Finding Hope in Life and Education

Acknowledgements-
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Introduction- I researched student success in high school, particularly looking at Ontario High School. This study came about by a collaboration of ideas from an organization that I have been working with, named, Inland Congregations United for Change (ICUC) and the local community. This particular organization works with congregations, schools, and neighborhood institutions in San Bernardino and Riverside County, ICUC brings people together to strengthen families and improve communities. Inland Congregations United for Change is affiliate of the Pico National Network and of Pico California, the largest grassroots community effort in California. My internship consisted of working with youth from local high schools in an attempt to empower and build leaders among the community. I was motivated to take on this particular research project since I saw that the surrounding community was mainly made up of minority and lower social
class economic members. For starters, these particular high schools were not graduating enough students nor were they sending enough students to higher learning institutes. For example one of the guidance counselors from Ontario High School said that only about 15% of their students go on to a four university. The organization of ICUC works with multiple issues that concern the surrounding community and education happened to be one of their concerns. ICUC has committed itself to investigate and aid the failing schools in the area, trying to decrease drop out rates, increase retention, increase college bound students within schools, and ultimately empower students. One of the main components of the research and primary focus will be Ontario High School. The findings were the results of critical ethnographic research, which included individual interviews, a focus group, participant observation, personal narratives, and storytelling.

At this point I would also like to highlight and point out certain things that may shape my perspective on this issue. I am a male, Latino, son of undocumented parents, come from the working class society, attend a small private liberal college, and come from a public school education system. I believe that minorities and poor children are just as capable and hold the same potential as upper and white children. However, it is a series of deciding factors that create the differences amongst those who find academic success and those who do not, which ultimately leads to a better life.

My topic of education is very large and therefore I have broken it down into several categories of focus. The first category will be about “risk youth and deciphering what the different risk factors are. The second category will be about
the new and increasing phenomenon of minority immigration and how that is changing the public school system. Lastly, my third category will cover the different levels of parental involvement in their children’s education and how that translates to student success. While researching the topic of at risk youth, I found that multiple studies have pointed to certain patterns or trends that are connected to unsuccessful students. Multiple authors have agreed with Coleman’s theory of social capital and the connection to overall success. This theory establishes a conceptual link between individual actors and their immediate social context. These are usually their homes, school’s, and their neighborhoods or environments. This theory is very broad but considers multiple factors like social structures, relationships, communities and family influences in shaping the lives of children. Traditional studies have illustrated poverty, family structures, race and parental education as some of the key indicators for student success. More recent studies have applied different approaches and considered additional factors in order to assess student success. Some of these include the overall accumulation of stressful experiences, family income, family structure, parent educational levels, family size, mobility, and home ownership. (Lucas, Tamara, Rosemary Henze, and Ruben Donato. "Promoting the Success of Latino Language-Minority Students: An Exploratory Study of Six High Schools." JSTOR. JSTOR, 2 Aug. 1990. Trueba, Henry T. "Culturally Based Explanations of Minority Students Academic Achievement." JSTOR. JSTOR, 3 Sept. 1988. DiMaggio, Paul, and John Mohr. "Cultural Capital, Educational Attainment, and Marital Selection." JSTOR. JSTOR, 5 May 1985 Furstenberg, Frank F., and Mary Elizabeth Hughes. "Social Capital and Successful Development among At-Risk
Minority immigration is another large category that is believed to direct and influence student success. The studies in this field are steadily increasing due to the ever-growing number of immigration to this country. In a recent article prepared for “the Center for Public Education” and written by Ron Crouch, he states that compared with the last century, we are increasingly aging and white on the one hand and young and multi-hued on the other. More and more of us were born in other nations, speak different languages, and carry different cultural traditions with us [pg.1]”. Most studies have noticed patterns occurring amongst these types of students entering the country. Studies have shown that in most cases these students are perceived as inferior, incapable, inadequate, unprepared, and ultimately are expected to fall short from academic success. Another aspect to this study is the way that the public school system systematically tries to “resocialize” and discredit their past educational and cultural experiences. Crouch believes, “how the schools respond to these challenges and to the opportunities presented by an increasingly diverse population will play a crucial role in the future well being of the nation”. Studies have also recognized that these students usually have a hard time trying to readjust to the new American culture of education. Some experts say that although many of these students are seen as incapable and lazy they are actually not against education they simply oppose an educational system that disrespects them. An
article titled “Promoting the Success of Latino Language-Minority Students: An Exploratory Study of Six High Schools” and written by Tamara Lucas, Rosemary Henze, and Ruben Donato stated the following, by considering them difficult or culturally and linguistically deprived schools have found it easy to absolve themselves of the responsibility for the education of these students [pg. 316]”. The schools are not meeting their obligations with all students, which in return is causing tangible consequences. “To assure academic success, schools must attend to this diversity through special programs and practices, and through increased sensitivity to student’s needs. High drop out rates, low standardized test scores, poor attendance records, and small numbers of students going on to post secondary education attest to the failure of most high schools to meet the needs of this student population”[pg.317].

Lastly, I found that parental involvement came up as a growing issue in determining student academic success. The mass media and the educational system seem to be using the lack of parental involvement as a reason to find them solely responsible and walk away from this issue with little responsibility. However, studies are showing that the public school system carries a big responsibility in helping all students succeed academically. Nonetheless most studies have agreed and concluded that the role of the family as well as the levels of parent involvement is crucial too. Studies have also shown that in most cases the level of parental involvement depends on the levels of parental education and family values. There is usually a direct correlation between the higher level of parental education and the likeliness that they are to be more involved. Another factor that is also crucial is the
citizenship of the parents and the students. If they are newly immigrants then they might not be formally aware of the educational culture that this country lives by. Once again the theory of social capital comes into play, studies have shown that the surrounding community plays just as a crucial role.

Education is a very broad, controversial, and an increasingly important topic amongst our nation. I believe that student success is not as simple as most people tend to visualize it. There are far larger forces and structures at play that exercise power over things like education. In order to critically and successfully analyze the factors of an exemplary student we would need to start from the very top and work our way down to the individual. Large factors like our capitalist system, segregation, immigration, racism, classism, poverty, family structures, and communities each play an enormous role on defining the level of success for an individual.

In my study I will be analyzed and distinguished what were the factors that create a student success path. I collected data through various methods with the goal of finding objective data that will reveal the seriousness behind this issue. I collected and gathered the data through a series of different investigative methodologies. One of the methods that were used was a research study, which involved interviewing individuals and conducting a focus group. A tremendous aspect of this research study has to do with the involvement of the community and being able to amplify their voices. Another method that I used was critical ethnographic research because not only is my goal to observe and learn but to also work towards a positive change. I feel like this method aligns very well with the organization that I have been working for and with our goals with the community.
Lastly, another big component of my research is compiled by the use of storytelling. I think that the main theory that will be guiding my path along this study will be the critical race theory. The reason why I say that is because the overall umbrella will be to examine and critique the multiple facets of power and/or systems at play. I think that making the distinction between methodology and methods is of crucial importance for multiple reasons. First it helped me critically identify and make a distinction between what are my guides or motives and what kind of tools will help me get there. I also feel that by identifying these two components I will be better aware of my biases or expectations.

Discussion- This study and the findings are the result of a semester long research project, the experiences, relationships, data, and interviews have all been conceived and collected within this time frame. My site was located in the city of Ontario where we spent a lot of our time in the Ontario house, which served as our common space. I would regularly spend about fifteen hours a week conducting research and work for the internship. My field notes are composed of notes and brief memos collected from throughout the semester. My archival data is composed of public statistics, academic journals, academic articles, focus groups, interviews, field notes, and a literature review. My first interview was of a guidance counselor from Ontario High, she was formally interviewed and recorded, and the interview lasted about twenty minutes. I chose to interview a counselor because I knew that they interact and keep track of hundreds of students every year. My first focus group was made up from youth attending two of the local high schools within the area. I specifically chose those students because they were attending the school that
I was studying. The group was composed of six students, four male and two female, the interview lasted for about an hour and a half; they were interviewed formally and were also recorded. The second focus group was made up of one female parent, a female teacher, and a male student. I chose to interview these particular people because they had previous knowledge and experience within the public school education system. The interview lasted about an hour and a half; they were interviewed formally and were also recorded.

The kids that fill the public school system all have their individual struggles and inner conflicts. However, they are not judged upon what they were given and what they have achieved but instead everyone is measured to one extreme or the other, successful or unsuccessful. That system itself is insufficient and ultimately wrong, circumstances and opportunities or the lack of, shape the lives of these children.

In my study, I analyze and distinguish some of the common characteristics of the path toward student success. Through my collection of data, research, and field work I was able to identify several reoccurring challenges amongst students that in most cases have and continue to prevent them from going to a four-year university. These themes include: parental education, lack of parental involvement, low expectations, and poverty.

More and more students are being forced to face various obstacles because their parents lack the proper schooling and knowledge. A lot of immigrant families
are coming over to the United States with a middle or high school education. In most cases parents do not have a college education so their ability to help and guide their children is severely restricted. During my focus group interview I asked about their families, L.W. said, “they didn’t know how to get into major universities, what scholarships were, any information about higher education”. If the parents formal schooling is limited and if they are relatively new to the country then they are probably not familiar with the U.S. education system, which creates a very clear distinction between those may succeed and those who may not. When I asked the same question to a guidance counselor I interviewed she answered, “their parents want them to succeed I don’t want it to sound like their parents aren’t interested they just don’t know how to help them”. The parents of these students do want to be involved, do wish the best for their children, they do care, but are simply tied down and limited. Parents cannot possibly provide knowledge that they do not possess; it is without a doubt that they do want to help although they are often looked upon and classified as uncooperative and uninvolved. Many times the schools have high expectations of these parents and when they fail to meet them they are blamed for the academic failure of their children. The reality of the matter is how can they set such high expectations when it was almost impossible to achieve them from the very start, no one acknowledges the injustice within the system but instead blames the school’s system shortcoming on the parents. When I conducted my focus group with the high school students I asked about what kind of family support they received and Y.V. responded the following, “they are not as on top of me because they don’t really know what I do in school, because they have a 6th grade education,
because they had to work when they were little. My parents do support me in anything that I do they just don’t understand how big college is and how we need to do all these things in order to get there. It’s just that they’re not educated as well as they’re supposed to know, in order to educate us”. Students are becoming the victim of the system, the fact that they must face obstacles simply because their parents do not possess the cultural capital or academic schooling does not reflect upon their capabilities or potential. However, society seems to deem them less than capable when in reality it is not black and white, it is not about successful or unsuccessful students its about an unjust and prejudice system. Students do want to go to college but they simply do not know how to because there is no one to guide them there.

Another reoccurring theme that I have been able to identify as a growing obstruction for students is the simple yet very powerful concept of expectation. An increasing number of students especially amongst minorities and lower class levels are experiencing a self-fulfilling prophecy. The educational system in place does not believe in the student of lower economic communities, like the guidance counselor was once told when she arrived to work there, “these kids do not go to college they just graduate from high school”. The system is not completely invested in these students and if anything else their expectations for them are to only graduate from high school. During the interview the same counselor also told me, “when I started in this district there was 8 counselors and now there’s 6 counselors to every school so our case -loads are up to 550”. The state is removing lots of funding and in
addition with an educational policy as the Race to the Top\(^1\) in place a lot of these lower level schools are suffering a significant cut in resources, staff, and support that would otherwise be provided to students. The students are not ignorant or blind, they see what is going on, they see the prejudice and most importantly they recognize the low level of expectations set out for them. In most cases the low levels of expectations do not end there but are unfortunately also carried on over from home. Many students do not feel the motivation or expectation to strive for college; they are surrounded by a culture that does not push for that. If the educational system does not believe in them, if their own parents do not have high levels of expectations then we should not blame them for fulfilling their socially constructed prophecy\(^2\).

A problem that has and continues to severely impact students is poverty. This problem is very extensive and the majority of the students in these schools have reoccurring encounters with poverty and in most cases the students are forced to pay the consequences. Poverty can affect a student from the minute that they are brought into the world because that will define the environment that they will live in, which will define what kind of experiences, expectations, and culture they are exposed to. When compared against those students who are born into wealth or simply born into the middle class, there is a very clear gap amongst the two. The

\(^{1}\) Race to the Top- States were awarded points for satisfying certain educational policies, such as performance-based standards for teachers and principals, complying with nationwide standards, promoting charter schools, and computerization.

\(^{2}\) This is discussed in great length in the “subtractive schooling” theory by Angela Valenzuela, (see citation in the bibliography).
race to the top begins and although those in poverty are at a clear disadvantage.

Parents of the lower class cannot have the choice or privilege of putting their children in a private education, in the majority of cases that is never a possibility. Now the education and quality of education will solely depend on their local school, which for most impoverished families means an overpopulated and underfunded school. During my interview with the guidance counselor I asked, what do you think is the biggest obstacle that students face while trying to earn their high school education and her answer was, "poverty, they have all the other normal things that teenagers go through and they have that extra". The poverty in the lives of these students is very real and harsh, such severe circumstances is expected to have a direct affect on a student, their grades, and ultimately their chances to go to college. How can a student possibly worry about homework when they do not have a place to do homework, or worse a place to sleep? How can students possibly focus or take school seriously when back home they are facing possible eviction or when they do not have enough money eat? The reality of many of these students is that of grown adults and therefore they often detour from the academic path but then again what else should be expected, it is almost as if they had no other option. When students drop out of high school, are caught selling drugs, or are involved with gangs it is often assumed that they are simply bad kids and chose that path for themselves but that could not be further from the truth. Those students were systematically placed there, those students had no other choice, they needed to survive and chose survival over education, then I ask who would dare to do otherwise? Poverty, drugs, violence, and gangs are not just things that people see in the movies a lot of these
students face them everyday and as a society we need to realize that but most importantly do something about it. The counselor also shared with me a story, “I have one student right now that has enough nursing certificates that she literally spends the nights at the hospital taking care of her mother who is dying and then comes to school then she goes back as soon as she is out of school and she is sitting in a hospital room so there's not even a computer or anything for her to do her homework but she is trying to graduate”. The suffering of students and the constant power of poverty in their lives is a part of their reality and clearly disrupts their life, which as a result puts them in an unfair disadvantage that it is almost impossible to get out of and succeed.

In my study I was not only able to recognize the challenges and obstacles that prevent students from achieving academic success but I was also able to find the support mechanisms that lead to students to academic achievement. One of the first characteristics that I was able to identify amongst triumphing students was the concept of persistence. This characteristic is often described as crucial if any student has any intention of going on to college. Being able to continue and move forward is something to admire in it itself but things become much more complex for students from underprivileged and lower economic communities. The students are expected to keep driving forward even if that means that some may have bigger obstacles to overcome but if they do manage to rise above expectations regardless of the obstacles and injustice then there is almost nothing that will ever stop them. When I interviewed the guidance counselor and I asked her about her opinions on what makes a successful student this was her response, “persistence, kids that are really
persistent, they are really motivated by making their families proud of being the first to graduate from high school and being the first to go on to college”. Some students understand the prestige of being the first to graduate from high school and go on to college, for many that is their drive to push further and dream for what most people see as impossible. When I asked a similar question to the student focus group a student responded, “my dad always tells me, I don’t ever want to see you be like me, you can be so much better”. Students in general face difficulties and challenges trying to achieve their academic dreams but students from impoverished communities face an almost impossible task and therefore their drive must be much greater. Like this student shared, his parents want a better life for him and he is able to see the struggles and the limited life that his parents live, which in many cases serves as a reminder and strength to hold on to when facing tribulations while attempting to succeed.

Another major component to academic success is having a solid and strong support system. This is often viewed as something simple but yet it is of most importance and vital to achieving student success. Without a support system the consequences are endless but having a support system can only strengthen and encourage a student. A support system is essentially the backbone to a student, it serves as their support, encouragement, bank of knowledge, and provides resources. A support system does merely stop at the family level, but involves teachers, mentors, counselors, friends, and essentially anyone who is willing to provide any kind of support. As a result students who’s parents cannot serve as their support system can find other sources of help and can still manage to find success. For a lot
of students in poor communities a lot of their support system tends to come from educational programs and teachers. When I asked the student focus group about what made up their support system Y.V. answered, “my support system is Upward Bound at my high school they are really supportive and they give us the tools we need to go on to college and be successful, they just really push you to going to college and being someone in life”. Then L.W. also shared his thoughts about his support system, I started in a group called Bright Prospects and it has really helped me out a lot, they are a rally good support system and before that I didn’t really have much. It is evident that a support system can make a significant difference and change the course of a student’s life overall. Like I mentioned before for a lot of students their support system is also largely made up by teachers and counselors. Students find great comfort and support in teachers because ultimately they spend a large portion of their time together. When I asked the students to tell me about their teachers and what kind of support they received from them these were their answers. L.W. said, “my sophomore history teacher still helps me a lot, she’s like a mentor to me, she helped me out in a lot of things not just in her class but she also taught me how to organize my time and education”. Then J.G. also said, “my AP English teacher, he’s not like a teacher, he’s more of a friend, he would never let us slack off”. Students truly do benefit from having genuinely interested teachers that are willing to go beyond what is typically required from them but most importantly those teacher’s believe and invest in the student’s future.

I know what is like to find yourself in the midst of chaos and violence but still want something better. I know what it is like to be in the middle of a broken and
unfair school system but still manage to somehow succeed. I not only know about
the different concepts and theories but I have lived and undergone many. My life is a
living testimony that academic success can be achieved if you have the proper
support system, a strong inner drive, and lots of persistence. The issues being
addressed in this paper might seem redundant or unimportant however if we do not
educate the kids of America today then what will be the result of the future of this
nation. Education should not be only for the elite or the “lucky ones” but should be a
possibility for all and that is not our reality today. Our school system is failing,
students are dropping out, and our prison system keeps increasing. This is not some
story about a poor brown kid not being able to attend college because he is from the
ghetto, this is a nation wide epidemic that will only lead our nation to one direction,
failure. If we want an education system that creates injustice, segregation, and
poverty then the system in place is doing exactly that. It is time to stand up and
speak against the injustice and discrimination now that the issue can still be solved.
Bibliography

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