for White students. The Jimerson, Anderson and Whipple study (2002) showed that students who are retained once are 40% to 50% more likely to drop out than

promoted students (p. 452). Romo and Falbo (1996) reported that individuals do not recover from grade retention and often dropout because, “the movement toward graduation is too slow” (p. 28). Latina/o youth do not want to be 20 and graduating from high school, and schools do not want youth of that age mixing with younger students.

Compounding factors

Most researchers agreed that the dropout problem is indeed complicated, with no one clear reason for dropout cited by students in surveys (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Hess, 2000; Rumberger, 1995, 2001; Schwartz, 1995; Wehlage, 1989). In the quest to improve the educational environment for Latino/a youth, and ultimately their chances for success in school, it is important to take a look at all the compounding factors that contribute to school dropout rates. After all, Latino/a youth do not just wake up one morning and decide not to continue with school; there is a process of dropping out that has been documented. “Dropping out is not a random, casual act . . . dropping out is the logical outcome of the social forces that limit Hispanics’ role in society” (Lockwood & Secada, 1999, p. 2).

We argue that dropping out is also a result of many factors within the school environment. We decided to look at the students’ schooling experiences in three rural communities to see what we could learn. The purpose of the study was to explore and describe, from the perspective of Latina/o high school dropouts from rural communities, the meaning attached to the act of leaving school, as well as the motivation for and process of dropping out. From their words we hoped to bring understanding to the phenomenon of high dropout rates for Latino/a youth because reform measures to date have done little to enhance Latina/o students’ desire to stay in high school. We also developed a plan for culturally responsive leadership that arose from hearing the students’ experiences.

DEFINING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP

Culturally responsive teaching is: “an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes. The use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains the mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the students’ own cultures” (Education Alliance, 2006, p. 3). Establishing a culturally responsive school or district demonstrates to students and

their families that they matter and that their learning matters. With early intervention for culturally responsive schooling, the dropout rates may decline. School leaders have a critical role in this effort.

School leaders must work toward four key aspects of leadership. First, they should be *multicultural leaders*, whereby they ensure that diverse students are served by their public schools with policies and practices that are multicultural. This is not just a matter of fairness and equity; it is an educational matter. As Smith (2002) found in his study, test scores rose when the focus was on an enriched educational environment that valued students' families and their cultural and linguistic knowledge. Students learn when they are safe, affirmed, and appreciated (Nieto, 2004). In addition, all students benefit from an education that promotes and values diversity by exposing students to different ideas, experiences, perspectives, and worldviews that they will need to compete and succeed in a multicultural and global society (Adam, 2006). Second, administrators should be *instructional leaders* who use their knowledge and understanding of teaching to influence how teachers teach and how students learn. Again, they need to be able to ensure culturally responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in the school and be able to raise test scores for all groups of students. Third, they should work as *managerial leaders* who manage the school finances, facilities, personnel, and compliance with the law. Creating a safe school environment is central to this work. Finally, administrators should be *participatory leaders*, whose job it is to incorporate parents, community, and other constituents into the school so that the school, as a public entity, is responsive to the public. See Appendix D for a representation of how multicultural and culturally responsive leadership tasks can be incorporated.

Principals who are culturally responsive are able to (a) incorporate multicultural knowledge and appreciation in the school; (b) raise test scores for all, including those groups traditionally underserved by public schools; and (c) engage parents and communities in the school setting. Gardiner and Enomoto (2006), drawing on Riehl's (2000) tasks for effective leadership, identified questions that administrators might ask themselves:

The first task is fostering new meanings about diversity. For example, do principals maintain high expectations for all while providing support for diverse groups of students? To what extent do they attempt to institute and sustain school reform? How do they support dialogue and discussion among groups that might be culturally different? The second task involves promoting inclusive instructional practices within schools by supporting, facilitating or being a catalyst for change. To what extent do principals demonstrate instructional leadership that promotes inclusion, awareness of

pedagogical practices, or concern for appropriate assessments? The third task relates to building connections between schools and communities. Are principals engaged with parents and families to encourage success for their children? Do they encourage community involvement and partnering with social service agencies? To what extent do they endeavor to bridge cultural clashes between diverse groups within their school-communities? These tasks are grounded in the values of multicultural education, advocating for cultural pluralism and honoring difference while ensuring social justice and equity among all students. As such they offer a useful means to frame what is meant by multicultural leadership and how to consider its enactment. (p. 562–563)

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

This book complements the research and writing done by others on multicultural education, culturally responsive schools, and the creation of a school climate of caring and success for all students (see J. Banks, 2006; J. Banks & C. Banks, 2001; Capper, 1993; Delgado Gaitan, 2006; Delpit, 1995; Delpit & Dowdy, 2003; Fine & Burns, 2003; Gay, 2000; Gollnick & Chinn, 2006; Gonzales, Huerta-Macias, & Villamil Tinajero, 2002; Henze, Katz, & Norte, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994a, 1994b, 1995; Obiakor, 2006; Ovando & McLaren, 2000; Riehl, 2000; Robbins, R. Lindsey, D. Lindsey, & Terrell, 2002; Schmidt & Ma, 2006; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2003). Where this book breaks new ground is in its attention to rural Latina/o youth dropouts, a largely invisible population in the dropout, multicultural, and social justice literature. The phenomenological method of presenting in-depth dropout experiences also complements other studies on dropouts that are literature reviews or have relied on quantitative methods.

The rural schools in this study demonstrated little recognition of the diversities of the students and families. The schools were not multicultural in their climate and culture, pedagogy, curriculum and assessment, and policies and practices, although the student bodies were diverse. Carter (2005) who conducted an ethnographic study of students in Yonkers, New York, also made this point: “Students . . . observe that educators privilege the styles, tastes and understandings of White, middle-class students, and they feel that their teachers deny the legitimacy of their own cultural repertoires and even their critiques of the information that they are expected to learn” (p. 10).

The Latina/o students in the Idaho schools in this study did not feel valued by the schools they attended. This led them to feel marginalized and

to act out in ways that further marginalized them. Ultimately, they dropped out of school because it was an unrewarding experience for them. Students felt either unimportant and invisible (Maria, Sophia) or they felt that teachers and administrators openly disliked them (Silvia, Beatriz, Cristina, Cesar, Armando, Enrique, Victor). Each student was able to name from one to three teachers throughout their entire schooling experience who had cared for them, but the effects of the larger environment of uncaring negated the positive effects of these few caring teachers. These youth clearly articulated the characteristics that they sought in a good teacher: someone who was not just putting on a “front” but who genuinely cared for and respected students and their cultural and linguistic background, and who held high expectations of their ability to learn. A teacher also had to make learning “useful” and foster academic achievement.

The findings of this study are for administrators, teachers, parents, researchers, and policy makers. This phenomenology described the personal experience of being a Latina/o dropout in the context of the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). The NCLB Act requires accountability for educators in the form of testing of students to gauge proficiency but does not help educators know how to create a culturally responsive school that will enhance accountability. Educators want their students to be successful but do not always know how to gain the necessary cultural knowledge they need to help their students. Information regarding the phenomenon of dropping out is needed to understand influences that may not be evident in test results or organizational structures. Personal, in-depth perspectives are needed on the dropout experience if the United States’ public schools are to make good on the promise to leave no child behind.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study. Chapter 2 introduces the three authors and the research methods. Further details on the phenomenology and the interview guides are included in the Appendixes A and B. Chapter 3 describes the Idaho context where the study was conducted and the rural communities and schools from which the students dropped out. Chapters 4 and 5 present the personal experiences of nine Latino/a students who dropped out of U.S. rural high schools. In most cases, the students transferred to alternative high schools that served to keep them in school for a few additional weeks or months—but these schools, too, were unsuccessful in graduating the students. Chapter 6 presents thematically the study’s findings and conclusions. Chapter 7 presents a leadership plan for culturally

responsive schools for administrators, teachers, and counselors who want to enhance the Latino/a graduation rate and improve the educational environment for all students. School leaders can adapt these plans to their own school settings. Appendixes C, D, E, and F provide additional resources on culturally responsive schooling.