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Against All Odds: Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers Seek to Improve Their Lives Through the GED and it's Impact on Parent Involvement

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Abstract: *Our presentation will focus upon a group of seasonal agricultural workers, enrolled in GED classes. To what extent are Latino parents currently involved in the schooling of their children? Does studying for the GED impact the depth and scope of their involvement? What implications does this have for increasing parent involvement in schools? In particular, how can more fathers become engaged in schools?*

Introduction

A high school diploma or the General Education Development Test certificate, (the GED) is essential for advancing beyond low-wage employment, pursuing vocational training, postsecondary education or the military. Today, the high school diploma or the GED, is becoming a prerequisite to an increasing number of low-wage jobs. Furthermore, some employers are now requiring that their current employees who do not have a high school diploma obtain a GED for job security. Thus for high school dropouts, the GED is increasingly viewed as a viable option as well as for those who never attended high school. Recent projections suggest that by 2020, the economy's demand for workers without a high school diploma will only be 11 percent, whereas 22 of California residents of working age will not have graduated from high school (Neumark, 2005). Yet, in California, where there is a growing need of options for high school dropouts, due to budget cuts, GED schools are being closed and/or are reducing the number of days the GED tests are administered.

Moreover, without a high school diploma the quality of life is negatively impacted. Levin found that adults who didn't complete high school were twice as likely to be unemployed as high school graduates. The life expectancy of a high school dropout is 9.2 years lower and that the health of an average high school graduate at 65 is better than the average 45 year old high school dropout (2006). Thus, obtaining a high school diploma or a GED is central to one's economic and overall wellbeing.

For those who migrate to the U.S. to work alone or with their families, a high school diploma is the key to accessing the American dream of having viable employment opportunities, and continuing one's education. For California's seasonal and agricultural workers, who did not earn a high school diploma in Mexico nor in the U.S., the GED holds more than a promise, it is key to surviving in a changing economy. Many attend GED classes to secure their employment in their current job, while others seek employment with improved working conditions such as an increase in pay or a better work schedule. Others aspire to continue their education through a job training program or at a community college, for without additional schooling, their opportunity to obtain employment beyond seasonal agriculture work which is decreasing.

The GED consists of five basic exams which include Math, Science, Language Arts (Writing & Reading), and Social Studies. GED classes are offered through Adult Schools, some are located at local high schools and online GED instruction is on the rise. The High School Equivalency

Program (HEP) offers GED instruction to migrant and seasonal agricultural workers. It is funded through the U.S. Department of Education and administered through the Office of Migrant Education.

The High School Equivalency Program was first funded in 1967 under the 1965 Higher Education Act. The HEP program is designed to help migratory and seasonal farmworkers (or children of such workers) who are 16 years of age or older and not currently enrolled in school to obtain the equivalency of a high school diploma or subsequently, to gain employment or begin postsecondary education or training. The program serves over 7,000 students annually. Over the last 40 years, the Office of Migrant Education has funded HEP programs through competitive grants of five year funding cycles. As of 2009, there are 40 funded programs across 20 states and housed in institutions of higher education or in non-profits. California is funded for 8 HEP Programs followed by seven programs in Texas and six in Oregon. The fundamental purpose of HEP is to break the cycle of poverty through education.

Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers

Migrant and seasonal agricultural workers are the backbone of California's multi-billion dollar agricultural industry. Yet this population is the least understood and the most underserved segment of society. The major difference between these workers is that the seasonal worker has settled in one location yet works seasonally either planting, tending and/or harvesting crops. Migrant farmworkers traverse statelines following the next crop harvest. The majority of migrant workers consist of individuals, mostly men, however, there are families, including children, who travel great distances to work seasonally to harvest crops. There are many challenges faced by this group, including working for poverty level wages, periods of no work, dangerous physical working conditions, and at times abuse. Children often accompany their parents into the fields to help contribute to the overall income earned. Thus, not only are agricultural fields dangerous for children, the gap in their education widens. Due to the mobility of their families, these children do not have the option of attending a full academic school year, which creates an academic gap that may never be bridged. This leads to dropping out of school, often by 9th grade. This segment of society manages their own and their children's health without insurance. They often work six to nine months a year, without any means of employment for the remainder of the year. If they are citizens or legal residents, they have access to unemployment benefits to bridge a few weeks of their employment gap. If they do not have legal status, they are left to fend for themselves without any government support.

During the height of the harvest season, some work a minimum of six days a week for 8-12 hours a day. There are some jobs which require working twelve hour days, seven days a week. Unfortunately there are not many options available for those with an elementary education level. The GED becomes a viable option as the word spreads in the community that the GED is now being required to keep current jobs and for low level employment such as dishwashers in restaurants. These workers see the GED as a way to serve as a role model for their children. Mothers finally have time to pursue their dreams of an education once their children have grown.

Hispanics Being Underserved

Hispanic children and youth are the nation's youngest and fastest growing group enrolled in schools today. In 2004, 34% of the Hispanic population was under the age of 18 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2005). The National Council of La Raza (2007) reports that while there has been improvement in the status of Latino education over the past decade, the data continue to show that Hispanic education achievement does not match that of non-Hispanic. From early childhood through higher education, Latinos continue to be underserved by education programs designed to help the most disadvantaged students. The report points out that participation in all levels of education continues to be low while dropout and attrition are still high" (<http://www.nclr.org/> p. 1). This is of a critical concern as the completion of high school is a standard measure of acceptable education attainment, yet Latino students continue to have the highest high school non-completion rates. In 2004, 53.2% of Hispanic 18-24 year olds had completed secondary schooling, compared to 74.9% of Whites and 50.2% of Blacks (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Unless there is some type of educational intervention, the high dropout rate among Latino school age youth are not likely to change, thus making them unable to qualify for positions that require post secondary education (Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, 2008).

Parent Involvement

The involvement of parents in a child's education has long been recognized as a critical component to the child's school readiness and success regardless of family income, education or cultural background (Flaxman & Inger, 1991; Epstein, 1995; Jones & Fuller, 2003; Herold 2003; Turnbull & Turbull, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). The importance of family structure and support for extended families remains strong among Hispanics in the United States despite news reports about the decline of the traditional family in general (Delgado, 1991; Inger, 1992). Casas and Furlong (2000) state that there is a need to correct the perception that Hispanics are unwilling to be involved in the education of their children. Immigrant families tend to trust teachers and schools to be equitable (Valdez, 1996). Olivos (2008) however cautions that simply encouraging parents to be more involved is setting up parents for disillusionment as a result of the existence of institutional inertia which often serves to create false promises to diverse communities.

Schools repeatedly cite the home environment as the reason for lack of academic achievement among low-income students, criticizing the parents for not being involved enough with the school (Jones & Fuller, 2003). Often school administrators and teachers misread Hispanic non-involvement at school to mean that they are uncaring about their children's education (Nicolas & Ramos, 1990). Yet, bicultural homes are rich with learning opportunities (Gandara, 1995) that schools often miss or disregard, (Olivos, 2006). Researchers have documented ways Spanish-speaking Latino parents have historically been treated disrespectfully when they try to have meaningful participation in their children's education (Cline & Nochoches, 2001; Olivos, 2003, 2004, 2004 & 2006). When schools and teachers are unaware of the learning styles or education backgrounds of Hispanic families, barriers are naturally set up against them (Ramirez, 1974). This type of thinking has led to feelings of mistrust and suspicion between both parties especially when the family's culture and language are rejected by the dominant school culture. Furthermore, the reasons that keep Latino parents out of the school are predominantly

structural (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004, p21). This starts with the school district's definition of parent involvement. What does parent involvement mean to educators and more importantly, who decides what it means for the district? The definition of parent involvement must be "ample enough for Latino parents to see themselves as important and capable agents in their children's education," (P. 62). Schools often narrowly define parent involvement as activities that can be counted, rather than as a relationship of equals (Olivos, 2006). Another common structural barrier is that a definition that subscribes to a one-size-fits-all does not work. Successful programs must harness the local talent (Lucas et al., 1990). Yet this is an impossible task when local talent is not valued (Olivos, 2006).

Hispanic parents do place a high value on education because they recognize that education is an important means to economic progress (Casas & Furlong, 2000). Research conducted by Nicolau and Ramos (1990) and Ho (2001) found Hispanic parents wanted to be involved with the school but believed it to be the school's responsibility to take the lead in initiating the collaboration. Despite reports that the Hispanic family structure is declining, Delgado (1991) and Zuniga, (2001) state that the family structure and support within the extended families remains strong. The responsibility of the Hispanic family is to teach their children the cultural values and traditions that identify them as members of a family (Zapata, 1995). To be "educado" / "educated" includes teaching children moral values including how to behave, how to act around others, and what is good and what is moral (Valdez, 1996).

Research completed by the The Tomás Rivera Policy Institute <http://www.trpi.org/> (2005) reported that "Latino parents' perceptions of parental involvement could be grouped into two distinct categories: academic involvement and life participation. Academic involvement was understood to encompass activities associated with homework, education enrichment and academic performance; life participation characterized ways that parents provided life education and were holistically integrated into their children's lives in school, as well as away from it. The report states that parents believe that monitoring their children's lives and providing moral guidance resulted in good behavior, which in turn allowed for greater academic learning opportunities (p. 8-9). This supports the concept that community connections with schools needs to be expanded and accept parent involvement definitions among different cultural and ethnic groups.

Importance of Latino Fathers Involved in Schools

Society has overwhelmingly accepted fathers as being the economic providers and mothers as the nurturers and caretakers within the family structure. In the last decade the roles of fathers have changed to being more involved in their children's lives. The new focus is not to lessen the role of the mothers in children's lives, but rather to highlight the fact that fathers being actively involved in their children's lives play a critical part in their overall development (Bauer & Shea, 2003; Turbull & Turnbull 2001).

The majority of the research, however being conducted is centered on fathers from white, middle class, well-educated, intact families (Jones & Fuller, 2003; Olsen & Fuller, 2003). The National Center on Fathers and Families (1997) stated that if society is truly interested in a widespread change in fathering culture and conduct then it must reach fathers of color, low income and working class such as the fathers participating in the HEP program.

The Center went on to report that fathers from African American and Latino populations are currently overrepresented in studies of father absences and underrepresented in studies of

father presence and involvement. There is a need to heighten the overall understanding of fatherhood as well as our knowledge of fathering among families of color and non-traditional families (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Inger, 1992)). Families from diverse, cultural and linguistic backgrounds often practice forms of parent involvement that mainstream school personnel may not always recognize as valid. It would behoove schools to capture those experiences as a means to make the connection with diverse families instead of imposing upon diverse families to adapt more dominant cultural approaches to school involvement (Moles, 1982; Flett & Conderman, 2001; Pena, 2000; Ho, Robinette & Gonzales, 2002).

The 1996 National Household Education Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (U. S. Department of Education, 1997b) looked at the extent to which fathers were involved in their children's K-12 grade schools. The results of the research confirmed that children whose fathers were positively involved in their school activities completed more school and had stronger emotional and cognitive developments. Latino fathers must play an active role in connecting with schools as a means to improve the social, emotional and academic success of their children.

The CSUS HEP Program, A Road To Success

Migrant and seasonal agricultural workers are a vital segment of the population and economy of the state. The obstacles they face are overwhelming and often coupled with limited knowledge of what steps to take to bring about a paradigm change in their lives.

A program such as the California State University Sacramento's High School Equivalency Program (HEP) provides seasonal agricultural workers and their families an opportunity to obtain the equivalence of a high school diploma, the GED. The HEP program also helps students prepare to move on to higher levels of education or training and/or into more stable and better-paid forms of employment. The academic preparation and career counseling it provides students is one part of the success factor. The other factor is the individual's self-determination and perseverance to complete the program against all odds.

The majority of students who enroll in CSUS HEP are adults from Mexico who have lived in the U.S. for a varying length of time. There are many reasons why they did not complete high school in Mexico. Often stated reason for not completing their secondary education in Mexico, is having to work to help their parents support the younger siblings. Immigrating to the U.S. alone or with their families looking for employment or to follow a spouse, was another reason stated for the disruption of their education. Often stated was the lack of resources to pay for high school (la preparatoria) in Mexico, which differs from the U.S. where public high school is free. If they arrived in the U.S. at the age requiring a compulsory education, the issue shifts to dropping out due to the lack of English skills, high school credits and/or the inability to pass the California High School Exit Exam. Very few indicate that education was not encouraged in their home.

The educational level of HEP students reflects a bell shape in which the majority have an 8th grade education. A few have an elementary level education on one end of the curve and a few attended high school on the other end of the curve. When asked in a group interview, why they want to pursue a GED, they state they want to reach their dream of 'finishing their education.' Being a rolemodel to their children is also stated as a motivating factor to pursue a GED. There are students who have been told by their current employers that a GED would help to secure their job, thus there is a sense of urgency. The GED is viewed as an advantage in

competing for better employment with better pay and working conditions. While most students study the Spanish GED materials and take the GED in Spanish, all recognize the benefit of learning English and plan to enroll in ESL classes after earning the GED. Fewer students embark on the GED track with specific goals for further training. HEP is held accountable to help students improve their employment situation and support those who desire to pursue further formal training. HEP also helps the few who want to earn a GED to become eligible to apply to the military.

Our research will focus upon reporting to what extent Latino parents in the HEP program are currently involved in the schooling of their children. In other words, what does parent involvement look like for these parents who are attending a GED class 4 nights a week? Does pursuing a GED impact their level of involvement with their child, either at home or at the school? Schools tend to focus upon the visibility of the parent at the school, and less on what parents do in the home that supports their children's education (Olivos, 2006).

The literature says that Latino mothers are predominately involved with the schools. Is this true for this group? The literature also indicates the importance of fathers being more involved in their children's lives. Therefore, we will report how parents in the HEP program define parent involvement and to what extent both mothers and fathers are currently involved in their children's education and see if pursuing their GED has an impact on their involvement. In other words, is the level of parent involvement of either mothers or fathers changing in depth or scope as a result of pursuing the GED?

In the hope of breaking the cycle of poverty, the importance of this research is to better understand how parents who pursue their own education, in this case, the GED, positively impacts their own lives and that of their children's as the family takes full advantage of the educational opportunities offered in the American dream.

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