

Full Length Research

A qualitative study of adolescent Hispanic female students and high school athletics.

Dr Erin McDonnell-Jones

Bellevue University, 1000 Galvin Road South, Bellevue, Nebraska 68005-3098,

Phone: 402.557.7582,

Author's E-mail: emcdonnelljones@bellevue.edu

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This research explores a concrete and a qualitative study of adolescent Hispanic female students and high school athletics. A literature review of similar studies was used to achieve the aim and objective of this study. The research design focuses on Hispanic female using a comparative qualitative study of interview. The result among others shows that social barriers are the foremost reason that Hispanic female's athletic participation is inhibited.

Keywords: adolescent Hispanic female students, high school athletics

INTRODUCRION.

In recent years, researchers have conducted studies on the deteriorating health of minority females, including African-American and Hispanic girls; however, within these studies, there has been no purely qualitative research, focusing on why there is reduced athletic participation or what could be done to entice athletic participation from Hispanic female students. According to Melnick et al. (1992), "until such time as additional research is conducted, preferably of a more qualitative, ethnographic sort, more detailed theoretical explanations of the socialization effects of interscholastic athletic participation among Hispanic females cannot be developed" (p. 69). Moreover, Feldman and Matjasko (2007) and Peguero (2010; 2011) all assert within their studies that additional research into Hispanic extracurricular participation is imperative because of the growing number of these students in the United States.

The purpose of this study is to formulate an understanding of what barriers inhibit Hispanic high school females from participating in high school athletics. The secondary purpose of this research is to develop an understanding of what coaches, teams, and

schools can do to help to support Hispanic female athletic participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As of the early 2000s, there has been an increase in the study of Hispanic female athletic participation; however, there are very few qualitative studies that focus solely on Hispanic female athletic participation.

Carvajal et al., (2002); Fahlman et al., (2006); Gordon-Larsen et al., (2002); Mâsse & Anderson (2003); Ogden et al., (2006) and Stovitz et al., (2008) all identify in their various studies and literature evaluations that Hispanic females are more at-risk for being overweight/obese and less physically active than their male and female non-Hispanic white counterparts. Wright's (2011) study found that the "rate of overweight and obesity is increasing for all children in the United States" and there is "evidence that suggests that racial and ethnic minorities and those from a lower socioeconomic status are at greater risk for being

overweight or obese” (p. 90). While all children need more physical education time and more physically active time, according to the aforementioned studies, attention needs to be given to those children who are ethnic minorities or of a lower socioeconomic status. Schools can help not only these minority children, but also all children learn how to be happy and healthy by “utilizing school facilities, qualified staff, [and] community outreach programs” (Pate et al., 2006), which will persuade them to be physically active and to improve their health.

No matter the ethnicity of the adolescent youths in the United States today, a majority of these young people are at-risk for obesity, as demonstrated by the extant literature. With the recent cuts to physical education programs in schools, extracurricular activities such as clubs and sports are extremely important in encouraging children and teenagers to participate in healthy, and active, lifestyles.

Participating in sports not only helps to protect participants against negative influences that can lead to delinquency and drug abuse, but also involves substantial amounts of physical activity. Additionally, participation in high school athletics subjects students to team rules and guidelines, which promote health-enhancing behaviors and healthy lifestyles (Pate, Trost, Levin and Dowda, 2000). These authors also reported that non-Hispanic white (NHW) students are more likely to participate in sports than Hispanic students and that male students are more likely to participate than female students. However, “[v]ery little research has been conducted in the extracurricular activity field that focuses only on Hispanic youth ...” (Feldman and Matjasko, 2007, p. 328).

The benefits of Hispanic female participation on an athletic team are numerous. According to Reith (1989), “Hispanic girls who participated in sports were more likely to score well on achievement tests, stay in high school, and continue their education in college than their non-athletic peers” (p. 5). Not only does participation on an athletic team help young Hispanic females in high school, but also, it helps them after they graduate from high school.

The reasons for the lack of Hispanic girls’ athletic participation are not obvious. Taylor et al. (1999) tell readers that, in order to “promote regular physical activity among girls of color before sedentary preferences become habits, [society] needs to know more about their beliefs, expectations, and experiences related to physical activity” (p. 76). When schools, communities, and the overall society have a better understanding of the Hispanic culture within the school or community, greater participation can occur once an essential comprehension has been established. Possible barriers include social values, socioeconomic status, beliefs, expenses and transportation (Wright,

2011). Other possible reasons that could inhibit Hispanic female athletic participation include religion, culture, and lack of experience (Sabo, 1986; Walseth, 2006; Suzuke et al., 2008; Iber et al., 2011).

Researchers speculate that “Hispanic concepts of traditional ‘femininity’ are being challenged today, as more and more parents encourage their daughters to combine educational and career goals with family plans” (Melnick and Sabo, 1992, p. 67). While some Hispanic females are beginning to challenge possible cultural stereotypes, more effort needs to be made in order to encourage Hispanic female athletic participation. Popular Latin American sports, such as soccer, baseball/softball, volleyball, and tennis (Cassidy, 2001; Hamilton, 2015) will help to encourage this necessary participation.

While Hispanic adolescents do not have to give up their unique identities, they can create new, balanced identities to help them understand a new culture. Pate et al., (2006) assert that participating in high school athletics will help these girls gain confidence with their bodies which will help them to avoid outside, negative influences such as drugs, alcohol, and gangs. Structured team guidelines will create schedules, which will help students to learn to manage their time and become academically successful. Interacting with coaches, referees, and peers will help the girls learn to self-advocate. Ultimately, participating in high school athletics will help the girls, hopefully, develop life-long habits that will lead to a thriving adulthood.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Recent studies that have focused on minority female athletic participation have cited the need to further the research with qualitative studies that focus specifically on Hispanic females (Cuadros, 2011; Horst, 2005; Melnick et al., 1992; Okamoto et al., 2013; Pate et al., 2006; Peguero, 2010; 2011; Springer et al., 2010; Stovitz et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 1999; Walseth et al., 2010).

As a result of the unique nature of this study, a comparative qualitative study was conducted as it allows patterns and themes to develop that allow for stronger analysis, interpretation, and knowledge that a quantitative study will not allow.

The participants for this study were adolescent Hispanic female students, between the ages of fourteen to eighteen, who attended a suburban public school in Pennsylvania during the fall of 2014-2015 school year and were selected utilizing purposeful sampling. The selection criteria included the girls’ ages, ethnicity, and level of athletic participation.

Participants for this study included three distinct groups of Hispanic females. The first group included eight girls who participated on the high school junior

varsity and varsity soccer teams during the Fall 2014 soccer season. The second group of participants are five girls who had participated previously (Fall 2013), but did not participate during the Fall 2014 season for reasons other than graduation or moving out of district. Finally, the third group encompassed six girls who did not participate on any athletic team, but volunteered to take part in the interview process. These girls were sought out from the Walking In knowledge (WIN) program with the help of the ESL teachers and the community outreach coordinator who works in the school building.

Two primary data collection instruments were used for this study. First, a series of interview questions were created to interview the adolescent Hispanic females. The second instrument utilized in the data collection was an attendance chart to maintain accurate daily attendance records for the girls as they participated during the soccer season.

RESULTS

As this study is one of the first qualitative studies to focus solely on and interview Hispanic female adolescents on their interest in athletic participation, their sense of belonging in the community, and what can encourage athletic participation, a few, prominent categories emerged from the data analysis. These categories quickly began to emerge during the interview transcription process; however, it was during a discussion of these categories with the interviewer that solidified that it is primarily social barriers, and not cultural or economic barriers, that inhibit Hispanic female athletic participation.

Culture: Family influence. The start of every interview began with a discussion regarding the girls' typical school day. Later in the interviews, family involvement with their former, current, or fictional soccer career were discussed. Combining these various questions leads to the conclusion that, while family is an influential factor in the girls' lives, it is not strictly family, nor culture, that inhibits their athletic participation.

No girl stated any family obligation in the morning. After school, however, their routines varied. Working, family obligations, and school obligations were common responses.

In addition to the variety of their after-school obligations, the girls' weekend routines and obligations also varied. Many of the girls mentioned a crossover of obligations, such as both work and family. Eight girls (all seniors) mentioned the necessity of working and 11 girls cited family obligations, such as helping to clean, doing chores, running errands, or babysitting younger family members. Only two of these 19 girls mentioned school obligations, such as homework.

When the girls were asked whether or not their family did attend or would attend soccer games, 11 girls stated that "maybe they would" or "sometimes they did." Their parents' work schedules were the primary reason that the parents could not attend every game. However, 14 girls responded that their families would ask or did ask how they did at practices or games. As Girl F responded, "they're always nosy, so they always ask everything." Two girls replied that, "no," their families would not ask how they did at games or practices. Two girls replied that their families might ask, sometimes, how soccer went; both girls cited that their families were more likely to ask about games rather than practices.

This information asserts that family members of previous players, current players, and non-players would attend soccer games if their work schedules permitted, and the majority of families would ask how a participant performed during her practice or game. This asserts that families are engaged, to the best of their abilities, in their daughter's athletic, or possible athletic, participation.

As part of the data analysis for this study, attendance was taken at the beginning of every soccer practice during the fall 2014 soccer season. During the ten-week season, of roughly five sessions (either game or practice) per week, these five girls accrued a combined total of seven absences for family reasons, which signifies missing practice for family obligations was a rare occurrence.

These findings suggest that, while family is influential to these girls' lives, it does not inhibit their athletic participation on school sports teams. Families appear to take an interest in the girls' activities as 15 families would try to attend sporting events and 16 families would ask about the girls' practices or games. Work schedules were the main factors that would prohibit consistent attendance at sporting events.

Social and economic: Reasons for playing. During the interviews, all 19 of the girls were asked about their level of interest in playing soccer, or any sport at the school, while, at the same time, questions were asked to investigate the 13 girls' decision to play soccer, either previously or currently. Analyzing these responses leads to the conclusion that it is economic and social barriers that inhibit athletic participation, not cultural barriers.

Of the 13 girls who previously played during the 2013-14 school year, or are current players during the 2014-15 school year, five girls cited that they tried out for the team for a new experience. Three girls cited their families' influence on their decisions to try out. One girl decided to try out because her friends encouraged her to, as they were also going to try out for the team. Finally, the last four girls cited their own enjoyment of soccer as the reason for trying out for the team.

The girls who previously played in 2013-14, but did not return to the team during the 2014-15 school year, cited work as the reason for not returning to the team. While six of the eight previous players did cite work concerns as their reasons for not returning, one girl stated that transportation home from practices was a concern.

The six girls who had never played soccer before were asked whether or not they had any interest in playing soccer. Five of the six replied "yes," while the sixth replied that she would be interested in playing volleyball.

These findings suggest that first and foremost, economic factors, such as working to earn money for current and future expenses, influence a Hispanic female's level of athletic participation on a school-sponsored athletic team. This is evident by the fact that seven girls had to stop playing in order to maintain their job. Furthermore, social factors also determine a Hispanic female's level of interest in playing soccer, or any sport, as is evident in their comments that they play for fun with friends and family outside of school or had decided to try out for the team because their friends were also trying out or were participants.

Social: Feelings while playing. The girls' sense of belonging, not only to the community but also to the soccer team, was investigated during the interviews. Primarily, questions about their feelings while at practice, while playing, when they won, when they lost, and a story that characterized their experience on the team led to the conclusion that, again, it is social barriers that inhibit athletic participation.

When asked how the girls, who had previously played or were currently playing, felt at practice, eight of the 13 girls stated that they thought practices were beneficial or a stress reliever. Five of the girls stated that they enjoyed practices because of the social interactions, such as they had fun, or they met new people, or they could be with their friends. Two girls stated that they felt either educated, because they were learning a new sport, or tired, because of the physical nature of the practices. Both the previous players and the current players felt the benefits of participating on the soccer team, due to their own perceptions of the benefits or the social interactions that occurred.

When asked how they felt while they were playing, seven girls reiterated the concept of a "stress reliever." Eight of the girls cited social reasons for enjoying playing soccer, such as feeling carefree or relaxed, having fun, and making connections. Finally, two of the girls stated that they enjoyed the nature of the workouts in soccer.

The social influence in playing soccer became apparent when the girls were asked how they felt when they won or lost soccer games. "Great," "good," "excited," and "proud" were common answers in response to winning. However, when asked how they felt when they lost, nine of the girls responded with a positive connotation such as "staying positive" and "getting better, or getting

motivated." Only four of the girls responded with a negative connotation, such as they felt "bad" or "angry."

When asked what the girls liked the most or least about playing soccer, again, the social influence of participating in sports is apparent. Nine girls enjoyed playing because their friends were on the team, or they made new friends. Two of the girls enjoyed playing on the team because they enjoyed the sport. When the girls were asked what they liked least about playing soccer, the social interactions were, again, very influential. Two of the girls stated the lack of diversity on the team as a reason why they did not enjoy playing, and two girls cited arguments between teammates as reasons. The other girls responded with the physical demands of playing soccer, such as pre-season, or how tired they felt as reasons that they did not enjoy playing. When the girls were asked to characterize an experience while on the soccer team, their stories could be divided into three categories: fun memories, the physicality of play, and attainment of a goal. Five of the girls provided a "fun" memory they had of playing, such as practices, bus rides, or games. Three of the girls cited the physical nature of the game, such as an injury sustained or the running involved. Finally, two of the girls cited the goal that was achieved, whether in the game (Girl D) or as a personal goal (Girl R).

These findings suggest that social interactions are extremely influential in a Hispanic female's athletic participation, as evident by both the previous players and the current players feelings during playing, winning, and losing.

Social: Feelings in the community. During the interviews, all of the participants were asked a series of questions that would help to determine their sense of belonging in the community. Their responses led to the conclusion that social barriers inhibit a girl's sense of belonging to the community. Furthermore, soccer does not impact a girl's sense of belonging in the community compared to other activities.

All of the girls were asked how they felt as they walked down the hallway, regardless of whether or not they had ever participated on the soccer team. Positive connotations were common responses such as "proud," "good," "confident," or "connected [to the school]," "normal," while the last four responses gave answers such as "it depends on the day" (Girl B). Only one girl, Girl G, referenced soccer as having an impact on her feelings as she walked down the hallway:

...You would wear the jersey and people would be like, 'oh, she plays soccer for the school,' and I don't know, it's just an inside feeling. I feel, like, in school...you stand out in a way...

When asked to describe the school in three words, the overwhelming majority of responses utilized the word "diverse" (eight responses). Other responses included "friendly," "helpful/supportive/caring," "fun," "big," and "nice" (Refer to Table 1). However, what became

Table 1: Overview of three words to describe school chosen by multiple participants

Choice of Word	Girl(s) who chose word(s)
Diverse	A, B, E, G, I, K, Q, S
Friendship(ly)	A, B, F, G, L, N
Helpful/caring	B, D, H, I, P, R
Big	L, S
Education	E, N, P
Fun	C, K, L, N, S
Nice	F, P

apparent with this question, was that, while the girls noted the diversity in the school, they did not comment on the separation between races in the school. One girl, Girl I, clarified her diversity comment by stating: “Even though [the school] is diverse, it is not like everyone talks to everyone. People usually stay [in] their cliques and their cliques are usually people of their own races.”

After all of the interviews were conducted, the researcher and the interviewer met to discuss the interview transcriptions and the categories that were evident from the interviews. During the data analysis meeting with the interviewer, after the interviews had been conducted, the interviewer stated that “others felt that way [as Girl I]; they just didn’t want to say it” as they told her after the recorder had been turned off.

The six girls who never participated in soccer were asked to tell a story that characterized their experiences at the school. Only one girl mentioned the diversity and how fun it is to talk to everybody. Another girl mentioned a class where she felt like an outsider, since she was the only Hispanic female in the class. When asked by the interviewer, as a follow-up question, if she has any friends who are Americans, she responded by saying, “I don’t really have much [sic] friends that are Americans. I mean, they’re like acquaintances, but I don’t think they’re like friends.”

Finally, before all of the interviews occurred, the girls completed a demographic information sheet that asked them to list their extracurricular activities. Of the 19 responses, 16 came back completed with a list of school-sponsored club and activity involvement. Then, during the interviews, all of the girls were asked whether or not they felt like they are involved in the community. Fifteen girls responded positively by saying “yes,” but seven of those girls specified that it was because of other activities in which they are involved. Only one girl said that “after soccer, I realized, like before soccer, I kind of felt like an outcast, but then right when you’re involved with something in the school, you feel more connected with everybody, even people you never expected to connect with” (Girl C).

These findings suggest that, while social activities did help the girls to feel more involved with the community or helped them to feel proud as they walked down the hallway, it was the other activities in which they were

involved, rather than soccer, that helped them to feel a sense of belonging in the community.

Social: Perceived benefits and disadvantages. During the interviews, the girls were asked what they thought were the benefits and disadvantages of playing soccer. An overwhelming majority of the girls provided answers that cite the social benefits and the social disadvantages of playing soccer for the school.

Thirteen of the girls stated a social benefit that soccer brought to them. Common responses included “making new friends,” “a new experience,” or “representing [the school].” Many of the girls also cited the health benefits, such as getting in shape or relieving stress as beneficial. Two of the senior girls also mentioned that playing soccer would help them prepare for college, while three girls referenced that soccer helped them to keep their grades up at passing.

The previous players are aware of the academic, health, and social benefits of playing soccer compared to the non-players and current players. However, the non-players believed that a benefit of playing soccer would be that a girl could feel more connected to the school.

As a disadvantage, time was the biggest concern for nine of the girls. However, six of the girls did not think there were any disadvantages to playing soccer. Girl A stated, “I don’t think there’s any disadvantage. I think the only thing with playing soccer is that it’s mainly white girls. Only a couple of Mexicans, it’s not really diverse.”

These findings suggest that the girls understand the benefits of playing soccer for academic, physical, and emotional reasons; however, the social issues, such as time commitments to jobs and other clubs, along with the lack of diversity, inhibit their participation on the soccer team.

Social: Soccer could encourage integration. The last question asked in all of the interviews was, “do you think playing soccer, or any other sport, would help Hispanic females become more a part of the community—why or why not?” These responses support the finding that socializing through sports can help Hispanic females to integrate into a new community.

Eighteen participants said that, yes, soccer could help to encourage Hispanic females to become a part of the community. Eight girls alluded to reasons, such as “helps stay active,” or that soccer can help them

Table 2: Overview of reasons why soccer could encourage integration

Reason	Girl(s) who chose word(s)
Yes, helps stay active/become involved	A, B, C, E, G, H, N, O, P, R
Yes, interact with Americans	D, I, Q
Yes, helps build confidence	F, J, K, S
Yes, helps understand everyone is equal	L, S
No, it is a mindset	M

“meet new people” or “become more involved.” Three girls stated that soccer would allow Hispanic females to “interact with Americans,” while two additional girls specified that Hispanic females are scared to meet new people because “they feel less than they are” (Girl G). When the researcher asked the interviewer to help to clarify that comment, the interviewer cited reason such as talent, practice, and skills that make Hispanic girls feel less capable than non-Hispanic white girls on the soccer field.

Five girls alluded to reasons such as helping to build confidence and understanding equality as reasons that soccer could help to encourage involvement. Only one girl said, no, soccer would not help because “it’s a mind thing for the girls to just get out of their comfort zone and be a part of the community” (Girl M). Table 2 provides an overview of the girl’s perspectives for reasons why soccer could encourage integration.

These findings suggest that, while soccer alone may not help to integrate Hispanic females into the community, social activities in large groups or teams could help Hispanic females to integrate successfully into the community.

SUMMARY

The information presented here is one of the first qualitative studies to focus solely on adolescent Hispanic females’ sense of belonging to a community, their level of athletic participation, and what factors encourage or inhibit their participation. The responses overwhelmingly point to the social factors that inhibit Hispanic female athletic participation. While the Hispanic females in the community may feel like a part of the community because of other school-sponsored activities, athletics does not yet play a significant role in their integration process.

Until such time that Hispanic females feel comfortable integrating with “Americans” or “whites,” social barriers will continue to inhibit athletic participation. While the Hispanic females do understand the academic, physical, and emotional health benefits of playing soccer, the lack of diversity will continue to discourage their athletic participation. However, if more Hispanic girls begin to participate on the athletic teams, than more integration can begin to occur, because, as

Girl C recognized, “the girls are amazing. You make new friendships with people that you never expect to even talk to, like, before playing soccer with them. They were people I would just see in the hallway, and now I can see them as ‘oh, I played soccer with them and they have great personalities.’”

CONCLUSION

Based on the participants’ responses, social barriers are the foremost reason that Hispanic female’s athletic participation is inhibited. The girls do not feel comfortable going into new social situations, dominated by non-Hispanic white females, without the companionship of their friends or other Hispanic females. Although not every participant strictly stated this, the interviewer who conducted these interviews stated that “most of the girls told [her after the interviews were conducted] that the lack of diversity” is the reason for not joining the soccer, or any athletic, team.

Economically, many of the girls must work to earn money. Eight of the nine previous players from the 2013-14 season did not return to play in the 2014-15 season because of their need to work. Furthermore, one girl who began the 2014-15 season felt the need to resign from the team in order to dedicate the necessary time to her job.

Culturally, only one girl, a first-generation immigrant, stated during her interview that her father “doesn’t really think girls should play soccer, well not soccer but sports, like, it’s not a girl thing to do. So he doesn’t really support me on playing soccer or doing any other sports” (Girl H). Girl H is one of 11 first-generation immigrants who participated in the study, which leads to the conclusion that culture is not an influential barrier compared to the social and economic issues that the girls face.

Social, economic, and cultural factors can encourage athletic participation. Socially, more girls would participate if their friends were on the team. According to Girl N, non-Hispanic white members of the team could “introduce themselves to me so then...I can get to know them and what that when it comes to having practice, I have somebody to speak to.” In addition to teammates’ reaching out, having coaches take the time to “encourage us by motivating us” (Girl J) and forming

“club teams just between the school...especially for girls...who are overweight and out of shape so it would be easier” (Girl B) would help breach any social barriers. Finally, administrators could work out economic issues, such as ordering “transportation from the practices to home” (Girl B) and teachers could “talk about what kind of sports and what is required and... be mindful of the amount of work that they give to students who do have after-school activities” (Girl E).

The scope of this study is limited as it only applies to a Hispanic female adolescents, between the ages of 14 to 18. As a result, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. However, the results of this study could apply to schools that have similar demographics. The small group of only 19 participants is another limitation. While 19 girls participated in the study, there is a population of over 35 percent Hispanic students enrolled in the school.

This comparative qualitative study has important implications for policy, practice, or action. Some necessary actions must be taken to help integrate these students, among these are:

1. Providing transportation home after practices, games, and activities.
2. Beginning recruitment early and provide practices and trainings for novice players.
3. Establishing recreational leagues to help to introduce rules, concepts, and physical activity for younger players.
4. Reaching out to, and working to include, coaching staff of similar ethnic backgrounds.
5. Ensuring coaches' willingness to accommodate girls' economic needs.

Future research should continue to conduct qualitative studies in order to formulate an understanding of what the girls need in order to integrate into communities, which quantitative data may not be able to provide. In addition, more girls should be interviewed from various areas of the country to determine whether or not this information is externally valid. Future research should conduct interviews with a greater number of participants in order to gather as much qualitative data as possible, especially from young females, such as freshmen, who may not be as involved with school-sponsored activities as their senior counterparts.

The Hispanic population is growing, quickly, in the area where this study took place, which is representative of the population's growth throughout the country (Cassidy, 2001). In order to help integrate this population into an already established population, greater understanding must occur between these cultures. Athletic teams in high schools can serve as one facility to help to integrate first- and second-generation immigrant children to help to bridge any cultural gaps between school, home, and community.

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