



On Hispanic Education:

By Michael J. García, Ph.D.

At-Risk Hispanics

The designation of being "at-risk" educationally refers to being at-risk of academic failure due to various reasons or causes. Hispanics have long been at-risk in our public schools due to the fact that the predominant language and culture of the schools in the U.S. have been different from the language and culture of Hispanics. When we consider the culture of the schools as different, we need to consider not only that the school culture is predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant, but also that it is predominantly oriented to middle class populations. Being non-white, Spanish-speaking, predominantly Catholic, and usually not middle class, Hispanics many times find schools linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically incompatible. This incompatibility in and of itself presents an at-risk factor.

The designation of being "at-risk", nevertheless, is important to Hispanics if they are to benefit from categorical funding for educational programs for "at-risk" student populations. Legislation has been proposed, for example, to fund preschool education and dropout prevention programs for "at-risk" students. There can be no denying that Hispanics need preschool education and dropout prevention assistance. For purposes of categorical funding of educational programs for at-risk Hispanics other than special education populations, let us consider therefore how and why Hispanics can be considered "at-risk." Five of the ways that Hispanics can be considered at-risk are, a) limited English proficiency, b) socioeconomic status, c) behavioral/attendance factors, d) academic performance, and e) migrant status.

Assessment of Hispanic students as being limited English proficient (LEP) should qualify such students for bilingual education programs, but such students are not always served by bilingual education efforts. Even when LEP Hispanic students have been served by bilingual education programs, this does not mean that they have attained cognitive/academic language proficiency in English sufficient to survive in an all-English setting. Unfortunately, oral English skills are not enough to perform effectively in academic settings; many times bilingual education programs are governed by a belief in the "exit fallacy" which assumes that mainstreaming minority language children out of a bilingual program into an English-only program will promote the development of English literacy skills (Cummins, 1980). As a result, many times Hispanic children are pushed out of bilingual programs before they are ready.

Another at-risk characteristic that Hispanic children sometimes have is their socioeconomic status. Some Hispanic children, for example, may come from households living at or below poverty level even though both parents may be working. It may also be that a child comes from a home that receives general assistance or aid to families with dependent children, or perhaps a child's family meets food stamp income eligibility requirements. In addition to living at or below poverty level, it may be that a Hispanic child comes from a single-parent

household, and in the case of teenage Hispanic youngsters they themselves may already be single parents. Adding to the problem is that many times Hispanics from low income or poverty level situations also are limited English proficient and this creates a communication problem in identifying such households or in correctly assessing their needs once they are identified. Hispanic children from such households many times also experience discrimination from their peers, teachers, and/or the community at large.

Due to such discrimination and because of other psychological and social reasons, some Hispanic children also manifest behavioral/attendance problems in schools which also puts them at-risk. Severe disciplinary problems, irregular attendance or frequent tardiness, and/or having previously dropped out of school are examples. Many times, Hispanic children are disproportionately disciplined compared to their non-Hispanic peers, this can have a negative effect on their academic performance. Due to difficulty in adapting to the school setting, Hispanic students may also suffer from poor attendance or tardiness—this in turn may result in additional disciplinary action.

Historically, Hispanic students have scored below their white counterparts in nationwide assessments of academic achievement. Academic performance, therefore, is one of the most frequently used criteria to determine at-risk status. This criteria includes having previously failed one or more grades, being below grade level in reading or math, scoring below norms in general achievement tests, or just making poor grades. When making assessments of academic performance to determine Hispanic students' at-risk status, however, it is important to make sure that such assessments be not more than six months old.

A Hispanic student's migrant or settled-out migrant status should also enter into determining his or her at-risk status. Because of migrants' harsh lifestyle and their high mobility, a student from a migrant worker family may also experience academic difficulty. As a matter of fact, Hispanic migrant students have one of the highest dropout rates of any students in our schools. When a pupil has to frequently change towns, homes, and schools, it is not always easy to adapt socially, psychologically, and, therefore, academically to a new setting. Additionally, migrant students many times have to work in the fields before or after school hours, so that they may not always be at their peak of performance when coming to school. When we consider that migrants students many times come from harsh backgrounds of bad housing, bad health, and bad safety in the workplace, it's amazing that they are able to come to school in the first place.

In addition to having any of the above characteristics, it is important to know if Hispanic students had or have siblings with any of the above characteristics. If the brothers and sisters of our Hispanic students are at-risk, then all of them may be at-risk.