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Perceptions of College among Latino Elementary School Students

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Abstract

Scholarly articles by Heejung Chung, Ginger Dickson (2011), Christina Spears Brown, Hui Chu (2012), Moreno and Gaytán (2013), and David Becerra (2012), support the statement that the educational system in the United States can better accommodate to the needs of Latino students. There are a lack of certified teachers and administrators who are culturally competent and can help Latino students develop the skills they need to succeed in college. These skills include effectively managing issues that may result from their socioeconomic and undocumented status, language barriers, and a lack of positive sense of ethnic identity. These are the areas with the most urgent need of improvement. The lack of school personnel who possess the skills needed to help Latino children continues to have detrimental effects such as misidentification of Latino students with disabilities, overrepresentation of disciplinary actions and an overall lack of self-esteem and determination to succeed in their educational endeavors as well as their future college experience. This study uses empirical data from surveys, focus groups, and a version of the Kenneth Clark Doll Experiment in order to determine the factors that shape the perceptions of college among Latino elementary school students (grades 2-5).

### **Perceptions of College among Latino Elementary School Students**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Latinos comprise 16.9% of the population in the United States. From 2003 to 2013, the Latino population increased by 43% (U.S. Census Bureau). This means that there are a great number of Latino students who are part of the educational system in the United States. Despite the significant increase in the Latino population in the past ten years, current research shows that the educational system could do more to improve the academic success of Latino students in schools. Though much research focuses on the high school level, it is important to be aware of the influence which schools have at the elementary education level in order to ensure a pathway to college for Latino students. There are many barriers that Latino students often face at the high school level in order to attain a college education. By intervening at the elementary level, it is possible for students to foresee future obstacles and overcome them before exploring the realistic option of attending college. This is the time when teachers, counselors, and administrators must invest a significant amount of time and effort to implement systems which promote educational success and aid Latinos in overcoming future obstacles.

One educational issue which is affecting the Latino community today is the huge disparity between the number of females (Latinas) attending college versus the number of males (Latinos) attending. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, women are more likely than men to not only go to college, but graduate from college. Research from the Pew Hispanic Center shows that in 2010, Latinas between the ages of 25-29 comprised 13% of all individuals with a bachelor's degree. This is a significant difference compared to the 6% of bachelor's degrees held by Latinos.

Before discussing the ways in which schools can better assist the needs of Latino students, it is important for school personnel to be aware of and understand the common barriers which Latino students often face in schools. By understanding these obstacles, schools will have the ability to avoid future ramifications which may dictate the academic performance of Latino students as they move through the education system. Some of these barriers include unauthorized immigration status, language barriers, low socioeconomic status, standardized testing, and teachers who are not culturally sensitive to his/her students.

One significant barrier which may affect Latino students in the public education system concerns the issue of unauthorized status among approximately 8.66 million Latino immigrants in the United States today. Approximately 6.17% of individuals within this population are children or youth. (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). Additionally, 3.1 million children with legal status live in households where there is at least one undocumented immigrant (Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). This reality poses more of a challenge for Latinos because children may live in constant fear of being separated from family members. This may cause a student to undergo an additional amount of stress while in school, which may furthermore negatively affect the academic performance of these students.

Another potential obstacle which Latino students often face is the lack of educational resources provided to them resulting from low socioeconomic status. The Hispanic Pew Center demonstrates this economic status among Latinos by presenting an average annual income of \$20,000 among Latinos in Washington State along with a 37% poverty rate. Research has implied that students who come from a low socioeconomic status are often associated with low academic achievement. The reason for this lack of educational triumph is because of limited access to resources such as advanced technology, qualified teachers, and enriched educational

programs (Chun& Dickson, 2011). If students are given access to these resources, it would give them an opportunity to prosper in their efforts to succeed in school.

There are many Latino students, especially recent immigrant arrivals, who may deal with language barriers as well. Difficulty in learning a new language may result in a constant struggle to effectively balance two different cultures, as well as to make new friends on a daily basis. As an English Language Learner, students are also required to amplify their efforts in school in order to merely understand the work required at their grade level. If students want quality scores on their work, this requires an even greater amount of time and effort. This poses a serious problem for students resulting in low self-esteem that may add an additional amount of stress to their lives, which may subsequently cause students to perform low on their academics.

Standardized testing has a history of oppressing minority populations in the United States. Standardized testing may pose more of a challenge for Latinos because these tests generally lack culturally sensitive questions. And yet, there is an incredible amount of pressure and significant consequences which may occur depending on the performance of students in schools. Studies have constantly revealed that all minorities except Asian Americans score lower on standardized tests than do white Americans (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006). Standardized tests have not proved to measure the full potential of a student, especially if the student pertains to a minority group with a disadvantaged background. Yet schools are pressured to ensure that their students perform well. If schools meet this requirement, then they are rewarded with monetary gain. However, if students in a school do not receive satisfactory scores, then schools are punished by restructuring, financial penalty, closure, or seizure by the state (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006). This approach of rewarding and punishing schools is extremely flawed because it is not beneficial to students in the public education system.

Though standardized testing has attempted to improve by modifying traditional standardized instruments to address cultural biases, attempting to connect culturally responsive instructional strategies to testing results, developing nondiscriminatory assessment tools, and focusing on language proficiency, standardized tests have yet to succeed in diminishing cultural biases in the test results (Altshuler & Schmautz, 2006). This may also be detrimental for a Latino student in regards to self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, as defined by the American Psychological Association, “refers to an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments” (2013). Because there is much emphasis on a student’s standardized test score, this may lead Latino students to believe they are only as intelligent as the test implies. Self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of a student’s academic outcome. Therefore, if a student does not perform well on a test, this may cause students to acquire negative and false perceptions of their ability to succeed in school. These perceptions may additionally cause frustration and loss of interest in academics for a student.

Many researchers believe that one of the most impacting obstacles which Latino students face in the public education system today is the lack of cultural competence among teachers. Cultural competency, as defined by J.J. Hoover, is “to understand one’s own culture and class and those of other diverse cultures, as well as engaging in positive behavioral changes to reflect these new understandings” (Hoover, 2009). This aspect of being a teacher plays a crucial role in motivating a child to succeed in their academics. Research has also revealed that there is a significant correlation between the way in which schools and teachers value cultural diversity with the academic outcomes of those students. It is important to note that though there is a partial responsibility for teachers to explore the cultural accommodations and values of their students, it is the education system itself which is flawed. Institutions do not require prospective teachers to

engage in extensive training on cultural diversity, and many institutions where teachers work also do not provide such training (Moreno & Gaytán 2013).

For this reason, it is extremely important for teachers themselves to adhere to culturally responsive teaching. This means that teachers must understand the language, pan-ethnic identities, generational status, and cultural values of Latino students.

The term Latino is often used as an umbrella term to refer to any individual who was born or is a descendent of an individual born in a Latin American country. Within the Latino culture, there are distinct cultural differences among individuals of different backgrounds. For example, an individual from Mexico may not necessarily share identical cultural norms or political ideas with an individual from Cuba. As a teacher, it is important to note these differences and value each difference. This way, students feel welcome and valued in the classroom.

It is imperative that educators also understand the generational status of their students in order to offer students a rich classroom experience. First generation students are often defined as having been born in another country but currently live in the United States. Students pertaining to the second generation are those who were born in the United States, but who have at least one parent who was born in another country. Third generation students were born in the United States, as were their parents (Becerra, 2012). Because there are significant differences in the potential obstacles which may arise from different generational statuses, each generation requires a different set of needs which must be accommodated in order for students to perform well academically. For example, first generation students often struggle with the adaptation of a new culture and language, and often the parents of these students endure extremely difficult labor in order to provide for their families. On the other hand, research has shown that third generation

students sometimes lack academic aspirations. Therefore, as a teacher, it is important to understand the various barriers which different generational statuses may encounter. Teachers are then able to better address the needs of their students.

There is a distinct difference in the cultural values between the home setting and the school setting for Latino students. Students are required to behave in two different ways according to which setting they are in. There is a disparity between the collectivist and collaborative approach which Latino families value and the school culture which often perpetuates competitiveness and individuality. The consequences of these different cultural values are also factors which may affect the academic performance of minority students. This conflict can diminish if teachers strive to implement aspects of the collaborative approach in a school setting and simply understand the different cultural values which students may struggle to balance on a daily basis.

Teachers also play a crucial role in influencing students to succeed academically according to the students' sense of school belonging, ethnic identity, and expectations. A high sense of school belonging is often associated with academic motivation and school completion (Chun & Dickson, 2011). Sense of school belonging also correlates with academic self-efficacy, attendance rates, academic effort, and academic grades. A study done by Chun & Dickson (2011) illustrates that sense of school belonging likely enhances the academic performance of Latino students. This study additionally found that "sense of school belonging was a significant predictor of expectancy for success in class, intrinsic value, and academic effort; but not for GPA, educational aspirations and educational expectations." Though sense of school belonging did not demonstrate direct correlations with educational aspirations and expectations, academic success and effort are crucial characteristics in the educational endeavors of Latino students.

A positive sense of ethnic identity also plays a critical role in the academic success of Latino students. Students with teachers who value diversity and promote multiculturalism often perform academically higher than students with teachers who do not value cultural diversity. Promoting cultural diversity in the classroom beneficially leads students to feel welcome and respected by their school which ultimately leads students to obtain a great deal of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is then tied to the educational success of those students. If students are not exposed to cultural richness and valued for the contributions which their cultural identity brings to the classroom, this may cause students to devalue their cultural identity and consequently perform poorly in the classroom. This may also cause unfortunate ramifications in regards to diversity. According to Spears and Chu (2012) schools which place less importance on developing positive ethnic identities among students often experience more racial discrimination. This practice is extremely important to perform in settings where there is a high Latino population because it is these schools which often experience the most discrimination among its students as a result of low importance placed on multiculturalism. Positive ethnic identities also directly correlate with a strong sense of school belonging among Latino students (Spears & Chu, 2012). As stated earlier, this too is a critical factor which leads students to succeed academically.

High self-esteem and self-efficacy most closely relates to high academic performance. This is critical to note as an area which teachers could potentially improve and offer support systems for. In order for teachers to ensure that all students are self-competent and motivated in the classroom, it is important to hold high expectations and offer support for students who could increase their level of self-efficacy.

In addition to the influence of teachers on their students, parents play a key role in the academic success of their children as well. One of the most important relationships to form in

schools are those with the parents of the students. This allows teachers to create caring relationships with the families of their students and collaborate with parents to discuss the areas which students could improve on. Though many Latino parents are generally not familiar with the educational system due to the labor intensive work many parents perform, they still hold high expectations and promote educational success for their children. This gives students the desire to make their parents proud and continue their academic tasks regardless of the challenges these tasks pose. Parents are active when it comes to providing successful learning environments for their children at home, communicating messages about hard work, and communicating messages about school success (Suizzo, M., Jackson, K., Pahlke, E., Marroquin, Y., Blondeau, L., & Martinez, A, 2012). Even though students may have to jump over a number of hurdles to succeed academically, research has shown that parents play a crucial role in the academic success of children regardless of the barriers they must overcome.

Many negative consequences may arise if teachers refuse to invest time in understanding the Latino culture. One of these consequences includes the overrepresentation of Latino students in disciplinary referrals. The current zero tolerance policy which many schools have adopted perpetuates the punishment of a child regardless of the level of the offense. This approach fails to truly understand why a child is behaving a certain way and does not aim to make the misconduct a learning process for the student. Though the purpose of this policy is to create safe environments for students in schools, the policies are problematic for Latino students because it is these students which are “more likely to be referred for disciplinary actions for lesser offenses (Moreno & Gaytan, 2013). The repercussions of these types of policies may include negative school experiences for students and may cause a negative impact on a child’s personal and/or academic performance.

Another issue which arises from the lack of cultural competency among teachers is the misidentification of students with disabilities and the disproportionate representation in special education among students pertaining to the dominant group versus minority students (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003). Language barriers and lack of culturally sensitive assessments are also factors which lead students to receive erroneous referrals from school personnel. There is a disproportionate number of students with diverse backgrounds who are identified with a behavior or learning problem in the public educational system. This too can cause an extremely detrimental school experience for a child. The child may be restricted from the general curriculum and this may cause delays in academic progress, inadequate social skills, and a lack of preparation to attain higher education.

In order to better address the needs of Latino students in public schools today, Perkins and Borden suggest that school and community leaders work together to “organize after-school programs or community education centers where Latino students can receive the benefits of supervision and mentoring” (2003). There should be more social systems within schools to offer support for Latino students who may need it in a variety of academic, social, and psychological aspects. This way, students have a constant support system within the school and parents are aware of the services offered at their child’s school in case they ever need it.

## **Method**

My methodology includes three aspects which all aim to discover the perceptions of college among Latinos students. The first and main part of this study includes a version of the Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark doll experiment. This experiment was conducted in 1939-1940 and aimed to identify children’s self-perception according to race. It found that though black children identified with black dolls, they tended to view the white dolls favorably

and the black dolls unfavorably. I also facilitated focus groups with parents and gathered surveys from completed by teachers to acquire the college perceptions from students.

I used two different scenarios to interview my subjects with the rendition of the Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark doll experiment. The first scenario included three female dolls of White, Latina, and Indigenous backgrounds. This scenario was used to discover what ethnicity Latino students believe have a greater chance of attending college. The second scenario included one female and one male doll both of Latino background. This scenario aimed to discover if there was a difference of perceptions according to gender within the Latino community. The questions for both scenarios remained the same. Some of these questions include “Which doll is the smart doll?” and "Which doll will go to college?" Interviews were conducted in schools with the permission of school principals and parents. Because of the limitations involved in obtaining contact information of my subjects, I asked the student’s teachers to send a letter home with their students asking for their parents’ permission in conducting this experiment.

I also facilitated focus groups with the parents of the children whom I interviewed. I recruited these parents for the focus groups using the **Snowball Sampling Method**. The invitation to participate was included in a letter which I sent home with their children. Therefore, these letters were translated in Spanish as well so that I could reach out to parents who did not speak English. These focus groups discussed factors which the parents themselves believed may be contributing to the perceptions of their children. I assigned a code to each of my participants in order to ensure anonymity and organize responses.

Lastly, I provided a survey to teachers across Washington State which asked them to use a given scale in order to answer the extent to which he/she agreed with given statements of cultural competence. The scale included whether a teacher strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed,

strongly disagreed, was neutral, or did not know. Some of these statements included, “You have received training regarding cultural diversity,” and “There are obstacles/barriers (culturally or otherwise) that Latino students face in your school.” I obtained the teachers e-mails by going to each school district’s website in Washington State. These interviews, focus groups, and surveys were beneficial to my research because the responses of the students, parents, and teachers allowed me to obtain a well-rounded perspective on the students' experiences in school.

## **Results**

Contacting principals was a difficult task to complete. The first obstacle which had to be overcome was accessing the e-mails of these principals on their district websites. It is important that principals make themselves accessible to the community and to the parents of their children and currently, these district websites are not fulfilling this necessity. Out of fifteen schools, only eight school principals responded after e-mails, letters, and phone calls were made. Many of these principals required district approval in order for this study to be conducted in their school.

Only one principal was immediately interested in the prospective findings of my research. This principal administered a school where 98% of the students have free or reduced lunch and 95% of the students are Hispanic. Upon entering this elementary school, it was enlightening to see translations of posters and murals in Spanish. The importance of valuing cultural diversity was clearly present. Because this school is located in an area where many students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, educational resources are limited. The principal informed us that when he first started at this school, many students would say that they wanted to be gang members when they grew up. The school has successfully changed these perceptions from their students. However, now when asked what they would like to be when they grow up, school personnel find that many students will say police officers or firefighters

because those are the individuals who they see on a daily basis in their neighborhoods. The next step is exposing these children to college. Despite the lack of resources this school suffers from, it currently has a music program which has been implemented in hopes of increasing the academic performance of their students. It also incorporates many aspects from the bilingual dual program which they lost a few years ago after the district decided they were not showing substantial improvements.

After being introduced to the parents from this school's Parent Booster Club, it was interesting to witness an extremely contradictory dynamic in the room. After stating the purpose of the prospective study, the Latino parents shared their experiences and the experiences of their children, nieces, and nephews in the educational system. Parents discussed their frustration with the lack of support from teachers and staff in the educational system to attend college. On the other hand, two white females who were present as well, one of which was a teacher, shared that their children had received the appropriate amount of support and were encouraged to apply to college. The contrasting dynamics in this room automatically supported the literature findings of this research project.

## **Discussion**

## **Conclusion**

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