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Self-Acceptance of Adolescent Latino Students with Disabilities

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Introduction

This study examined personal perceptions of biculturalism, cultural identity, and disability, especially self-acceptance of culture and disability. Culturally diverse individuals with disabilities confront issues of self-acceptance with respect to both *race identity* and *disability*. Several accomplished researchers have developed measures to explore these constructs, including the *Perceived Stigma in People with Disabilities (PSPID)* instrument, (Ali, Strydom, Hassiotis, Williams, & King, 2008) and the *Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (SASH)* (Marin, Sabogal, Vanoss, Otero, & Perez, 1987). However, to date, research has primarily focused on monolingual students with disabilities (Patrikakou, 1996); moreover, prior research has only minimally explored the intersection of disability identity development with other key variables, such as race/ethnicity and specific disability characteristics (Forber-Pratt, Lyew, & Mueller, 2017).

Literature Review

Studies on Latino adolescent students with disabilities are very limited and scarce. This is in stark contrast to increased enrollment throughout the United States of children from Latino and other diverse backgrounds (Aud et al., 2012). This descriptive study attempts to provide a unique perspective on a new generation of young Latino students in special education classes in a large metropolitan area in Northeastern United States and thereby increase the effectiveness of special educators. Klingner and Artiles (2003) questioned, “How can we avoid the inappropriate provision of special education services to culturally and linguistically diverse students?” (p. 66). They argued that, “The field has not yet adequately determined how to distinguish between disabilities and the normal second language learning development” (p. 70). The issues undergirding this question continue to warrant explicit attention. After more than three decades, Latino students are still overrepresented in special education programs across the country. It is proposed that being bicultural—and in effect positively affirming the dimensions subsumed in this identity, may provide more cognitive-affective and social support for adolescent Latino students with disabilities than their acceptance and/or positive perceptions of their identified disability. To enhance teachers’ abilities to scaffold these social and cognitive-affective mediators to advance adolescent Latino students with learning disabilities’ school outcomes, research must explore the extent to which these adolescents’ dynamic self-acceptance and identity are influenced by disability, home language, and school context (Harris, Ravert, & Sullivan, 2017; Rodriguez, 2015).

The problem of underserving students with special needs, particularly those who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD), is becoming more acute. Despite the increase in the number of school-age children with disabilities, adolescent Latino students in special education are dropping out of high school at an alarming rate (NYDOE, 2012). Approximately 22% of English learners are identified as having a disability and are placed in special education programs

(NYDOE, 2012). The outlook for adolescent Latino students with disabilities in multicultural communities is especially grim. Rodriguez (2015) ascertained that individuals involved in the evaluation of children with special needs are concerned about the academic needs and self-esteem of this population.

The literature focused on the relationship between positive self-perception and academic performance is well-established. However, the nature of this relationship is complex, especially for bilingual adolescent students with Learning Disabilities (LD) (Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Current implementation of programs to foster self-acceptance and promote self-determination may not be meeting the needs of transition aged students with high incidence disabilities, in particular those from CLD backgrounds (Pierson, Carter, Lane, & Glaeser, 2008; Trainor, 2002). This constraint reflects an urgent need to expand the literature base to more clearly articulate evidence-based practices that enhance bilingual adolescents with disabilities' cumulative social and academic school outcomes (Blanchett, Klinger, & Harry, 2009; Bottiani, Larson, Debnam, Bischoff, & Bradshaw, 2018). In addition, it is imperative for the field to explicitly explore the pivotal influences that shape adolescents' racial/ethnic, cultural, and disability identities, as doing so will better position educators to competently support these adolescents as they navigate increasingly complex social interactions and academic expectations (Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2017).

Overrepresentation refers to circumstances in which a racial or ethnic group has greater representation in special education than in the general population. CLD students who are learning English may not recognize academic and other terms in their textbooks, which in turn often influences their academic achievement. These interrelated phenomena may erroneously lead school personnel to conclude that learners who are unfamiliar with English are in need of special education services. In point of fact, Latino students are overrepresented in special education (Aud et al., 2012; Skiba et al., 2008). In an effort to understand Latino students in special education, this study seeks to examine personal perceptions of biculturalism, cultural identity, and disability, especially self-acceptance of culture and disability, which have been used to blame or attribute poor school performance to this student population. Concurrent with these findings, the academic performance of CLD learners continues to lag behind that of their Caucasian American peers. Specifically, CLD learners experience higher grade retention rates and perform significantly below Caucasian American students on standardized assessments (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Trent, et al 2014). CLD learners are also disproportionally represented in programs for students with exceptionalities. For instance, they are overrepresented in the high-incidence special education categories and underrepresented in programs for students with gifts and talents (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Skiba et al., 2008).

Theoretical Framework

Three conceptual frameworks served to guide the current study. These include current understanding and research that has focused on self-acceptance and self-determination of students with disabilities and also the literature base focused on self-concept for students with disabilities. To date, these constructs have been explored separately, that is, in isolation to each other. This study drew from these multiple constructs in an effort to more fully explore

persistent concerns that center on Latino students with disabilities' academic, social, and school outcomes. As such, this descriptive study seeks to expand our understanding of these constructs in relation to this specific group of students and thereby close a gap in the field's literature base.

The first theory framing this study draws from Shepard's (1979) work that established the validity of self-acceptance as an experimental construct. Skaalvik and Hagtvet (1990) refined this understanding, suggesting a recursive model of influence between academic achievement and self-concept/self-acceptance in elementary and middle schools. In the case of students with LD, the traditional understanding of the relationship between self-concept and academic performance needs to be updated to meet the specific needs of students with LD. Students with LD feel less accepted by peers; have lower self-esteem; feel more lonely; have lower levels of achievement, effort investment, academic self-efficacy, sense of coherence, positive mood, and hope; have higher levels of negative mood; and report lower quality of life (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). According to Kim and Gal (2014) self-acceptance—defined as the detachment of one's self-worth from one's self-assessment—as a moderator of individuals' responses to self-deficit information. They believe that although like self-esteem, self-acceptance affects self-worth (i.e., the value individuals attach to the self), self-acceptance can be distinguished from self-esteem in that self-esteem is tied to individuals' evaluation of their self-assessment. Other researchers refer to self-acceptance to individuals' self-satisfaction, and implies both self-understanding and an awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses (Sansinenea, Asla, Agirrezabal, Fuster-Ruiz-de-Apodaca, & Garaigordobil, 2019). Self-acceptance refers to how comfortable an individual is as a member of her or his gender (Hoffman, 2006). Self-concept is defined as students' beliefs about the degree to which they view themselves as more or less talented than other students in terms of a certain academic activity. Academic self-concept has broadly been seen as how a student views his or her academic ability when compared with other students (Tentama, & Abdillah, 2019).

Although mainstream schooling is a key policy of social inclusion for students with LD, this policy may be contributing to impaired academic achievement in some cases. Significant increases in self-reported stigmatizing treatment were found in students of mainstream schools compared to those from segregated ones (Cooney, Jahoda, Gumley, & Knott, 2006). Perceptions of discrimination paired with actual instances can form a negative feedback loop because a perception of pervasive discrimination is highly negatively correlated with academic performance (Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014).

Given these findings, education programs should be providing support to mitigate the stigmatization of students with LD. They must also incorporate new operational strategies to meet the needs of these students. As noted above, the transition from adolescence represents a critical period for identity development (Harris et al., 2017) and the ways that adolescents both develop and express their individualized academic self-determination and motivation (Zorogian, 2013; Zheng, Gaumer-Erickson, Kingston, & Noonan, 2014). In light of increased national enrollments of children from CLD backgrounds and placement of bilingual youngsters with learning disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Blanchett et al., 2009; Bottiani et al., 2018), the educational community must more directly explore the intersection of culture, race, and disability and in particular, identify how language use and social experiences impact adolescent

Latino students with disabilities' evolving and complex identities (Artiles et al., 2005; Forber-Pratt et al., 2017; Harris, et al., 2017; Trainor, 2002).

Zorugian (2013) found a high correlation between student motivation and self-determination. Zheng et al. (2014) found “strong collinearity between self-concept and self-determination and a lower correlation coefficient between self-concept and academic achievement than the one between self-determination and academic achievement” (p. 469). In the current study, only self-determination was used as a predictor variable for academic achievement of students with LD. This choice aligns with prevailing conceptions of self-determination that emphasize the interrelated constructs of self-knowledge, identity, and agency (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000).

It was equally important to explore constructs of risk and resilience as these have been associated with effective proactive interventions for students who have complex learning needs. That is, these constructs “reliably distinguish between groups of students and identify those students in need of extra school-linked programming” (Robertson, Harding, & Morrison, 1998, p. 17).

Finally, research has demonstrated that parents' attitudes are a critical factor shaping academic performance (Patrikakou, 1996). As such, parental and other social supports should be included as part of an analysis of resiliency variables of students with LD. This line of inquiry must specifically explore the reciprocal impacts of parents' beliefs and priorities on their children's self-acceptance and cultural identity (Blanchett et al., 2009; Harris et al., 2017). Additionally, studies must endeavor to extend our understanding of how parents from CLD backgrounds construe, experience, and/or reconcile cultural discontinuities that emerge as a byproduct of inclusive educational contexts that promote their children's individualized expressions of autonomy and identity that challenge their own values and beliefs (Trainor, 2002).

Methods

It is hypothesized that being bicultural may provide cognitive-affective and social supports for adolescent Latino students with disabilities, which favor academic achievement, more than having a positive identification with the culture of their disability. Accordingly, this descriptive study will examine the relationships between biculturalism, cultural identity, self-esteem, and academic self-esteem relative to the academic achievement of adolescent Latino students with disabilities.

Research Questions

Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities perceive themselves stigmatized for having a disability?

Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities experience stigmatized treatment where they live?

Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities perceive themselves as proficient in English?

Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities perceive themselves as proficient in two languages?

Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities perceive themselves as bicultural?

Participants. The participants in this study were 165 students in high schools. Participants were recruited from four high schools with a large percentage of Latino students with disabilities. As shown in Table 1, gender was close to evenly distributed across respondents.

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Gender

Gender	N	Percent
Female	81	49.1
Male	84	50.9
Total	165	100

Measures. The *Perceived Stigma in People with Disabilities (PSPID)* instrument measures perceived stigma by people with mild to moderate disabilities. The PSPID is a 21-item measure rated on a dichotomous Yes/No scale (Ali, Strydom, Hassiotis, Williams, & King, 2008). The *Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (SASH)* is a brief unidirectional and multidimensional measure of acculturation for Latino/as (Marin, Sabogal, Vanoss, Otero, Perez, 1987). The SASH contains 12 items. The 33 Likert items take into account the clarity of instructions. Following the approval to conduct research in the district where participants attended school, the *PSPID* and *SASH* questionnaires were administered. In total, 165 respondents participated.

Procedure. Four high schools in a large Northeastern Metropolitan School District were invited to participate in this study. Institutional Review Board approval was granted by the university and school district. Consistent with standard practice, the letter requesting permission included a statement delineating the purpose of the study, along with a description of the procedures of the study, and a statement about the potential benefit of the study for the students as well as for the district. After gaining approvals to conduct the study, teachers in classes that included adolescent Latinos with disabilities were given a letter explaining the study and were asked to send the consent form to the parents of prospective participants. At the time of data collection, students whose parents returned a signed consent form had the study explained to them and the students were asked whether they wanted to participate in the study. Students who wanted to participate were then asked to sign an assent form. Students were permitted to complete the scales online or using paper and pencil.

Analyses. For both questionnaires, the number of responses in each category was tallied and the percentage value was calculated based on the number of participants responding to each particular statement. Replies were presumed to specify the perception, belief, or attitude expressed in each item. For particular items, the responses were assigned a numerical value and a weighted mean was calculated. Tallies of all responses to each item were calculated.

Results

Data obtained from administration of the PSPID reveal the personal perceptions of Latino students with disabilities with respect to stigmatization for engaging in special education. Data from the PSPID are used to answer the first two research questions in this study. Results from the SASH questionnaire provide insights into bicultural identity. Those results provide answers

to the last two research questions.

Perceptions of Stigmatization

The results obtained from administration of the PSPID appear in Table 1. In response to the first research question, “Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities perceive themselves stigmatized for having a disability,” the findings reveal that a considerable majority (75%) of adolescent Latino students with disabilities do not perceive themselves stigmatized for having a disability. Further support for this perception is evident in the reply to Item 21, in which 86% of the Latinos with disabilities who completed the survey do not report people making fun of them for participating in special education.

In responding to the second question, “Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities experience stigmatized treatment where they live,” the majority of participants reported experiencing very little stigmatized treatment in the local area where they lived. Indeed, 92% of the respondents reported that the police have not treated them badly. Similarly, 90% of the respondents replied that doctors and nurses have not treated them badly. However, the results of one survey item contradict this perception. Specifically, in reply to Item 13, 57% of the respondents disagreed with the statement: “No one bothers me when I use buses, trains, or taxis.” Given all of the PSPID results, as shown in Table 1, the Latino students with disabilities typically held positive attitudes, often in 3:1 (75% to 25%) or 3:2 (33% to 67%) ratios relative to negative attitudes, though sometimes as high as 10:1 or 5:1 when expressing positive versus negative feelings. There are a few exceptions in which attitudes run closer to 1:1, which are evident in the replies to Items 4, 13, and 17. Interpreting replies to Item 4 is complicated because a reply of either Yes or No can be conceived as positive.

Table 1: Percentage Respondent of Perceived Stigma in People with Disabilities (PSPID)

	Yes	No	N
1. People talk down to me	24.8% (41)	75.2% (124)	165
2. People think I am not as good as them	33.1% (54)	66.9% (109)	163
3. The police have treated me badly	7.9% (13)	92.1% (151)	164
4. I think I am the same as other people	56.4% (92)	43.6% (71)	163
5. The way people talk to me makes me angry	26.7% (44)	73.3% (121)	165
6. People make me feel embarrassed	25.8% (42)	74.2% (121)	163

7. Doctors and nurses have treated me badly	9.1%	(15)	90.9%	(150)	165
8. People on the street make fun of me	9.8%	(16)	90.2%	(148)	164
9. People on the street have hit me	8.0%	(13)	92.0%	(149)	162
10. People on the street look at me in a funny way	22.0%	(36)	78.0%	(128)	164
11. People like to talk to me	82.2%	(134)	17.8%	(29)	163
12. People make fun of my family	11.0%	(18)	88.3%	(144)	162
13. No one bothers me when I use buses, trains or taxis	42.9%	(70)	57.1%	(93)	163
14. I feel welcome in shops, restaurants and clubs	85.9%	(140)	14.1%	(23)	163
15. People laugh at me because of the way I look	10.4%	(17)	89.6%	(147)	164
16. People are nice to me	85.3%	(139)	14.7%	(24)	163
17. People treat me like a child	41.4%	(67)	58.6%	(95)	162
18. I keep away from other people because they are not nice to me	40.6%	(67)	59.4%	(98)	165
19. People laugh at me because of the way I talk	26.2%	(43)	73.8%	(121)	164
20. I worry about the way people act towards me	37.7%	(61)	62.3%	(101)	162
21. People make fun of me about going to special education	13.8%	(22)	86.2%	(137)	159

Bicultural Identity

The results obtained from administration of the SASH appear in Tables 2 and 3. In responding to the third question, “Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities perceive themselves as proficient in English,” the findings reveal that the respondents typically feel that they are proficient in English. Consider, for instance, the final three columns in Table 1, which identify respondents expressing feelings of competence in both languages equally, favoring English somewhat, or using only English. Items 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 provide insights into competence in English. Parenthetically, the results for Items 2 and 3 are notable because the percentages are similar across all categories, which indicates that the language the respondent used primarily as a child remains in use through adolescence. Returning to Items 1 and 4-8 for evidence of competence in English, the sum of the percentages in the final three columns for these items yields a mean of 86% with a range from 79.1% to 93.1%. Hence, the respondents regard themselves as proficient in English.

In responding to the fourth question, “Do Latino adolescent students with disabilities perceive themselves as proficient in two languages,” the respondents generally perceive themselves as proficient in both languages. To begin, notice that the column for “equal in both Spanish and English” is about 25% for all eight items, excepting Item 4, which is closer to 20%. Equal proficiency in two languages is relatively rare for bilingual people. With respect to the results for the “Spanish better than English” and “English better than Spanish” categories, the sum of the percentages for the interior three columns for Item 1 is 81.6%. Hence, even though one language might be favored somewhat over the other, on average, about 8 out of 10 respondents will use either language. Yet, after considering the sum of the interior three columns for Items 4-8, the answer to this question is not as clear as the answer to the previous question. For Items 4-8, the mean of the sum of the percentages of the interior three columns is 50% with a range from 49% to 53%. That mean is much lower than 81.6%, which invites further reflection.

Considering the results in the “English Only” category for Items 4-8, one readily finds in Table 2 that 43% to 46% of the respondents use English only when thinking, speaking with friends, and listening to radio or TV.

Table 2: Items 1-8 of the *Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (SASH)*

	Only Spanish	Spanish better than English	Both Equally	English better than Spanish	Only English
1. In general, what language(s) do you read and speak?	3.7% (6)	17.2% (28)	26.4% (43)	38.0% (62)	14.7% (24)
2. What was the language(s) you used as child?	29.4% (48)	20.9% (34)	23.3% (38)	10.4% (17)	16% (26)
3. What language(s) do you	27.2 (44)	16.7% (27)	30.9% (50)	7.4% (12)	17.9% (29)

usually speak at home?					
4. In which language(s) do you usually think?	8.2% (13)	10.7% (17)	18.9% (30)	19.5% (31)	42.8% (69)
5. What language(s) do you usually speak with your friends?	4.3% (7)	8.1% (13)	23.6% (38)	21.1% (34)	42.9% (69)
6. In what language(s) are the TV programs you usually watch?	3.1% (5)	6.3% (10)	22.0% (35)	22.6% (36)	45.9% (73)
7. In what language(s) are the radio program you usually listen to?	8.9% (14)	7.6% (12)	27.8% (44)	10.8% (17)	44.9% (71)
8. In general, in what language(s) are the movies, TV, and radio programs you prefer to watch and listen to?	2.5% (4)	4.4% (7)	23.9% (38)	24.5% (39)	44.7% (71)

Replies to Items 9-12 on the SASH provide insights into personal perceptions of biculturalism because the items sought the extent to which the respondents would associate with members of two cultures, Latino/Hispanic and American. Item 9 shows that 13.7% of the respondents have only Latino/Hispanic or American friends, whereas 86.3% of the respondents have friends from both cultures. The results for Item 12, which also pertains to friendship, indicates that 8.8% of the respondents would choose only Latino/Hispanic or American friends, whereas 91.2% of respondents would choose friends from both cultures. With respect to social gatherings (Item 10), 16.2% of respondents prefer such events when only Latinos/Hispanics or Americans are present, whereas 83% of respondents prefer events with people from both cultures. Lastly, with respect to visitors and visiting others, 26.6% of respondents prefer only Latinos/Hispanics or Americans, whereas 73.4% of respondents prefer people from both cultures.

Table 3. Items 9 – 12 of the *Short Acculturation Scale for Hispanics (SASH)*

	All Latinos/ Hispanic	More Latinos than Americans	About Half and Half	More Americans than Latinos	All Americans
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9. Your close friends are:	8.1% (13)	23.6% (38)	51.6% (83)	11.2% (18)	5.6% (9)
10. You prefer going to social gathering/parties at which the people are:	11.2% (18)	15.5% (25)	54% (87)	14.3% (23)	5.0% (8)
11. The persons you visit or who visit you are:	21.0% (34)	29.0% (47)	35.2% (57)	9.3% (15)	5.6% (9)
12. If you could choose your children's friends, you would want them to be:	4.4% (7)	8.1% (13)	73.8% (118)	9.4% (15)	4.4% (7)

Discussion

This research attempted to make a critical contribution by increasing the knowledge base about cultural identity and self-acceptance of a disability. In this study, self-acceptance is conceptualized as relevant to adolescent Latino students with disabilities and their sense of belonging and understanding of the norms and values in both mainstream America and the Latino community. Given the results of the stigmatization survey, the PSPID, the majority of participants perceived themselves positively, which portends a sense of optimism about their future. The researchers posit that adolescent Latino students do not feel discrimination because they live and study within their own community. We might argue that the students live in a rather homogeneous environment (“a bubble”) in which there are more similarities among their peer group than differences, which is a possible explanation for why they have a positive self-perception.

The findings of the study also revealed that the SASH could be used to identify strengths and weaknesses in Latino adolescents with disabilities. In particular, 81% of the respondents speak in two languages with varying proficiency. Teachers who are aware of the bilingual capacities of their students can create instructional experiences that foster acquisition of content knowledge and advanced language skills (Rodriguez, 2009). SASH results also revealed that due to the common use of English in the United States, approximately 45% of the 165-person sample use only English when listening to radio and TV programs, as well as when thinking. Retaining bicultural identity requires opportunities to engage in discourse in both languages and activities common in both cultures.

Research supports culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Kea & Trent 2013). To incorporate culturally responsive instructional strategies, teachers first take time to learn the cultures of their students. Herrera (2016) refers to this as biography-driven instruction. Teachers

may summarize their findings about the cultures of their students on note cards or in digital forms. Once aware of the multiple cultures of their students, teachers can create presentations and select examples especially relevant to their students. In addition, teachers can provide feedback in manners consistent with the cultures of students. Further, people in many cultures speak a language other than English and, in those cases, students benefit from instruction that draws on their native language (Rodríguez, Carrasquillo, & Lee, 2014). Shulman (1986) discussed the integration of Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (PCK). When a teacher draws on PCK and accounts for the cultural competencies of their students, students benefit greatly (Gay, 2010; Kea & Trent, 2013; Rodríguez et al., 2014).

Also consider this study in light of the goals of the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which seek to prepare all students for entry to higher education or work, including those with disabilities. IDEA (2004) mandates support for special and general education teachers working with students with disabilities by creating a curriculum addressing the linguistic, affective, social, and emotional needs of this population. To afford students opportunities to engage in effective instructional experiences, there is a need to increase of the capability of educators working with students with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Schools with Latino adolescent students with disabilities should implement instructional and transitional programs sensitive to the academic needs of this population.

The intersection of bilingual learners and learners with disabilities remains a complex and challenging field of study. Moving forward, we need to know more about Latino adolescent students' experiences in school, including issues relevant to having been identified as having a disability.

Further Work

As the United States becomes increasingly multicultural and as the global community becomes more interconnected, it will be important to further examine the variance of disabilities and inclusion, use, and effectiveness of different problem-solving styles within culturally evolving community contexts. Future studies may stratify diverse learners to discern whether differences exist across large cultural groups (e.g., Latino, Asian) or whether differences exist within such groups (e.g., Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Colombians; or Japanese, Chinese, Korean). In addition, consistent with findings revealed by Zorigian (2013), we hope that this study stimulates future research in the field of education with a special focus on motivation, capacity for self-determination, and academic achievement of adolescent students with disabilities. After all, future work linking self-acceptance of culture and disability with effective instructional practices may improve academic achievement for diverse learners.

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