

Working With Latina Adolescents in Online Support Groups

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Abstract

Latina students face many challenges that can lead to school dropout. Although school counselors have the skills and training to provide counseling and guidance to students at-risk for dropping out of school, they are often placed in positions where their role is primarily administrative. This paper describes an online support group developed by two rural school districts and a university counseling program in order to address the needs of Latina students.

Working With Latina Adolescents in Online Support Groups

Latinos are currently the largest racial/ethnic group in the U.S. with approximately 34% under the age of 18 (Rameriz & De la Cruz, 2002). Although the number of Latino students graduating from high school is increasing, high school dropout rates continue to remain high (Fry, 2003). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2003), the national Latino high school dropout rate (21%) is more than twice the national average (10%).

The under-education of Latinos has serious implications for the group's socioeconomic advancement as well as U. S. economic competitiveness. It is widely acknowledged that education is an important means to economic progress, especially given the increasing value of education and technological skills in the labor market (Lockwood & Secada, 1999). If current trends persist, there is a potential for the deterioration of an educated labor force, resulting in a decline of U.S. economic competitiveness, a loss in sales and profits, as well as a decline in the nation's tax base (Council of Economic Advisers, 2000). Clearly, this is a group that needs new and creative approaches in education in order to confront this potential crisis.

Contributing Factors to Latino School Dropout

The factors that contribute to Latino adolescent school dropout rates are well known to researchers (Hess, 2000). Factors such as lower socioeconomic status (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996), recent immigration (Fry, 2003), and low achievement (Romo & Falbo, 1996) have been found in the literature to be related to school dropout. However, critics have challenged this research by stating that what is not known is why Latinos are twice as likely to drop out of high school when compared to other low-income minority students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995).

Furthermore, little is known about why U.S. born Latino students dropout at higher rates than immigrant Latinos or African American students (Hess, 2000).

An explanation for Latino dropout rates is offered by researchers who have examined the psychosocial factors related to school dropout (Bernal, Saenz, & Knight, 1995; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Monsivais, 1990). One possible contributing factor to the high dropout rates among Latino students is the school environment. A survey done by Monsivais (1990) found that many teachers, even Latino teachers, felt that they were not prepared to teach Latino students. Moreover, teachers were offered few options for in-service trainings on how to work with students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Education remains focused on preparing teachers to work with students who come from middle-class backgrounds, speak English, and have resources available outside of school (Gebhard, Austin, Nieto, & Willett, 2002; Yasin, 2000).

Another roadblock often faced by Latino students is teachers' biases or misconceptions of the Latino culture. A teacher being influenced by stereotypes may not be as encouraging to Latino students or may fail to reach out to Latino parents (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). These biases can also emerge in the form of low expectations of students and unfair criticism of the Latino culture and students' abilities (Bernal, et al., 1995; Pew Hispanic Center, 2004).

Bernal et al. (1995) found that low self-esteem is another factor that is related to Latino dropout rates. They found that devaluation of their ethnic group was related to low self-esteem of Latino students. Perceived devaluation was also related to Latino

students feeling marginalized. Furthermore, Latino students who incorporated these negative views had lower achievement in the classroom.

Although academic success for Latino students has been related to experiencing expressions of warmth, caring, and personal regard from teachers and counselors (Ginorio & Huston, 2001), few Latino students seek help from school counselors. Latino students often do not feel comfortable seeking help from a school counselor (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). One study found that Latinos are less likely to use school counselors than Caucasian students. When Latino students did meet with a counselor, it was typically for non-academic related concerns, such as discipline (Huston, Ginorio, Frevert, & Bierman, 1996). The study also found that due to school counselors' low expectations of Latino students, counselors were less likely to place Latino students in college preparation classes.

Although Latino students face many barriers to their educational success, Latinas¹ face additional stressors because of their gender status. For example, research has shown that Latinas were more likely to feel unsafe at school and express more feelings of apprehension than their male counterparts (Smith, 1995). Feeling unsafe can be disruptive to the learning environment for Latinas. A study done by Haag (1999) found that Latinas were more likely to be the target of sexual slurs and insults on their intelligence than any other racial/ethnic minority group. Experiences such as these lead Latinas to feel disengaged from school (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

As shown in the literature, Latino students face many challenges that can lead to school dropout. Furthermore, Latinas are faced with additional stressors such as sexual harassment (Haag, 1999). Clearly, Latina students are in need of support and guidance

¹ The term "Latina" is the female gender of the noun "Latino."

to help them address barriers to their educational attainment. Although school counselors are trained in providing counseling and guidance to adolescents, unfortunately, they are often placed in positions where their role is primarily administrative and leaving little time for counseling students (McLeod, 2005; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Given that Latina students face many stressors that may affect their educational persistence and the time constraints of many school counselors, the purpose of this paper was to describe the development and implementation of an innovative method using the internet as a means of providing group counseling for Latina adolescents located in two rural school districts.

Development of the Online Support Group for Girls Program

In 2002, a Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP) grant was awarded to a university in south Texas. The grant provided funding to work with two rural school districts near the Gulf Coast region of Texas. The primary goal of the GEAR-UP program is to facilitate the college enrollment of underrepresented students; therefore, various intervention programs were developed in order to best facilitate this goal. One program that was developed was the Online Support Group for Girls Program.

Selection of the online support group members for the program was done in collaboration with the school counselors and a counselor educator from the Texas university. The counselor educator communicated with the school counselors by phone and email. School counselors were asked to identify Latina students who were having problems with school performance or were identified as "at-risk." "At-risk" was defined as students who were at risk of failing courses or dropping out of school due to

behavioral problems (e.g., inattentiveness in class, argues with authority, etc.). After identification of students, school counselors received parental consent for students to participate in the online support group. An online support group format was chosen because the distance of the rural school was located over 200 miles from the university where the group counselors were located.

Before the group convened online, an American On-Line (AOL) Instant Messaging account was created. The AOL IM software was chosen because it is free and could be made easily accessible to each of the schools involved in the project. Screen names and passwords were set up by a graduate student assistant. The students were assigned passwords that would be simple and easy to remember, such as “project2003” and the students’ first names were used as screen names. The information was then disseminated to the university counselor educator and school counselors. The school counselors then provided each of the students with her username and password.

Six graduate-level counselors, who were called Aggie Partners in this program, created a private chat room that was available only by invitation. Invitations to join the chat room were sent to the Aggie Partner’s assigned students, school counselors, and the counselor educator. The Aggie Partners each worked with a group made up of five Latina 8th grade students. The online group sessions were approximately 30 minutes long and met once a week. The issues that were covered in the group involved coping with daily stressors, peer relationships, and the overall well-being of the Latina students. Aggie Partners were provided live supervision by the counselor educator who was also a licensed counselor.

Case Examples

The following section discusses several salient student issues that were observed in the groups. Although there were occasions that the Aggie Partners introduced a topic to the group, often the students brought their own concerns to share, which allowed the Aggie Partners to facilitate discussions on topics pertinent to the students' needs. Some of the issues that arose in the counseling groups were often reoccurring such as relationships with peers and boys, pressures to have sex, apprehension about college, financial concerns, and academic performance.

Relationship with Peers and Boys

One important concern that was discussed almost every session in the support group was relationships with peers and boys. The group members seemed to trust each other and talked openly about expectations and fears about dating boys and peer pressure to have sex at a young age. Relationships with same-sex peers were also important for the group members to discuss with each other. They talked about how to handle a situation in which a friend may have betrayed them or was not talking to them for an unknown reason. The group members shared their opinions openly and seemed willing to critique other members. Members were also supportive of each other when appropriate. Below is a sample conversation about the expectations from peers (student names have been replaced with pseudonyms; original font and text used by group members is shown).

Teresa: b/c i hate when people talk bout u even though they don't know u

Aggie Partner Amanda: yeah...that's very frustrating

Teresa: they judge u by how u dress not by your personal life

Mary: People always think iam some crazy pot head just cause iam punk

Aggie Partner Amanda: teresa- do you find people judging by what you dress like too?

Mary: YES IT DRIVES me crazy

Aggie Partner Amanda: mary- so they don't get to know you first?

Mary: no

Aggie Partner Amanda: man...that's annoying

Teresa: just b/c i wear nothing but name brand close every body thinks in rich

Mary: My mom wont let me wear the kinda pants i want because she doesnt want people to have bad thought about me

Aggie Partner Amanda: sounds like clothes are a BIG issue at school

Mary: I dont care what other people wear. I wear what I want

Aggie Partner Amanda: but it just bothers you when people judge you for what you're wearing

Mary: Well.....kinda

Aggie Partner Amanda: teresa- it bothers you that people assume that you're rich?

Teresa: yeah. i hate that

Pressure to have Sex

Issues around sex and pressures to have sex were a common theme in many of the online support groups. Although group members were hesitant about bringing up the topic of sex, the group counselors were able to create a safe space for the members. For example, group counselors shared with the members their own experiences of

curiosity about sex when they were at the same age. Counselor self-disclosure allowed the group members to share personal experiences with sex such as fears of pregnancy.

Below is an example of the third author's online support group:

Carla: *i know for a fact James don't want sex only he wants to go on a straight long relationship with me he talked to me last week i spent the weekend with him*

Aggie Partner Jennifer: Like, it is good to explore options when you are young...

Carla: *yeah it is*

Aggie Partner Jennifer: and to see what their expectations are for a relationship... and if their actions match their words

Carla: *yeah*

Carla: *cause i'm having a Quinceanera² I told him not to do stuff that is not good*

Julia: *aaaahhhhh*

Aggie Partner Jennifer: hmm?

Carla: *what are you thinking Jennifer cause you seem to be saying hmm????*

Aggie Partner Jennifer: not to do stuff for your b-day? like what?

Julia: *what do u mean*

Carla: *what do you mean*

Aggie Partner Jennifer: [do you mean] push to have sex . . .

Carla: *not to do things that pops to his mind with other girls he does*

Julia: *ohhh*

Carla: *cause ive talked to him about this before and he said i'm not gonna tell nobody we can keep it on the down low and i said no and he said we dont have to and i said i dont want to and he said well we can wait*

²A Quinceanera is a young Latina woman's celebration of her fifteenth birthday.

Aggie Partner Jennifer: I am so proud of you Carla... that takes a lot of courage!

Carla: *yeah it does*

Carla: *it scary but i said it*

Carla: *cause he wanted me to go to his house by myself and it was dark and i said no*

Carla: *and he just kept begging and begging me*

Aggie Partner Jennifer: Another thing I have learned is that you have to demand respect for yourself to be respected... think about what you want in a guy and don't settle for less... especially in how they treat you!

Carla: *okay*

Carla: *jennifer thank you for letting me tell you this*

As seen in this example, the counselor created a safe place for Carla to talk about her fears of being pressured to have sex. The counselor provided support to Carla by validating her feelings and praising her decision to not give into the pressure. Carla felt heard and validated as demonstrated in her statement of appreciation for being allowed to tell her experience.

Apprehension about College

Concerns about college were topics the group members discussed almost weekly. Many of the group members considered high school as a stepping stone to prepare them for college. They discussed many fears about going to college such as being alone and away from family and friends. They talked about having to get a job and fears about paying their own bills and buying groceries. The following is an example of one student's concern about going to college:

Veronica: were you scared to go to college

Aggie Partner Debra: OH YES! I went away to college and can still remember how it felt driving away from home....I was sad

Aggie Partner Debra: i know I must have called my mom at least twice a day every day! **Veronica:** that's wut im scared of

Aggie Partner Debra: you were interested in colleges that are not too close to home, aren't you?

Veronica: yah

Aggie Partner Debra: the good thing to remember is that most of the people around you will be feeling the same way

Veronica: kool

Financial Concerns

The group members also discussed financial issues related to future careers and colleges they were interested in attending. Financial barriers to college were also of great concern to the group members. Many of the group members seemed to have misconceptions of credit cards, school loans, and financial aid. They eagerly asked questions about grants and scholarships and expressed hope to get a scholarship to pay for college.

Academic Performance

The support group was a safe place for the group members to discuss their concerns about their academic performance in classes. The group members often offered support and encouragement to each other and at times offered to help each other with studying. Many of the group members were involved in athletics and

understood the fear of being unable to participate in an activity because of failing a class. The group members expressed their worry about high school classes being harder and not making "good enough" grades to be accepted into a university.

Limitations and Practical Implications

The Online Support Group for Girls Program offered a supportive and safe environment for several Latina students to talk about the various stressors they were facing in school. The students were able to explore many different themes that ranged from very personal experiences, such as relationships with boys and pressures to have sex to financial barriers to college. There were many questions the students had that were related to their apprehension about high school, college, and careers which developed out of ideas or discussions introduced by the Aggie Partners. It seemed that many of the students had misconceptions about future opportunities and were eager to learn about options available to them.

Despite the benefits of the online counseling group to the Latina students, there are some limitations and practical implications when considering the implementation of an online counseling group. First, it is important to get support from the school district's administrative body. Because our program was part of GEAR UP, district administration was very supportive of the program. Furthermore, much of the funding for computer equipment and technology support was paid for through the GEAR UP grant. School counselors who are interested in starting an online support group will need administrative support particularly if technological resources are not available.

Another limitation was that Aggie Partners sometimes found it difficult to manage the group because the students were from the same school and were sitting next to

each other in the school's computer lab. Thus, side conversations occurred that were not part of the group discussion. This problem could be helped by having a monitor in the computer lab. The monitor could check in on the students periodically to remind students to limit conversations to the online group.

Another limitation is the investment of time on the part of school counselors to establish and facilitate the online support group. Understandably, this would be difficult to do since school counselors' current daily schedules are filled and almost maximized with non-counseling related activities and responsibilities (McLeod, 2005; Paisley & McMahon, 2001). Fortunately, the internet presents an exciting opportunity for collaboration between school counselors and university counseling programs to provide a much needed service to students.

One recommendation for school counselors interested in implementing a similar program is to first assess the type of counseling services needed in their school. For instance, career, college, and relationship issues can be addressed in an online counseling format. However, online counseling is not appropriate for serious mental health issues such as suicidal tendencies, depression, and other emotional/behavioral disorders.

School counselors should inquire about technological resources available in their school. Providing online counseling requires access to a fast internet connection such as broadband and chat software. Internet security is also a major concern. School counselors should consult with technology staff in their school about what is needed (e.g., software) in order to protect students who are working online.

Because online counseling differs from face-to-face counseling, school counselors are encouraged to contact a university-affiliated counselor educator who has had experience in online counseling. A school counselor can collaborate with the counselor educator to establish an online counseling program. Through the program, counseling trainees will be able to get training experience while at the same time students will benefit from counseling services. Supervision of the counseling trainees can be negotiated between the school counselor and the counselor educator.

Finally, school counselors are recommended to develop a proposal for the online counseling program to present to school administration. The proposal should detail the need for the program, resources needed, process of how the program will be implemented, and the educational benefits to the students. Most importantly, the proposal should specify how the effectiveness of the program will be evaluated. For example, program effectiveness can be measured by a decrease in behavioral problems or increase in grades.

Summary

The utilization of technology to enhance teaching in the classroom is a growing trend in many school districts. As demonstrated in this article, technology can also be utilized to offer counseling services. School counselors are able to offer a great number of services to their students without having to increase their own workload significantly by collaborating with universities to bridge the gap. Collaboration can help reach Latina adolescents who may not otherwise receive these services. Given the current educational attainment outlook, counseling and guidance for Latina adolescents is

crucial. Innovative methods such as the one presented in this paper are needed in order to assist in the educational persistence of Latina students.

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