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ABSTRACT

A study was done to examine the reasons why Puerto Rican youth from the Holyoke (Massachusetts) Public School System drop out of high school and the effect of dropping out of school on the Latino community. The study was conducted using data provided by the Holyoke School Department and drawn from Students' cumulative folders and school district annual reports, which provided information on administrative practices and policies, students' socioeconomic background, and academic performance. The study population included 125 members of the 273 Holyoke High School graduating class of 1990 and 82 students who dropped out during their junior or senior year. Three male dropouts were located and interviewed by telephone. Findings indicate the following: (1) a 68 percent dropout rate among Puerto Rican youth; (2) a lower dropout rate for Puerto Rican students born in Holyoke compared to those born in Puerto Rico; (3) those enrolled in the Transitional Bilingual Education program were half as likely to leave school; (4) the gap between Hispanic Americans and Whites was largest in the area of ability grouping; (5) the curriculum is at odds with the experiences and culture of the majority of students; (6) Hispanic American students had higher grade point averages overall than did White students; and (7) Spanish was the primary language among Hispanic American high school students. Implications of the study for school policy and practice are considered under the following headings; (1) Maintain and strengthen bilingual progams; (2) Reform the curriculum; (3) Rethink ability grouping; (4) Revise retention policies; (5) Develop work-study programs as incentives for young people to stay in school; (6) Improve counseling practices; (7) Maintain reliable records and accurate information about dropouts; (8) Reform disciplinary policies; (9) Investigate teacher--student interactions; and (10) Develop a more welcoming school climate. Included are 63 references. (JB)

"I Was An Outsider": Dropping Out Among Puerto Rican Youths in Holyoke, Massachusetts

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Introduction

The school dropout phenomenon has long been viewed as a serious educational and social problem. It is well documented that leaving high school without a diploma has negative individual and social costs (Levin,1972). For the individual, leaving high school prior to completion is associated with occupational opportunities and economic prospects that limit economic and social well-being. Because of their relatively low educational levels, many high school dropouts lack the academic skills that enable them to secure steady employment and adequate income. This is true not just when they first leave school, but becomes an even bigger disadvantage over time because dropouts have fewer opportunities to upgrade their academic skills to remain even relatively competitive in the rapidly changing labor market (Rumberger,1987).

Leaving high school prematurely affects not only individuals but also society at large. For cities, states, and the federal government, high school dropout is associated with increased expenditures in social welfare and costly employment and training programs (King,1978; Levin,1972). According to Fine (1985), "dropouts are more likely to be in prison, to have multiple pregnancies and children, to be on welfare, unemployed or in dead-end jobs than high school graduates. This is particulary true for girls: a diploma means the difference between being a domestic and being a clerical worker."[1] Further, the social consequences of dropping out of school go beyond economic costs. As Levin points out, among other things, premature high school-leaving is associated with higher rates of crime, lower rates of intergenerational mobility and lower rates of political participation (1972).

While over the past four decades the nation's high school dropout rate has decreased substantially, Hispanics[2] have not shared proportionately in that improvement. Hispanic students continue to have the highest dropout rate among all major racial/ethnic groups. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES,1990), in the last ten years, while non-Hispanics' annual high school dropout rate declined from 6.6 to 4.4, the rates for Hispanics have not declined. Approximately 10 percent of Hispanic students leave high school each year.

As well documented by the National Council of La Raza, Hispanics not only have higher dropout rates but also tend to leave school earlier than any major population group (NCLR,1990). By the age of 17, almost 20% of Hispanic students leave school without a diploma. Among Hispanics aged 19 and over, 43% are out of school and without a high school diploma.[3] By 1988, only 51% of all Hispanics 25 years old and over were high school graduates, compared to 63% of African Americans and 78% of Whites.

What is true at the national level is also true in many states and local communities. Of all the major racial/ethnic groups in Massachusetts, Hispanics have the highest dropout rate. According to a recent report prepared for the Massachusetts Board of Education, the annual dropout rate for Hispanic students from 1987 to 1989 remained higher than that of any other group: the current yearly dropout rate of Hispanics is 14.1% while it is 9.2% for African Americans, 7.8% for American Indians, 4.7% for Asian Americans, and 4.0% for Whites (Massachusetts Deparment of Education, 1990).[4]

Purpose and Methodology

The research reported in this paper is based on a study done in 1991 to

explore what factors may lead to dropping out of high school among Puerto Rican youths in Holyoke, Massachusetts, a small city in western Massachusetts. Because of its large Puerto Rican school population and growing dropout problem, Holyoke provides an ideal setting in which to investigate the dropout problem of Hispanics. Holyoke is unique in that its Latino population is overwhelmingly Puerto Rican, a situation that is less and less common today in Northeastern urban areas where large numbers of Dominicans, Cubans, and Central and South Americans are also settling. Lessons to be learned from this study may include a careful reevaluation of school policies and practices that discourage Puerto Rican students from staying in school. We hope that the study will also contribute to a growing awareness and, consequently, to actions that will stem the tidal wave of Puerto Rican dropouts from U.S. schools, a situation that affects not only Puerto Rican communities but the nation as a whole. The results of this research may have implications for other Latino populations as well.

Using demographic data from local schools and the city and state, and through a small number of interviews with Puerto Ricans who have completed or left high school, this study explores the reasons for dropping out of high school and its effect on Latino communities. First, we will present an overview of the dropout problem among Latinos by reviewing research that has been done in the area. Throughout this review, we will present a critique of traditional dropout research that tends to focus on personal and social characteristics while ignoring a macroanalysis of the problem. We will then describe the Puerto Rican community in Holyoke with a special focus on high school students. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the major findings and policy implications of the dropout problem for the Holyoke Public Schools.

This study was designed as a policy study. Research carried out was exploratory in nature and the goal was to raise questions and suggest policy implications for schools with a deepening dropout crisis among Puerto Ricans and other Latinos. We did not attempt to test empirically but rather to explore the data to yield information for policy analysis. The study had the following purposes:

1. To provide a historical overview of the expansion of the Puerto Rican and Latinn student population of the Holyoke Public School system that would include descriptive statistics of the present situation.

2. To compare students who complete high school with those who do not on a number of factors: race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, gender, school-related experiences (attendance, non-promotion, participation in bilingual education program, suspension, grades, standardized achievement test scores, and placement in a particular track), in order to determine how such factors might affect high school completion.

3. To discuss possible reasons that account for Puerto Ricans/Latinos in Holyoke dropping out of high school.

4. To recommend school policies based on an analysis of the dropout situation in the Holyoke Public Schools.

5. To provide a critique of traditional dropout research and explore other contextualized explanations for school dropout.

Sample and Data

The study was conducted using data provided by the Holyoke School Department. Data was drawn from the students' cumulative folder as well as from the school district annual reports.[5] This provided information on administrative practices and policies, students' socio-economic background, and academic performance.

A student sample of 125 was drawn from the 273 Holyoke High School graduating class of 1990. In addition, all students (82) from the class of 1990 who dropped out of school during their junior or senior high school year were included in the study. Among these who did not graduate, 35 students left school in the 11th grade, and 47 some time during their senior year (12th grade). Each one of these students was chosen because their cumulative school folders appeared to be complete and updated regarding information required for the study. In addition, a sample of 12 students was drawn for personal interviews. Due to the students' frequent mobility, only three male students (2 graduates and one dropout) were reached. These students were located and interviewed by telephone. Attempts to locate additional students from the 1990 cohort group were unsuccessful.

Review of the Literature: Why Hispanics "Leave" School

Hispanic students seldom drop out of school due solely to individual or personal choices. A large number of studies have identified and documented an array of factors associated with the likelihood of dropping out of high school in general. These factors are primarily related to student and family characteristics and can be classified under six major headings: peer; demographic; family-related; economic; individual; and

school-related (Rumberger,1987). Unfortunately, most analyses of school dropouts tend to treat these factors as if they existed in isolation from the social and political contexts in which students live and go to school. Few attempts have been made to analyze how such characteristics are related to larger societal, economic, and political contexts. For example, poor facilities and inadequate teaching staff (Fine,1986), discrimination, racism, and low expectations (NCAS, 1985; Miller, S., Nicolau, S., Orr, M., Valdivieso, R., and Walker, G., 1988), lack of Hispanic role models among school personnel, inadequate resource allocation, and the lack of appropriate programs to meet language needs and involve parents are also factors that contribute to students leaving school (NCLR,1990). The crux of our critique is that an inordinate amount of attention has been paid to student and family factors while societal and political characteristics have been left largely untouched in the investigation of school dropouts. More recent research on school dropouts, including the NCLR report, has been more comprehensive in explaining why many students leave school (Wehlage and Rutter, 1986; Wheelock, 1990; Fine, 1991). We will review the six major factors traditionally associated with school dropout and add to the discussion by providing a contextualized and comprehensive framework for understanding this thorny issue.

In traditional research on dropouts, the demographic factors most frequently associated with premature school leaving are race and ethnicity characteristics. As mentioned before, dropout occurs more often among members of racial and ethnic minorities, especially Latinos, than among White youth (Rumberger,1987). Dropout also occurs more often among Puerto Rican and Mexican American students than among other Hispanic groups (NCLR,1990). Attending public schools in urban areas in the South or West, where large concentrations of both Mexican Americans and Puerto

Ricans are found, is another demographic factor associated with dropping out (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986).

Race and ethnicity characteristics cannot be separated from the sociopolitical context in which they are found. That is, students' race and ethnicity are not risk factors *in themselves;* rather, the way in which students' race and ethnicity are valued or devalued in society is what seems to make a difference. In fact, it has been argued that institutional racism, classism, and ethnocentrism are major underlying causes of students' failure in our schools (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Persell, 1991; Fine, 1991; Nieto, forthcoming). Claiming that race or ethnicity *per se* are risk factors thus begs the question by shifting the blame of school failure to students and their families alone. Race and ethnicity characteristics become facile explanations for a problem that is far more complex.

In addition to demographic characteristics, numerous studies have identified family-related factors that influence dropout behavior of high school students. In this category the two most important factors are family social and economic characteristics (socioeconomic status), and family background and structure. Students from lower socioeconomic strata have consistently been shown to have higher dropout rates than their peers who come from higher socioeconomic origins, no matter what variables or predictors are used to measure social and economic status (Rumberger,1983). Low parental education level and income, having sibling(s) who dropped out of high school, living in a single-parent family, language minority status, and fewer learning materials and opportunities in the home are some family-related risk factors linked to dropping out (Rumberger,1983; Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan,1984; Ekstrom et al.,1986; Vélez,1989; Ferńendez and Vélez,1990, and NCLR,1990).

It is important to emphasize that these factors in themselves do not explain the root causes of dropping out, but rather seek to describe the conditions under which certain students live. For a more comprehensive explanation, we need to understand how family-related characteristics are viewed in schools. For instance, Anyon has documented that schools are tremendously affected by the socioeconomic status of the communities in which they are found (Anyon, 1981). Her ethnographic research illustrates how the quality of education in various schools, from those in poor and working-class communities to those in professional and upper-middle class communities, differs dramatically. These differences include the curriculum, instructional strategies, and teachers' expectations of their students. This is corroborated by research in an Appalachian school that found that, in spite of a teacher's best intentions, instructional strategies are often driven by teachers' limited expectations of students because of their social class (Bennett, 1991). Persell echoes this finding by claiming that students are far more different when they *leave* school than when they *enter* (Persell, 1991). That is, schools, rather than being "the great equalizer," tend to exacerbate even further the social and racial differences that children bring to school.

Blaming single-parent status on students' failure in school is also found in much traditional dropout research. Here too it is important to understand that single-parent status alone cannot be responsible for so many students dropping out. Research by Clark (1983) in inner-city schools in Chicago found that some Black students, even those from single-parent households where parents had a low educational level, can be extremely successful in school. We need to place family-related factors within a larger social and political framework in order to understand that

family structure alone cannot be used as an explanation for dropping out of school.

National data analyzed and reported by the National Council of La Raza (1990) points out that a combination of the factors mentioned above put many Hispanics in a "high risk" category and increase their odds of leaving school. The NCLR report also notes that selected factors have a greater effect than others on the probability of students leaving school. For instance, single-parent family status plus low family income, and low parental education plus limited English proficiency are reported as two significant combinations. The report shows that among 8th grade Hispanic students, 36% tend to exhibit two or more of the risk factors, compared with 14% of Whites and 41% of African Americans. Among sub-Hispanic groups, Puerto Ricans (40.8%) and Mexican Americans (39.3%) are most likely to have two or more risk factors than Cubans (23%). As previously noted, single-parent family status has been identified as a major risk factor affecting Hispanic students. The percentage of Puerto Rican children living in a single-parent household (33%) and headed by a female (29%) is greater than that of any Hispanic group, as well as that of White students. In spite of this, it should be remembered that many Hispanic students from single-parent households are successful in school. Thus, relying on such family structural issues for an explanation of school dropouts is simply inadequate.

Another study suggests that in addition to socioeconomic status and Hispanic origin, Spanish-speaking status is associated with a higher dropout rate than either English-speaking status or other language status. However, as the authors emphasize, "no analysis has independently examined ethnicity, language minority status, and socioeconomic status

as contributors to dropping out" (Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan, 1984). Other researchers who have looked into this issue in more depth pinpoint teacher attitudes and biases about Spanish language use, rather than any inherent deficiency from speaking Spanish, as the real problem. For example, one study in Texas found that teachers repressed Spanish use by their students because they viewed it as a handicap and a "social problem." Teachers thought that continuing to use Spanish was a way for students to persist in being "foreign" and thereby refusing to become American. In spite of the fact that most of their students were American citizens, teachers still viewed them as "outsiders" if they continued speaking Spanish (Hurtado and Rodríguez,1989).

Lack of English skills alone cannot explain poor academic achievement or high dropout rates among students. For example, Cuban students have the highest educational level of all Latinos, yet they are also the most likely to speak Spanish at home. Their largely middle-class background is a more salient factor than their language use (Valdivieso and Cary, 1988). Speaking Spanish has been found to be an asset rather than a handicap in a number of studies. Focusing on the relationship between Spanish language background and achievement among first-, second-, and third-generation Mexican American high school students, another study found that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, Spanish is not an impediment to Latino student achievement (Buriel and Cardoza,1988). A further study, this time focusing on academically successful students from a variety of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and social-class backgrounds, found similar results: all of the students whose families spoke a language other than English were adamant in maintaining it. The same was true of culture. That is, cultural and linguistic maintenance, even if at times conflicted, had a positive impact on the academic success of these students (Nieto, forthcoming).

Although there are certainly exceptions to this, the role of language and culture as mediating factors in educational success cannot be overlooked.

Another study of Latino high school sophomores and seniors found that those who were highly proficient in Spanish performed better on achievement tests and had higher educational aspirations than those who were not (Nielson and Fernández,1981). Furthermore, a long-awaited federal Education Department study recently released concludes that although each of the three types of bilingual-education methods used (English immersion; shifting to English over four years; and shifting to English over six years), are beneficial to native Spanish-speakers, *the more native language instruction students received the more likely were they to be reclassified as proficient in English.* The study found that although English immersion programs may be effective in teaching children English, bilingual programs are even more effective (Ramírez, 1991).

Well-implemented bilingual education programs have been found to reduce the likelihood of Spanish-speaking students leaving school. This has been corroborated by a number of studies, including one conducted in Massachusetts in which Holyoke schools were included. Here, it was found that students enrolled in bilingual classrooms were less likely to be retained in grade and had a higher attendance rate than those not in the program (Walsh and Carballo, 1986). All of these data would suggest that issues of language use and proficiency, just as those of family and social characteristics, have to be understood within their social and political contexts. Speaking Spanish alone is not an adequate explanation for high dropout rates; rather, the way in which Spanish use is viewed by teachers, schools, and communities and the value placed on it are undoubtedly more crucial (Walsh, 1991).

Economic, peer, and personal factors have also been associated with premature school leaving. Getting a job to help the family finances is the most common reason given for dropping out of high school. Pregnancy, marriage, poor motivation, low self-esteem, and friends' educational and social expectations are often associated with dropout decisions (Ekstrom et al.,1986; Wehlage and Rutter,1986; Rumberger,1983). In fact, some of these factors are not really related to dropping out at all. For example, recent studies have pointed out that most teenage females who get pregnant do so *after* dropping out of school, not before. In this case, there may be structures within schools that push females to drop out; it is only afterwards that they may decide to become pregnant. Just as in this case, other factors associated with dropping out need to be challenged in order to get to the root cause, rather than the symptoms, of dropping out. For instance, poor motivation, rather than a *reason* for dropping out, may actually be a *result* of poor schooling and lack of academic success.

Several school-related characteristics or factors within the schools' control associated with the decision to leave school have also been identified. Among them, school policies related to students' behavior (discipline problems, suspension from school, cutting classes, and absenteeism) and poor academic perfc'mance (poor grades and grade retention) are highly associated with dropping out. Among mainstream dropout research, these factors, together with individual and family social and economic characteristics, tend to blame dropout students for "their failure." As Wehlage (Weis et al., 1989) points out, "by focusing exclusively on personal and social characteristics shared by dropouts, this research makes it appear that dropouts are deviant, deficient, or negligent with regard to school."

Rather than blaming the victims who drop out, several researchers have focused on how school characteristics themselves may influence student academic achievement and behavioral problems and, consequently, school retention. This area of research has been more promising than previous research because it has looked beyond family, personal, and socioeconomic characteristics to a more wholistic explanation of school dropout. It has been found that some school policies and practices may negatively influence Hispanic students' academic performance, behavior, and their decision to stay in or leave school. Fernández and Shu, for instance, in analyzing data from the High School and Beyond study, reached a puzzling conclusion: Hispanics had higher dropout rates *even* when their grades were higher than other students; they were in the academic rather than the "general" track; they were not from poor families; they did not have parents with less schooling; and they did not have problems with their teachers (Fernández and Shu, 1988). The researchers concluded that schools have been unsuccessful in holding onto Hispanic students even when they did not display any of the traditional "risk factors" associated with dropping out. The only possible clue as to reasons for dropping out came from the finding that many Hispanic students, both dropouts and stayins, expressed many more negative feelings about their schools than other students in the national sample.

This leads to the necessity of exploring conditions in the school itself that may encourage some students to leave. These conditions are what Wehlage and Rutter have called the "holding power" of schools (1986). These researchers conclude that it is the *combination* of certain student characteristics and certain school conditions that are responsible for students' decisions to drop out. The school factors and a brief description of each follows.

• Grade retention: National data show that after American Indians, Hispanic students are more likely to be held back for two or more grades than any other racial/ethnic group (NCLR,1990). In Massachusetts, the percentage of African Americans (8.5%) and Hispanics (8.3%) recommended for grade retention for the 1988-89 school year is substantially higher than for Asians (3.9%) and Whites (2.7%) (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1990). In addition, in 7 of 10 districts with the highest Hispanic student population, grade retention rates among Hispanics are higher than for other groups (Wheelock,1990). Grade retention among Hispanic students is a major reason why they leave school and experience higher dropout rates. Limited English proficiency, learning disabilities, and/or poor academic performance are the most frequently reported reasons given by students for this decision (Fernández and Vélez,1990; NCLR,1990).

• Over age: Students who have been held back and put behind their age cohorts tend to experience higher dropout rates (Vélez,1989; Fernández and Vélez,1990). High school dropout among students ashamed for being older than their classmates has been noticed. An explanation that focuses on economic reasons seems to be related. As Fernández and Vélez suggest, "given limited financial resources at home and doubts about the long-term benefits of a high school diploma, older students may decide that the personal costs of staying in school are too high."

•Confrontation: Cutting classes, absenteeism, disciplinary problems and school suspension can be classified as "confrontational practices." According to Kim (1985), students who feel alienated from the educational goals of the curriculum and school personnel (teachers, counselors and administrators) become engaged in confrontational practices. Vélez (1990) point outs, "persistent confrontation can lead to official dismissal from

school or to uncomfortable situations that causes the student to leave on his or her own." School suspension also increases the odds of dropping out for all Hispanic groups, although the rate is higher for Cuban and Puerto Rican students.

• Placement Practices: Placement in a particular track is a factor associated with early school leaving. Enrollment in an academic or pre-college preparatory curriculum tends to decrease the likelihood of dropping out. This has been found to be the case among Puerto Rican students. As stated by Vélez (1990), enrollment in an academic curriculum is " a defense against dropping out." It is well documented that Hispanics are overrepresented in "special" and non-academic programs. In addition, Hispanics are far more likely than Whites to enroll in "special" and low-status courses, and far less likely to take advanced or higher level courses (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1990; NCLR,1990; Wheelock,1990).[6]

• Little Participation in Extracurricular Activities: Although participation in extracurricular activities and its effect on dropping out has not been investigated thoroughly, a few studies suggest that such participation may act as a buffer against dropping out. One study centering mostly on interscholastic athletics found that participation is more likely to enhance than interfere with high school students' academic achievement (Steinberg, L., Blinde, P., and Chan, K.,1988). The previously cited research on academically successful students from a variety of backgrounds also found this to be true. That is, in almost every case, academically successful students were far from the stereotypical "nerd" suggested by the conventional wisdom; rather, they were involved in a great variety of activities, from school clubs and sports to participation in community,

cultural, and religious activities (Nieto, forthcoming). Fitting in and the feeling that one is an "insider" are probably related to students' comfort in the school setting.

This review of the literature has revealed that, although much research on dropouts has been carried out, it has often been flawed by an overreliance on decontextualized explanations of why students "leave" school. That is, much of the literature has focused on individual student and family characteristics and neglected the larger social and political framework that would help us understand overarching reasons for school dropout. These include certain school policies and practices; the value placed on race, ethnicity, and language by schools in particular and society in general; and students' feelings of not belonging. We will now turn to the specific case of Holyoke to see how this contextual framework applies to a particular situation.

Puerto Ricans and Other Hispanics in Holyoke

The number of Hispanics in Massachusetts rose dramatically between 1980 and 1990. According to 1990 Census Bureau figures released by the Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research (MISER), the number of Hispanics living in Massachusetts grew 103.9% (from 141,043 to 287,549) compared to a 2.4% (from 5,595,994 to 5,728,876) increase for non-Hispanics during this period.[6] Between 1980 and 1990, after Asian Americans (189.7%), Hispanics became the second fastest growing community, making them the largest minority group in the Commonwealth (MISER,1991).[7] Cities across western Massachusetts are not exempt from this demographic change. Cities such as Holyoke have seen dramatic changes in the composition of their racial/ethnic population.

Holyoke is a medium-size urban city in Western Massachusetts. Designed as a cotton textile manufacturing center, it claims to be the first planned industrial community in the United States. After the Civil War, paper manufacturing replaced cotton textile products as the principal economic activity of Holyoke. By 1880, it came to be known as the "Paper City of the World." Today, although the city has a more diversifed industrial base, the paper industry continues to be one of the most important economic sectors (Engraham Planning Associates, 1987).

During the last two decades, Holyoke has experienced a drastic change in the racial/ethnic composition of its population. The Hispanic population within the city, which is ninety percent Puerto Rican, has increased significantly in the past decade. As overall population declined 2.2 percent, from 44,678 to 43,704, between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of Hispanic residents increased by 120%. In 1980, the White population was 38,276, the African American population was 1,045, and there were 6,165 Hispanics. According to 1990 Census Bureau figures, the racial/ethnicity population composition of Holyoke now shows 31,938 Whites, 1,571 African Americans, and 13,573 Hispanics. In terms of percentages, this means that the proportion of persons of Hispanic origin grew from 14 to 31 percent during this period (MISER, 1991).

The racial/ethnic student composition of the public schools shows the same demographic changes that can be seen city-wide: declining White student enrollment and an increasing Hispanic student population. According to data pubished by Holyoke Public Schools (HPS,1991) in 1974, 80% (7,014) of the total school system enrollment was White, and less than 16% (1,414) was Hispanic. In 1985. these figures were 44 % for Hispanics (3,030) and 51% (3,481) for Whites. One year later, the number

of Hispanic students surpassed the number of White students. By 1990, while the percentage of White students enrolled in the Holyoke schools dropped almost 32% from what it had been in 1980 (to 2,407), the enrollment of Hispanic students jumped 62% during the same time period (to 4,711).

As mentioned before, of all racial and ethnic groups in Massachusetts, Hispanic students have the highest dropout rate. The public schools of Holyoke are no exception. For the 1986-1987 school year, the percentage of Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics who left high school in Holyoke was the highest among all racial/ethnic groups.[8] According to Holyoke Public Schools' annual dropout rate data, more than half (52%) of those youths who left school were White students, followed by Puerto Ricans/Hispanics (46%), and Asian Americans (2%). However, at the junior high school level, 64% of the total dropouts were Puerto Ricans, compared to 36% for White students (HPS,1990).[9]

By the 1989-1990 school year, Puerto Rican students were dropping out at a higher rate than Whites. During that period, the dropout rate for Hispanic high school students was the highest at 68%, followed by White students at 25%. At Holyoke High School, Puerto Rican students dropped out at a rate of 72%, compared to 20% for Whites. Three years earlier (1986), the dropout rate difference between Whites (47%) and Puerto Ricans (50%) was relatively small (HPS,1990). The annual dropout rate among Puerto Ricans students at the junior high school level rose from 64% to 69% between 1986-87 and 1989-90. Meanwhile, the dropout rate of White students decreased from 36% to 25% during the same time period.

A Profile: Dropouts and Graduates

For the 1989-90 school year, 62% of the city's total school enrollment consisted of Hispanic students, the great majority of whom were Puerto Rican. For the same time period, the number of Hispanics enrolled at Holyoke's two high schools constituted 46% of the total student enrollment at that level. However, of the students who left high school during this academic year, 68% were Puerto Rican. The transition in Holyoke from a primarily White to a primarily Latino student population is a phenomenon that is happening in other parts of the state and the Northeast as well. Thus, Holyoke is an ideal setting to study the dropout phenomenom of Hispanics, particularly Puerto Ricans, because we may be able to uncover specific tensions and conditions in such settings that exacerbate the dropout problem. A brief statistical description of the data collected and major trends derived from it are summarized below.

The racial/ethinic and gender distribution of the students who graduated is as follows: a total of 71 students are Hispanic (38 female and 33 male); 50 students are White (23 females and 27 males); 2 are Asian male students; and 2 are African Americans (one of each gender).[11] The breakdown of the 82 students in the dropout group is as follows: 49 Hispanics (21 females and 28 males); 26 Whites (16 females and 10 males); 4 African American males; and 3 Asian students (1 female).

Forty-four percent (86) of all students (207) reported that they were born in the city of Holyoke. Among Whites, stayers and dropouts combined (76), about 3 of 4 students (74%) reported than they were born in Holyoke. In contrast, twenty-two percent (30) of the Hispanic students (120) were born in Holyoke and forty-four percent (54) in Puerto Rico. Only three

Hispanic students were born in South America. It is significant to note that the students born in Puerto Rico exibited a disproportionaly higher dropout rate than those born in Holyoke. Of those students in our sample, only ten percent (3) of Puerto Ricans born in Holyoke left high school compared to forty-two percent (22) of those born in the island.

With regard to family structure, Hispanic dropouts tend to live in a single-parent family, usually with a mother but no father. The study found that more than one in two Hispanic students (55%) live with one parent at home. Fifty-one percent of them live in families headed by a mother. Compared with dropouts, Hispanics who stay in school are twice as likely to come from a family with two parents at home. Forty-four percent (30) of Hispanic high school graduates live in two-parent families, compared to twenty-two percent (11) of the dropouts.

When gender is taken into account, the situation changes quite dramatically. The proportion of Hispanic females (stayers and dropouts) who live in single-parent households is higher (58%) than that of Hispanic males (44%). Male Hispanic students who come from two-parent families exhibited a higher rate of high school completion (53%) compared with their female counterparts (37%). However, the proportion of Hispanic females who completed high school and live in a single-parent family, in most cases headed by the mother, is higher (58%) than those high school graduate females who live with both parents (37%).

White students (dropouts and stayers) are twice as likely to live in two-parent households than Hispanics. Three out of four (76%) White students live in two-parent families compared with one out of three (34%) Hispanics. Seventy-eight percent of the total early school leavers live in

two-parents household, compared to seventy-three percent of those who graduate high school. Among the White youths (graduates and dropouts combined) who live with only one parent, 86% live in female-headed families.

Both White female and male students living with both parents tend to have higher dropout rates (87% females and 69% males) than those who live in one parent-families (13% females and 25%). Among those students who live in a two-parent household, the proportion of those who do not finish high-school is slightly higher (78%) than those who graduate (73%).

Self-reported data of parents' occupational status shows an unequal pattern both between White and Hispanic males, and Hispanic and White females. Forty-six percent of White male parents reported that they were employed in blue collar occupations (machine operator, tool maker) and 33% in professional jobs (teacher, lawyer, engineer) compared with 35% and 6% respectively for Hispanic males. On the other hand, 55% of Hispanic females identified their occupation as "ama de casa" (housewife), 12% as unemployed or on welfare, and 12% as blue collar worker, compared with 30%, 3%, and 22% respectively for White females. In addition, 24% of the White mothers reported being employed as either nurse, teacher or manager, compared with only 1% for Hispanic mothers. In the dropout group, a high proportion of Hispanic students' parents (64%) identified their occupation as "ama de casa," unemployed, or on welfare, compared to 11% of White's parents.

Data on the students' dominant language was available for 106 Hispanic students from a total of120. Among all Hispanic high school students, Spanish appears to be their primary language. Forty-five percent

(48) of all Hispanic students appear to be Spanish dominant, followed by English-speakers (38 students for 36%), and speakers of both (20 students for 19%). Data obtained regarding the students' language proficiency as determined by the home language survey and the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM) appear to yield contradictory findings. Spanish language dominance appears to be a factor in both those who drop out and those who graduate. Among the dropouts, the proportion of Hispanic students whose dominant language was reported as being Spanish is higher (46%) than Hispanic English-dominant students (38%). However, among graduates, the data indicates that the proportion of Spanish-dominant students is higher (45%) than Hispanic English-dominant speakers (38%).

Among Hispanic high school dropouts, those enrolled in mainstream programs are more likely to drop out than those enrolled in the Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) Program. Sixty-nine percent (34) of all Hispanic dropouts were enrolled in mainstream programs, compared with thirty-one percent (15) in TBE. Of those enrolled in mainstream programs, sixty-five percent (22) reported English as their dominant language; fifteen percent (4) reported being bilingual; fifteen percent (4) identified themselves as being Spanish-dominant. Among this latter group (Spanish-dominant) four students have attended the Holyoke Public Schools since the primary grades. Of the 15 students enrolled in the TBE program who dropped out of high school during either their junior or senior year, ten were Spanish-dominant. All of them had transferred from various public schools in Puerto Rico one or two years prior to dropping out. In addition, all of them had obtained grades of C or lower in all academic subjects. Among Hispanic dropouts, 9 of 28 students (32%) were enrolled in the TBE program at some time prior to entering high school, compared to 17 out of 38 (54%) graduates.

Regarding why students leave high school, there is no doubt that "work" is the most popular reason reported by dropouts: fifty-three (24) of all dropouts reported work as a reason for leaving high school. White females appear to report work more frequently (79%) than do White males (64%) and Hispanic females (43%). The labor market implications of these data cannot be ignored. While no Hispanic males reported this reason for leaving school, at least in the sample obtained, data from all Holyoke High School dropouts for the 1989-90 school year shows that Hispanic students left school to get a job at a higher rate (35%) than White students (28%). Marriage, homemaking, and/or pregnancy appear to be uncommon (just one student) reasons reported for leaving high school among females, regardless of race or ethnicity. The second most frequently reported reason by females for leaving high school was to obtain a GED. Again, this may indicate that this type of program fits in better with a work schedule, work being an absolute necessity for many families. Forty-three percent (35) of all students left high school for reported "reasons" such as "dropout" and "other." This means that their records indicated that the reasons they left school were either to "drop out" or for "other" reasons. The lack of adequate reporting at the school level is no doubt responsible for these records.

Academic tracking has been found to be responsible for de facto discrimination. It adversely affects those students most at risk of educational failure and has been found to be most prevalent in schools with large numbers of students of color (Oakes, 1986). In Holyoke, information on advanced level courses taken by Hispanic and White students sheds light on their academic achievement and educational opportunities. It appears that the gap between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students is greatest in the areas of school performance (as measured by reported grades) and

educational expectations (as measured by advanced courses taken and plans to attend college). Whites are far more likely than Hispanics to take advanced level courses.[12] Of the 104 advanced courses taken by the 1990 graduating class, sixty-nine (66%) were taken by Whites and just thirty (30%) by Hispanic students. Among Hispanics, female students took 66% of the total courses taken by Hispanic graduates. However, White males took more (55%) advanced courses compared with white female students (45%). Enrollment in advanced level courses among dropouts is almost zero. Six high level courses were taken by Hispanic, White, Asian and African American dropouts (82) combined.

If taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is a good predictor of students' plans to attend college, the data in this study further illustrates differences in the educational opportunities between White and Hispanic students. Hispanic graduates are far less likely to take the SAT than White students. Twenty of the seventy-one Hispanic graduates (28%) took the SAT compared to thirty-six of fifty (72%) White graduates. Among the dropouts, only 5 White students and no Hispanics took the SAT. Hispanic female students are twice as likely to take the SAT as Hispanic males. One out of three (37%) Hispanic female graduates took the test, compared to one in five (18%) Hispanic males.

When considering the grade point average of students who graduated, the data indicates that Whites are far more likely to get "A"s than Hispanics. Sixty-six percent (11) of the total "A" students were Whites, compared to twenty-one percent (3) of the Hispanics. Nevertheless, Hispanic students on the average achieved higher grade point averages than either White graduates or dropouts. For example, 56% were more likely to graduate with a grade average of "B" than White students (39%). In

addition, the percentage of Hispanic students (67%) with a grade average of "C" by far surpasses the percentage (31%) of White graduates.

In the Hispanic graduate group, two females were held back in the 9th grade as a result of poor academic performance; however, both completed high school with a grade average of "B." Back in 2nd grade, a note in a Puerto Rican girl's cumulative record stated that such a student "should have repeated 1st grade (But parent insisted she be promoted)." Ten years later, this student graduated with a grade average of "C+". It is interesting to note as well that from this graduating class of 1990, just one student was identified as having special needs, and therefore received special education services during junior and senior high school.

Twenty (61%) of the thirty-three graduates who entered at the high school level came from the public school system in Puerto Rico. Their grade point averages ranged from "C" to "B." Of the dropouts who entered at the high school level, a high proportion came from the Island's public school system (71%). However, this latter group tends to have lower academic grade averages. With the exception of one student with a "B" average, the group's grade average ranged from "C minus" to "D minus". Grade point average distribution among 11th and 12th grade dropouts reveals that 35% (25 students) reported a grade average of "C," and 3% (2 students) of "B". Seventeen out of thirty-seven (46%) Hispanic dropouts reported a grade average of "C" or higher, compared to six out of twenty (27%) for White students.

A high proportion of White graduates and dropouts have been in Holyoke schools for most of their school life. Among graduates, seventy-eight percent (39) had attended Holyoke schools since prior to

sixth grade, and ten percent (51) prior to ninth grade. The remaning 12% (6) White graduates entered the Holyoke schools at the high school level. All were previously enrolled in private schools. The proportion of Hispanic graduates who enrolled prior to 6th and 9th grade is 42% (30), and 13% (9) respectively. The remaining 45% (33) Hispanic graduates enrolled at the high school level. On the other hand, 49% (24), and 8% (4) of Hispanic dropouts had attended the Holyoke schools since prior to 6th grade and 9th grade respectively. The remaining 43% (21) dropouts enrolled in or after 9th grade. The distribution for White dropouts is: 61% (16) prior to 6th grade, 4% (1) prior to 9th grade, and 35% (9) at high school level. Thirty-three percent of White dropouts attended private school prior to enrolling at Holyoke High School.

In the group of White graduate students that entered the Holyoke school system at the elementary level, the proportion of graduates is higher (76%) than the proportion of dropouts (61%). On the other hand, a low percentage (14%) of White graduates entered the school system during their high school years, compared with the dropout group (35%). Finally, 11 out of 26 (42%) White students who left high school without a diploma were overage for grade by at least one year, compared to 14 out of 49 (29%) Hispanic dropouts. Among all the dropouts, two students had a grade point average of "B," one Hispanic female, and one White male.

In general, Holyoke's Puerto Rican students can be clustered in two groups: one, those students who had been enrolled in the Holyoke schools since prior to high school and; two, those who enrolled at the high school level. In the first group, the data indicate that Hispanics who had been in the TBE program at some point in their schooling have a better chance of graduating that those who had never been in the program. A high proportion

of students in this group are Spanish-dominant; this, in turn, appears to be a significant factor when considering their higher dropout rate. However, there are reasons to consider these findings as non-conclusive. In the first place, the two ways the school has for determining language dominance (the home language survey and the BSM) were administered to the students years prior to entering high school. It is important to note that the BSM, a screening instrument designed to determine "language proficiency", is not a comprehensive measure. Second, given the fact that the majority of these students have been Holyoke students since the primary grades, it is unlikely for Spanish to continue to be their primary language for academic purposes.

On the other hand, the "early-exit" philosophy of TBE programs has been shown to disadvantage many students for future academic success. While no longer totally dominant in Spanish, many of these students are also not academically proficient in English. The result can be a disproportionaly higher number of students who are referred for special education services or who simply wait out their time in high school until they can drop out (Cummins, 1986).

When considering those students who moved from Puerto Rico and enrolled in high school, the analysis appears to be easier due to several facts. There is no doubt that Spanish is their primary language. This in turn may explain why a high proportion of Hispanic graduates are Spanish-dominant. The TBE program provides the means for those who come with a grade point average of "C" or higher to attain graduation. Lack of success, for the students who come from Puerto Rico at the high school level and drop out, may be related to the quality of education they received in Puerto Rico.

The number of Hispanic students enrolled in advanced courses as well as those who take the SAT is significantly small. This might be due either to a lack of academic aspirations beyond the high school level or a lack of information and encouragement on the part of the school system. A high number of Spanish-speaking students find their field of choices in advanced courses limited because of their year of enrollment at the high school and their apparent lack of English proficiency. This is also true for Hispanics who are English dominant, although they have more choices. Low academic achievement as measured by grades, and low self-expectations, influenced by teachers' low expectations, might be possible explanations that apply to this latter group.

The curriculum offered at the high school level gives even more reason for the alienation many Puerto Rican students may feel. The *Holyoke High School Course Selection Guide* gives a complete listing of all the courses available at the high school. In this school system that has a 62% Puerto Rican student body, there is only one course on Puerto Rican history and it is found *only in the bilingual program.* For English-speaking Puerto Rican students in the mainstream, who are the majority, and for non-Puerto Ricans, no equivalent course is available. Ironically, although the number of African American and Jewish students in the school system is very small, there is a course on Apartheid and another on the Holocaust. These are no doubt offered because it is felt that all students could benefit from them. The same could certainly be said about a course on Puerto Rican history that concerns the background of the majority of students in the school.

Some Thoughts From Students

We received additional data about why Puerto Rican students drop out of school through students' personal experiences in the school system. We conducted interviews with three students, one who had dropped out and two who had completed high school and it became evident that additional school-related experiences may be implicated in students' decision to drop out. José, one of the students interviewed, explained how he felt at school: "I felt alone." After a brief silence, he added, "Tú sabes..... no son los míos" (you know.....they are not my people); "I was an outsider."[13] José is an 11th grade dropout and had been a Holyoke school student since kindergarten. He lives with both parents and three siblings and works at a paper factory. José does not plan to go back to high school or get the GED. It seems that even some students like José, who have had the benefit of a Holyoke education since kindergarten, still feel alienated and alone in the school setting. Because of his feelings of isolation, José is neither able to benefit from his educational and social experience in Holyoke nor to build on his culture and language to help him succeed.

Pedro's situation is a bit different. Pedro is a Holyoke High School graduate who lives with his mother and no siblings. He works as a machine operator in a local paper factory, and is planning to attend college as soon as his mother is economically independent. A Holyoke school system student since the 7th grade, Pedro described his overall school experience as "buena" (good) even though he made a point of clarifying that "algunas maestras yo no las entiendo" (I don't understand what some teachers say), in reference to the "americanas" (Americans). When asked if his level of English proficiency accounted for this situation, and for not taking advanced courses or the SAT, Pedro replied: "No mister... no, no es el

inglés... el problema es otro... no sé explicarle, no sé." (No, mister... no, it is not the English... that's not the problem... I don't know how to explain it, I don't know).

When asked to make recommendations to the Holyoke School Deparment about helping Puerto Rican students stay in school, Pedro answered: "Hacer algo para que los boricuas no se sientan aparte" (Do something so that the Puerto Ricans would not feel alienated), as he himself had felt many times. Although his experience has been different from José's, given the fact that he graduated and could thus be considered more successful, he too is quite clear that his educational experience was less than adequate. Both graduates and dropouts expressed feelings of disengagement from school.

Carlos, a Puerto Rican student who enrolled in the high school in 11th grade and graduated a year later, described his experience as "la pasé bien" (I had a good time). When reacting to the comment that he had been a student in Holyoke for only two years, he said: " Sí, eso es verdad pero la pasé 'cool'... porque yo no me meto con nadie" (Yes, that's true but it was 'cool'... because I keep to myself). He learned that in order to be successful in school, he would have to keep to himself, to keep his private world separate from his school world. Carlos is currently working as a janitor and living with his mother and two siblings. He says he finished high school so that his mother would be proud of him since he was the first one in the family to do so.

Summary and Discussion

The data analyzed in this study sheds some light on the high rate of Puerto Rican dropouts in the Holyoke school system. Major findings can be

summarized as follows:

• The dropout rate among Puerto Rican youths in the 1990 cohort group was 68% overall. At Holyoke High School specifically, the dropout rate was 72%.

• School-related data indicate that students born in Holyoke had a substantially lower dropout rate (3%) than those born in Puerto Rico (22%).

• Among dropouts, those enrolled in mainstream programs are more than twice as likely to drop out (69%) than those enrolled in the Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) program (31%). Of the Hispanics enrolled in the TBE program who dropped out, 67% had transferred from various public schools in Puerto Rico one or two years prior to dropping out; all had obtained grade point averages of C or lower in all academic subjects in Puerto Rico; and all were Spanish dominant. Hispanics enrolled in the TBE program at some point prior to entering high school exhibited a higher rate of graduation than those never enrolled in the TBE program.

• The gap between Hispanics and Whites is greatest in the area of tracking or ability grouping. Of the total advanced courses taken by the 1990 graduating class, 69% were taken by Whites and 30% by Hispanics, even though Hispanics made up 57% of the class. In addition, the proportion of White graduates (72%) who took the SAT is far higher than that for Hispanics (28%). However, there is no indication that Hispanics were over-represented in vocational oriented courses. Academic tracking has been responsible for de facto discrimination, and the situation is no different in Holyoke (Oakes, 1986).

• The curriculum offered in the high school is often at odds with the experiences and culture of the majority of students. No course on Puerto Rican history and culture is taught in English and few other courses seem to include any reference to the Latino experience in general.

• Hispanic students, both dropouts and graduates, had higher grade

point averages overall than did White students. The percentage of Hispanic graduates with a grade average of "C" (67%) by far surpasses the percentage (31%) of Whites. Among dropouts, 46% of Hispanic reported a grade average of "C" or higher, compared with 27% for Whites. White graduates (66%) are far more likely to get "A"s than Hispanics (21%).

• Spanish appears to be the primary language among Hispanic high school students and Spanish language dominance seems to be a factor in both dropouts and stayins. Among dropouts, Spanish-dominant students dropped out at a higher rate than Hispanic English-dominant students. However, among graduates, Spanish-dominant students had a higher high school completion rate than Hispanic English-dominant speakers.

• Most Hispanic students in the Holyoke High Schools were born in Puerto Rico (44%) and Holyoke, Massachusettes (22%).

• Family-related characteristics such as family structure and socioeconomic status of Holyoke's Puerto Rican students have been consistently similar with those of previous research. Regarding family structure, the study found than 1 out of 2 Hispanic dropouts (55%) lives in a single parent household, and 51% lives in female-headed families. Hispanic high school graduates are twice as likely (40%) to come from a two-parent family than are dropouts (22%).

• Although "work" is the most popular reason reported by students for leaving high school, this is not true for Hispanic males. Among Hispanic females, both work and getting the GED are the most frequently cited reasons for dropping out. However, one out of three of all students left high school for reasons stated as "dropout" and "other." This finding points to the lack of consistent record-keeping and follow-up of students who drop out of high school in the Holyoke public schools.

It comes as no surprise that socioeconomic status measured through

parental occupation and certain family stuctures are factors that appear to be present at a higher proportion among Hispanic students than Whites, and among Hispanic dropouts than Hispanic graduates. Among dropouts, especially Hispanics, living in a single parent-family, being overage for grade by at least one year, and low family income increase the odds of leaving school. Insofar as limited family income usually depends on a single wage, in most cases from the female, older students may decide that they are better off working than staying in school. As Vélez points out, "the lack of economic resources at home increases the costs of further education because the income that the student would receive if he or she was working would significantly improve the family's situation." This situation appears to be confirmed by the high proportion of Hispanic females that report "work" as a reason for leaving high school.

Regarding why students leave high school, it is important to highlight that even though "work" was the most popular reason self-reported by Hispanic female dropouts, this might very well be masking other reasons for dropping out. The high proportion of so-called "reasons" for dropping out that were reported as "dropout" and "other" speaks to the school's responsibility to obtain more accurate data in these cases.

Data that we have reviewed focused on a number of factors related to dropping out. Some of these traditional data have to do with family structure, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement as measured by grade point average. However, as our critique of traditional dropout research has pointed out, such data do little to provide definitive and clear-cut explanations for the dropout phenomenon among Hispanics in Holyoke. Using these indicators alone, it is clear that no one factor can account for the extremely high dropout rate among Latinos in the Holyoke

Public Schools. In fact, these data are fraught with contradictions and seeming disparities. For example, family structure, specifically female-headed households, might be a contributing factor for dropping out, but this does little to explain why almost half of Holyoke dropouts come from a *two-parent* family. Thus, family structure *per se* is not the problem. Likewise, both dropouts and stayins are more likely to be Spanish dominant than English dominant, thus challenging the claim that English dominance inevitably leads to a higher rate of graduation. Also, although success in school as measured by grade point average results in larger numbers of White students remaining in school, the same is not true for Hispanics. That is, given their grades, we would expect that a much higher proportion of Puerto Ricans would graduate than is actually true.

All of these factors suggest that dropping out cannot be explained by simply looking at socioeconomic status, structural family issues, or students' relative academic achievement. Although grueling poverty and attendant problems of unemployment, inadequate housing, and poor health care, among others, certainly make academic success more difficult, they alone cannot account for the success or failure of students in the Holyoke schools. If this were so, many more Puerto Rican students in our study of the 1990 cohort group would have quit school. Other conditions inside and outside of school may be equally important. Although this particular study has focused on schools, we have not considered in depth other community and societal factors that may be important in explaining school dropout. But because it is the schools' responsibility to educate all students regardless of their socioeconomic status, language ability, or family structure, schools need to review the impact that their policies and practices have on particular groups of students.

The research reviewed has made it abundantly clear that a combination of teacher, school, and societal expectations of students (based on their social class, race, ethnicity, and language) are important factors to consider in students' achievement. The curriculum, both hidden and overt, also serves as a "risk factor" in that it is often unrelated to the experiences and background of many students. Thus, factors such as socioeconomic status and family structure cannot be given as sole reasons for high dropout rates. Unfortunately, it is these characteristics of students' race, language dominance, social class, and family structure that are often cited as the most important considerations in school failure, and this tends to dismiss the schools' obligation to educate all students. In the final analysis, what we can say with some certainty is that factors such as female-headed households may be a contributing factor but not an adequate explanation for the wholesale dropout rate among Hispanics.

A better way of understanding school dropout is by exploring a complexity of factors that may impact differently on different students. Structures besides family characteristics and socioeconomic status need to be considered as well. Our critique of traditional dropout research is based on the conclusion that contextual factors have to be included as well in any analysis of school failure. A contextual analysis goes beyond just individual and family characteristics and focuses on school policies and practices, including curriculum offerings and programs that build on students' language and culture; community and school expectations of students' achievement; teachers' interactions with students; and the general climate in schools that either encourages or discourages students from staying in school. By focusing on these contextual factors, we have been able to develop some insights into the disproportionately large number of Puerto Ricans who drop out of school in Holyoke.

The data we have reviewed for this study have been primarily quantitative in nature. The limits of these kinds of data are very clear. While they may give us important information about grade point averages, the number of years students have been in a particular system, their language dominance, and so on, they do little to tell us about the quality of the school experience for students. Nevertheless, some important contextual factors were either not easily available nor quantifiable (for example, do teachers in Holyoke have equally high expectations of all students? Are some school policies subtly racist and exclusionary? How is Spanish use viewed within the school setting?) An investigation of issues such as these would probably go a long way in helping Holyoke focus on the school dropout dilemma in a more comprehensive way.

Several school conditions have shed light on why some students are more persistent in school than others. Spanish dominance, as mentioned previously, has not been a deterrent to school success. On the contrary, it can be an asset, depending on whether or not students had the advantage of a bilingual program. Bilingual education, then, is an important way for schools to mediate students' experiences in school, helping them to acculturate to the educational environment while using the language and culture with which they are most familiar. As in previous research, this study points out the potential benefits of bilingual education in helping students successfully complete school by making them feel comfortable within the academic setting.

The students' own voices, through the interviews, reinforce the importance of feeling comfortable in the school setting. Although admittedly a very small number and certainly not meant to be representative of either dropouts or stayins, the three students to whom

we spoke had some cogent messages about their school experiences. All three, whether they had completed high school or not, felt alienated by their school experiences. They felt that they did not belong and all articulated this feeling, sometimes hesitatingly but clearly. Fitting in seems to be an issue even for those who have known no other home but Holyoke and who have been in the local schools for many years. The urge to belong and fit in cannot be overemphasized; it has come up as a primary concern of Latino students in national studies as well (Miller, et al., 1988).

The very rewards of staying in school, studying long hours, and graduating are brought into question by this research. Even the two students we interviewed who had completed high school were not necessarily better off economically than the one who had dropped out. All were working in low-level and poor-paying jobs that have little promise for the future. The advantage of a high school education is not apparent to many students, whether dropouts or graduates. Carlos, who says he graduated because it made his mother proud, is currently working as a janitor. It is no surprise that many students choose to drop out and pursue other dreams if this is what they see as the advantage of a high school diploma.

It is also important to mention that those students who had been in Holyoke schools since kindergarten or first grade had a significantly lower dropout rate than those who were not. In this case, it seems that the schools were more successful in helping these students "fit in" and thus feel more comfortable in school. Whether even these Hispanic Holyoke High School graduates have received any tangible benefits from their high school diploma is, however, unknown. The only data that we have concerning these students' plans to attend college (whether they took the

SAT, for instance) are not hopeful. We must conclude that although "fitting in" is an important first step in making students feel comfortable at school, it is by no means enough to encourage them to pursue a higher education or even to have higher expectations of themselves.

Implications of Research for School Policy and Practice

A number of implications for changing school policy and practice are suggested by this research. We will mention each of these and comment briefly on them.

• *Maintain and strengthen bilingual programs.* Despite the limits of using primarily quantitative data, it has provided some dramatic examples of programs and policies that are more successful than others. The bilingual program, for one, has proven to be substantially more effective at helping students stay in school than the mainstream program. This has tended to be true of bilingual programs in other towns also (Massachusetts Advocacy Center, 1990). The implications of this success for Holyoke and similar school systems could not be clearer: continuing and strengthening the bilingual program is an important step to ensure that more Hispanic students receive a meaningful education and graduate from high school.

• *Reform the curriculum.* It is difficult to determine how the actual school curriculum was implemented from the data we reviewed. In spite of this, we found that the stated curriculum was narrow in its focus and often had little relevance for the majority of students. In addition, the bilingual program offered no advanced courses, only basic or standard level courses, again reinforcing the low status of the program. The very scarcity of course offerings in the bilingual program was quite dramatic. In addition, the complete absence of courses that focus on the background and experience of the majority of students in the Holyoke schools confirms

the need for comprehensive curriculum reform. The fact that so many Hispanic students were found in lower-level courses and had little access to higher-level academic courses also gives us some indication of the impact that curriculum can have on students' life chances. A total reform of the curriculum, from revision of materials to development of meaningful, multicultural content, is a first step in helping Puerto Rican students succeed in school.

• *Rethink ability grouping.* This research has confirmed the problem with ability group tracking. We found that Hispanic dropouts left the Holyoke schools with higher grade point averages than their White counterparts; those Hispanic students who graduated also did so with higher grades than their White peers. Yet, Puerto Rican students were grossly underrepresented in college-preparatory classes. Ability grouping needs to be rethought if all students are to have access to the high-status knowledge that is necessary for academic success and college attendance.

• *Revise retention policies.* Previous research has demonstrated, and this study confirms, that retention as a policy simply does not work. If the purpose of retaining students is to give them a better chance to succeed, it has failed. Students who are overage for their grade are often frustrated by the experience of remaining in the same grade for one, two, or even three years. Schools need to find alternatives to help students who are not succeeding in school.

• *Develop work-study programs to provide an incentive for young people to stay in school.* A number of students in this study claimed that they dropped out of school in order to work. Yet, in the small number of interviews we did with former Holyoke High School students, we found that their present work situations were in dead-end jobs that held little promise for advancement. Their academic preparation had little to do with these jobs. A curriculum for eighth to twelfth graders that provides a

combination of academic classes with work experiences, where students understand the connection of school to their future, might be a more effective way of holding more students in school.

• *Improve counseling practices.* The role of counselors in motivating students to stay in school cannot be overemphasized. Even among those Puerto Rican students who graduated from high school, the notion of college as a real possibility was remote at best. This was clear from looking at the small number of Hispanics who were in advanced level or college preparatory classes and those who took the SAT. In many high schools, counselors are assigned to do scheduling, testing, and other activities unrelated to direct work with students. This situation needs to be changed in order to provide equal access to an excellent education for all students.

• *Maintain reliable records and accurate information about dropouts.* It became clear to us that students who drop out often do so without ever speaking to a counselor, teacher, or high school administrator. Their records indicate such reasons for dropping out as "drop out," a meaningless explanation that does little to alert school personnel to factors that may motivate some students to leave. Schools need to have in place systems that ensure that all students who are thinking of leaving school have the opportunity to speak with professional staff (not secretaries, as is often the case) to explain their reasons for leaving. Interviewing each student carefully and thoroughly is a first step in understanding not only individual students, but also those policies and practices that help to push other students out. Schools also need tc identify potential dropouts as soon as possible and give them the support they need before they drop out. Providing such assistance at the high school level is too little, too late. The middle-school grades, and sometimes even elementary school, is the place to start.

• *Reform discipline y policies.* A review of the literature confirms the negative role that disciplinary policies can have, particularly when they are perceived as unfair by students. These policies include suspensions for absences and for other infractions. Students who are repeatedly suspended are more likely to drop out of school. Including students in reformulating disciplinary policies is one way to begin to reverse this process.

• *Investigate teacher-student interactions.* Although we received very little information about students' interactions with teachers, it is worth noting that those interviewed said they were sometimes negative. They did not necessarily single out particular teachers for criticism, but rather focused on the school climate in which teachers and students interact. The fact that the Holyoke Public Schools have changed from a predominately White to a majority Puerto Rican system in the past twenty years means that it has been through some tumultuous and dramatic changes. Some administrators and teachers may not yet feel comfortable or knowledgeable enough about their students to work effectively with them; others may be insensitive and expect little from their students. Students voiced the feeling that some of their teachers simply did not care. More data from in-depth interviews need to be done to investigate this important issue further.

• *Develop a more welcoming school climate.* Developing a more affirming school climate for all students is also indicated. What became clear through the few interviews we had with former Holyoke High School students was that they never quite felt at home at school, as if the school were "theirs" rather than "ours." Probably even more important than what can be done at the classroom level is what happens at the larger school level through the leadership of administrators. This should include the curriculum reform previously mentioned as well as initiatives such as

outreach to foster parent involvement, creating clubs that are of interest to a wider array of students, actively recruiting Hispanics into existing clubs and teams, and developing a cadre of students to work with their peers in both academic and non-academic endeavors.

Conclusions

The Holyoke schools are reflective of school systems throughout the country that have high Latino enrollments. Given the historic tensions, typical of our society, between the newest immigrants and other more established city residents, it is no surprise that racism and apathy go hand in hand in the destruction of a school system. As a recent newspaper article on the crisis in the Holyoke Public Schools stated, "A factor in the system's problems, some say, may be racism. A number of teachers and principals said they believe an aging white community has abandoned the schools because of antagonism toward Puerto Rican children, who make up almost 63% of the student body here." (*Boston Globe,* 1991). Although each city and town differs in its political, social, historical, and economic context, the problem is a national one and this research on the dropout problem in the Holyoke Public Schools may shed light on other school systems as well.

Traditional dropout research has focused on socioeconomic status and structural factors as responsible for high dropout rates. Although these are certainly contributing factors to the high dropout rate, by themselves they fail to adequately explain the wholesale dropout rates of Latino students. Factors that focus on the social, cultural, and political contexts in which students live and go to school need to be considered as well. These include school curriculum and climate, policies and practices that

discourage students from staying in school, and the quality of interactions among teachers, students, and parents.

In spite of the fact that the Holyoke Public Schools has looked for ways to lower the dropout rate, it has remained high. We are left with a rather pessimistic scenario of a school system in an aging town with more demands for services than ever before, trying to hold onto a shrinking tax base, and attempting to understand and focus on its very large dropout rate with little success. This research has made it clear that much more needs to be done by the school system to create environments that affirm all students because too many of them still feel like strangers in their own schools. Nevertheless, there is some reason for hope. A number of practices, particularly the bilingual program, are substantially more successful at holding onto students than others. Although the data from the school system sheds some light on several factors that may contribute to the high dropout rate, other contextual information is hard to assess. Given the limits of our own study and the many questions with which we are left, we believe the following need to be investigated more thoroughly:

- What curricular changes might provide a more inclusive learning environment for all students?
- What is the quality of interactions among students and teachers?
- How is the school climate perceived by students?
- What alternative activities within the school setting might attract a more diverse student population? How might this affect the dropout rate?
- If students who have been in Holyoke since their early schooling are much more likely to graduate, how can we capitalize on this? What are the implications for policy and practice?
- How does graduation affect students' choices for work or further

education? Does high school graduation "pay off" for Puerto Rican students in Holyoke?

This research study has been a preliminary attempt to develop some understanding of the disproportionately high dropout rate among Puerto Rican youths in one school system in Western Massachusetts. It may shed light, however, on similar school systems with Puerto Rican and other Latino populations. Traditional dropout research has focused primarily on personal, family, social, and economic factors to develop theories about why some students drop out of school. Although such theories may provide partial insights into the problem, they can steer attention away from what the school must do to provide equal educational opportunities for all students. A comprehensive approach looks more critically at contextual factors such as the schools' curriculum and programmatic offerings, retention and ability group practices, and counseling services in an attempt to develop learning environments than can eliminate the feelings of students like José that "I was an outsider."

Reference Notes

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1. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, poverty rates rose notablely among Hispanics without a high school diploma. In 1978, the poverty rate among Hispanics aged 35 and over who left high school before graduation was 25%. By 1987, the level of poverty reached 36%. The percent of Puerto Ricans living under the poverty level has remained higher than any other Hispanic subgroups. In 1978, some 40% of Puerto Ricans lived in poverty. The rate was the same in 1987.

2. Although in most cases we use the term "Hispanic" to be consistent with the label used by federal, state, and local agencies (e.g., the Bureau of the Census, Massachusetts Deparment of Education, and Holyoke Public Schools), the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

3. Although dropout figures vary from study to study depending on the definition and the computation of the dropout rate, Hispanics continue to have the highest school dropout rates of any major group.

4. Massachusetts Department of Education defines dropout as students16 or older who leave school prior to graduation for reasons other than transfer to another school and annual dropout rates describe the percentages of students who drop out in a given year.

5. A student's cummulative record consists of all or some of the following: Elementary Transcript, Elementary Temporary Record, Secondary Temporary Record, Secondary Transcript Grades, Social and Personal Record, Home Language Survey, Holyoke High School Application Form, Bilingual Systax Measure II, Language-Cognitive Needs Profile, Massachusetts School Health Report, and "Certificado de Créditos de Escuela Superior". Past academic performance of students transferred from Puerto Rico public high schools to Holyoke High School are detailed in the latter transcript.

6. All but two of the 71 Hispanic are of Puerto Rican origin.

7. For a comphehensive study on the curricular tracking system in Boston see Massacusetts Advocacy Center (March, 1990) Locked In/ Locked Out: Tracking and Placement Practices in Boston Publics School.

8. Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race.

9. Persons of Asian and Pacific Islanders origin grew at a higher rate (189.9%) than other racial or ethnic category, making them the fastest growing population in Massachusetts.

10. The Holyoke high schools system consists of the Dean Technical High School and the Holyoke High School.

11. Junior high schools include the Lynch and the Peck Middle schools. This finding is consistent with national data that has found that over 40% of all Latinos who drop out of school do so before entering high school (National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, 1984).

12. Holyoke High School offers honors or advanced course sequences in Language, Mathematics, Science,and English. Courses designated Advanced Placement are those equivalent college credit and other courses offered at "a more significally demanding pace and depth".

13. All of the names used are pseudonyms.

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