

Summary for Final Report

Helping All Latinas Achieve (HALA) Project

Investigations of Latina educational attainment reveal a lower high school graduation rate for Latina girls than for girls in any other racial or ethnic group. This circumstance, combined with the poorer transition outcomes noted for all girls with disabilities, does not fare well for Latinas with disabilities as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. Unfortunately, very little is known about the unique transition experiences of Latinas in special education. This is especially alarming when one considers the rapidly changing demographics in the U.S., with the Hispanic population being the fastest growing culturally and linguistically diverse group. Furthermore, Latina girls in special education are subject to the “triple jeopardy” of sexism, racism, and disability bias, which results in additional barriers to successful transition. For example, research reveals that:

- Latina girls have the highest teenage pregnancy and high school dropout rates, and they are least likely to earn a college degree, compared to other youth.
- Young women with disabilities are significantly poorer, less likely to attend postsecondary education, more likely to be unemployed, and receive considerably lower wages, compared to young men with disabilities or women without disabilities.
- Women have more disabilities than men, with minority women experiencing disabilities at a disproportionately higher rate compared to Anglo women.

The HALA project investigated the transition experiences of Latina youth with disabilities. Specific research questions were: 1) What are the transition goals of Latinas with disabilities and their parents? 2) To what extent do the goals of Latinas and their parents reflect the IDEA mandates for transition planning? 3) To what extent are the transition goals of Latinas and their parents similar to the transition goals of Anglo girls and their parents? 4) What are the barriers to successful transition faced by Latinas with disabilities? 5) What factors contribute to the successful transition of Latinas with disabilities?

The HALA project involved collaboration between the Regional Research Institute at Portland State University, Portland Public and Long Beach Unified School Districts. During the project period, three studies were conducted: 1) a survey study; 2) a qualitative focus group study; and 3) an informal Delphi Method study. The HALA Project encountered barriers in recruitment that resulted in the need to enter a no-cost extension period, which has just ended. Interestingly, the recruitment barriers that were encountered reflected the barriers to services that exist for Latina girls with disabilities. For example, the project intended to recruit Latina girls in special education through their school special education programs,

however, schools were not identifying Latina girls with disabilities for special education services, despite acknowledgement that there were Latina students in the district requiring these services. Alternate methods of recruitment were required (i.e., recruiting through churches, gang prevention, and teen pregnancy programs) in order to identify Latina youth who were appropriate participants for the study. This in itself was informative and highlighted the many systemic barriers that exist for Latina youth with disabilities.

Much effort has been put into dissemination of Project findings, including preparation of an invited article for a special issue of *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals* (attached), as well as conducting presentations at local and national community meetings and conferences.

Community engagement was a key component to this project, and providing Latina youth and their families with information was an important component of dissemination in this project. Presentations conducted at local and national conferences targeted organizations that address concerns and provide services relevant to Latinas/Latinos and disability issues.

Findings from the HALA Project were compelling and provided an important picture about the needs of Latina girls with disabilities and their families. Findings highlighted the importance of family, the high value placed on post-secondary education by Latina youth with disabilities and their families, the programming barriers that exist for these youth (i.e., disability and racial/ethnic stereotypes, discrimination), the importance of spirituality, and different definitions of and beliefs about disability held by youth/their families and the school system. The findings suggest that current programming for Latinas with disabilities is not perceived by the youth and families as culturally relevant and supportive, and furthermore fosters negative and damaging stereotypes about a community that is already underserved and the target of discrimination. While this is not good news, the project also identified potential supports that can be implemented in order for school districts to better address the needs of this underserved community.

Findings from the HALA project will continue to be comprehensively disseminated to regional and national audiences in a number of ways. A list of recommendations for service providers, youth and families will be available via the Portland State University, Regional Research Institute website. An article based on the results of the survey study will soon be submitted for publication and another article based on the focus group results is in preparation at this time. In addition, an article highlighting the recruitment barriers encountered in this project, and how these barriers inform culturally

appropriate research methodologies will be written during the early part of 2008. Finally, but not least, the findings from this project are being built upon as this investigator is planning to apply for further funding to continue this line of research by developing and applying an intervention that is culturally specific for transition age Latina youth with disabilities. It is believed that this project has substantively contributed to our understanding of the educational and transition experiences of Latina students with disabilities, and is providing important information on promoting their school success.