

# Perceptions of College Among Latina/o Elementary Students

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## Abstract

This study uses empirical data from a version of the Clark doll experiment and Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) to determine the factors that shape the perceptions of college among 35 randomly selected Latina/o children in Grades 2nd to 5th. The findings of this study lead to two conclusions: (a) that Latina/o children hold their race/ethnicity in lower regard when compared to Whites, exhibit an ambivalence regarding identity that negatively affects their self-esteem and their perceptions of college as an attainable goal; and (b) that Latinas perceived themselves more favorably than Latinos in all categories, which positively affects their perceptions of a college education.

## Keywords

elementary, education, Latina/o, culture, race/ethnicity

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Latina/o population in the United States grew by 22% between 2004 and 2014, comprising a total of 17.4% of the U.S. population; of the 55.4 million, 11.2% reside in Washington State. This significant increase signals an emerging demographic change and, consequently, specific needs that must be addressed for Latina/o students who are increasingly becoming part of the public education system. Current research shows that the education system could do more to improve the academic success of Latina/o students in schools (Becerra, 2012; Brown & Chu, 2012; Chun & Dickson, 2011; Crisp & Nora, 2009; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). Although much research focuses on high school as the critical stage that determines whether or not students will attend college, it is essential that we assess the impact of schools at the elementary education level to tackle these hurdles and ensure a pathway to college for Latina/o students (Contreras, 2013; Hoover, Nunez, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vazquez, 2013). The multiple barriers Latina/o students often face at the high school level to attain a college education are widely documented (Becerra, 2012; Brown & Chu, 2012; Chun & Dickson, 2011; Crisp & Nora, 2009; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013). However, intervening at the elementary level can be much more effective for school administrators and students if they can foresee future obstacles that may prevent them from attending college (Contreras, 2013). This is the time when teachers, counselors, and administrators must invest a significant amount of resources to implement systems that promote educational success and assist Latina/os in overcoming future obstacles (Ramalho, Garza, & Merchant, 2010).

Intervening at the elementary level necessitates school officials and policy makers being aware of, understanding,

and addressing common obstacles that Latina/o students often face in schools, which include unauthorized immigration status, language barriers, low socioeconomic status, standardized testing, and teachers who lack cultural sensitivity training (Crisp & Nora, 2009; Hoover et al., 2013; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013).

## Theoretical Framework

Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) provides a foundation for discussing the implications of race/ethnicity in the educational system (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit theorists operate under the assumption that “racial inequity and racism is a normalized everyday occurrence,” while also shifting away from the Black/White binary that dominates race discussions in the contemporary United States (Anguiano, Milstein, De Larkin, Chen, & Sandoval, 2012, p. 128; Trucios-Haynes, 2000). The roots of LatCrit come from Critical Race Theory (CRT), which addresses “issues of concern to Latina/os, such as immigration, language rights, and multi-identity” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 166). Both LatCrit and CRT emerged out of identity development theories, which are widely used by practitioners in student affairs because it is helpful in understanding the

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processes students go through in discovering their “abilities, aptitude and objectives” (V. Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009, p. 577). CRT has also been influenced by critical legal studies and radical feminism as well as European philosophers and theorists such as “Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and U.S. radical scholars and activists, such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, César Chávez, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Power and Chicano movement” of the 1960s and 1970s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 5). According to CRT, “whiteness and racism are predictable, structural, institutional mainstream and common phenomena. Whiteness works through hegemonic systems and occurs at [the] material, ideological, local, and global levels” (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2001, cited in Anguiano et al., 2012, p. 128). Together, LatCrit and CRT complement identity development theories in student affairs because they look at the “critical role of social status of different identity groups in the construction of identities” (V. Torres et al., 2009, p. 584). Furthermore, these authors suggest LatCrit, the theory being used as the primary analytical tool in this study, is one among three new approaches (the other two are CRT and queer theory) gaining prominence in student affairs because they “help researchers and practitioners to highlight the experiences of marginalized populations . . . [focusing on] how society defines the norm in relation to the understanding of race, ethnicity, and sexuality” (V. Torres et al., 2009, p. 583).

The intersectionality of LatCrit is ideally suited to study the educational systems and Latinas/os because it draws on documents such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo as a source to tackle systems of oppression that emanate from different parts of an individual’s self-identity, “including ethnicity, culture, nationality and language” rights. It also addresses issues of “bilingual schooling, internal colonialism, sanctuary for Latin American refugees and census categories” (Anguiano et al., 2012, p. 128; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 91). Furthermore, LatCrit examines the intersections of race and socioeconomic status central to the findings of this study.

The extant literature in this study exposes stark inequalities within the experiences of Latina/o elementary students compared with Whites. LatCrit theorists posit social transformation and activism as one way to challenge the dominant ideology, especially in marginalized communities. For these reasons, LatCrit theorists “urge researchers to highlight the experience of people of color as validated holders and creators of knowledge” (Anguiano et al., 2012; Huber, Lopez, Malagon, Velez, & Solorzano, 2008, p. 128).

Finally, LatCrit situates Latinas/os in “a larger inter-group framework, both domestically and globally to promote social justice awareness,” with four primary functions including “(1) the production of critical and interdisciplinary knowledge; (2) the promotion of substantive social transformation; (3) the expansion and interconnection of anti-subordination

struggles; and (4) the cultivation of community and coalition among outsider scholars” (Valdes, 1999 cited in Anguiano et al., 2012, p. 128).

## Method

The main objective of this study is to assess the perceptions of college among Latina/o elementary school students. The term *Latina/o* refers to any persons of Latin American descent, specifically individuals who were born in or are descendants of individuals from Latin American countries including Mexico, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Ecuador among others (Oboler, 1995; Tatum, 2001).

With the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the entity in charge of protecting human participants, elementary school students were interviewed using a version of the Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark doll experiment (Branch & Newcombe, 1986; Clark & Clark, 1947; Jordan, Hernandez-Reif, 2009). This experiment was conducted from 1939 to 1940, and aimed to identify children’s self-perception according to race. It found that although Black children identified with Black dolls, they tended to view the White dolls favorably and the Black dolls unfavorably.

This study involved contacting school principals to allow researchers to study their pupils. Teachers from each school then agreed to participate in the study and sent letters as well as consent forms to parents to receive permission to interview their children.

Elementary school principals who agreed to participate in the study were asked to randomly select student participants whose last names began with the letters E, G, M, T, and O. This method for acquiring participants is considered random sampling because the selection process involved choosing participants from a list containing the names of everyone in the population being sampled (Babbie, 2011). The quota sampling technique was also used because the target population had to fit a preset list of characteristics to participate in the study (Babbie, 2011). At the time of the study (fall 2013), at least 75% of the second- through fifth-grade participants in each of the school districts were of Latina/o background and at least 80% qualified for free or reduced lunch, which are characteristics of the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic inequality addressed by LatCrit and CRT (Anguiano et al., 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

The study used two different scenarios to conduct one-on-one 5- to 10-min interviews with children in Grades 2 through 5 by using a rendition of the Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark doll experiment. With permission from parents, most interviews were video recorded, and notes were taken for the few students who did not agree to be video recorded. The first scenario included two female dolls of White and Latina backgrounds (see Table 3 for the list of questions) and was used to discern what ethnicity Latina/o

**Table 1.** Poverty and Population Rates of Participants.

School districts	% of students on free and reduced lunch	% of Latino population
School District 1	82.3	85.8
School District 2	89.1	75.9
School District 3	83.5	75.9

**Table 2.** Participants' Class Rankings and Ages.

Grade level	%
Second grade (ages 7-8)	11
Third grade (ages 8-9)	26
Fourth grade (ages 9-10)	43
Fifth grade (ages 10-11)	20

students identify with and believe have a greater chance of attending college as well as to ascertain the children's overall self-perceptions. The second scenario included one female and one male doll both of Latino backgrounds and aimed to discover whether there was a difference in perceptions according to gender among the Latina/o children. The questions for both scenarios remained the same except for, which doll looks most like you? (see Table 4 for the list of questions). Each question began with "Which doll . . .," to elicit a response from children that would require them to choose a doll they believed was most likely to experience the scenario of the question asked. Despite this "one or the other" elicited responses, there were several students who responded "both" to some of the scenarios. The participants were also informed that there was no right or wrong answer and that they could stop the interview at any time or skip any questions they did not like. Interviews were conducted in schools with the consent of school superintendents, principals, and parents.

A total of 14 students from School District 1 were included, seven from School District 2, and 14 from School District 3. Table 1 indicates the percentage of free and reduced lunch as well as the Latina/o population in the various school districts where the study was conducted. In addition, Table 2 shows the number of students who participated in the study based on grade and age. Respondents included 14 boys (40%) and 21 girls (60%), with a total of 35 participants ( $N = 35$ ). Because the purpose of this study was to include only those who were of Mexican American or Latin American descent, there were no other racial/ethnic groups included in this study. In addition, the geographic areas in Washington State where these interviews were conducted are mainly rural, agricultural, and children who attend these schools are generally drawn from parents who are first-generation immigrants or migrant workers. In fact, the majority of students interviewed for this study were of Mexican or Mexican American descent who were first- and second-generation immigrant background and did not include students

of Afro Latina/o backgrounds. School district numbers are fictitious to protect the anonymity of the schools.

The measurement instrument used for this study included questions derived from the Clark doll experiment and current literature on the common obstacles faced by Latina/o students in the process of acquiring a higher education. This study derived its findings from field notes as well as the content and themes that emerged from analyzing the students' videos.

## Hypotheses

The hypotheses for this research study were as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** In the race scenario, the White doll would be perceived more favorably than the Latina doll.

In other words, the White doll would be the one who students believed would attend college and the one who was doing well in school. This hypothesis stemmed from the results of the Mamie and Phipps Clark study in the 1940s that inspired this work. In the Clark doll experiment, Black children favored the White doll more than the Black doll. It was hypothesized that this study would elicit similar results for Latina/o students as a way of showing that not only perceptions of ethnicity/race have remained constant over time but also that "whiteness and racism" is a "common" and "predictable," "structural" "phenomena," engrained in "institutional mainstream" as CRT predicts (Delgado et al., 2001, cited in Anguiano et al., 2012, p. 128). This hypothesis also derived from the significant and continuous education achievement gap that exists between White and Latina/o students. Such disparities are widely reported by the U.S. Census Bureau and many other scholarly publications as described in the "Recommendations" section.

For the second scenario, the hypothesis posited the following:

**Hypothesis 2:** The Latina female doll would be seen more favorably than the Latino male doll.

This is a hypothesis based on Pew Hispanic Research Center data, published as a report by Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez (2013), showing more Latinas are attending college today than Latinos, with males experiencing a 13-point gap (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). The hypothesis suggests that this mind-set of positive self-perception for Latinas begins at the elementary level. This hypothesis was also formed after analyzing recent studies exploring shifting gender roles within the Latina/o community, especially among those who immigrate to and settle in the United States (Fraga et al., 2012). Despite the limited research that explores new gender roles within the Latino community, this population has historically been identified as having a machismo culture, meaning that the males in the family have a strong sense

**Table 3.** Percent of All Students' Responses to the Questionnaire for the Race/Ethnicity Scenario.

Students' responses	Sally (White doll)	Maria (Latina doll)	I don't know	Both
Which doll does well in school?	80	14	3	3
Which doll is the smart doll?	60	37	3	0
Which doll is the dumb doll?	34	57	9	0
Which doll does her homework?	69	26	0	6
Which doll does better in tests?	60	40	0	0
Which doll gets in trouble at school?	31	66	0	3
Which doll behaves in school?	63	37	0	0
Which doll likes school more?	60	37	0	3
Which doll is liked more by teachers?	60	34	6	0
Which doll has a better teacher?	63	29	6	3
Which doll will go to college?	66	29	0	6
Which doll looks most like you?	43	40	17	0

**Table 4.** Percent of All Student Responses to the Gender Scenario.

Students' responses	Jose (male doll)	Maria (female doll)	I don't know	Both
Which doll does well in school?	51	46	0	3
Which doll is the smart doll?	43	54	0	3
Which doll is the dumb doll?	60	34	6	0
Which doll does her homework?	43	54	0	3
Which doll does better in tests?	37	63	0	0
Which doll gets in trouble at school?	66	31	0	3
Which doll behaves in school?	31	66	0	3
Which doll likes school more?	37	63	0	0
Which doll is liked more by teachers?	34	66	0	0
Which doll has a better teacher?	46	49	5	0
Which doll will go to college?	37	57	0	6

of masculine pride and perceive themselves as the primary bread winners and heads of the households (Glass & Owen, 2010; J. B. Torres, Solberg, & Carlstrom, 2002). According to studies cited by Fraga et al. (2012), Latino males are expected to earn sufficient income to provide for the family and, therefore, should, in theory, obtain higher levels of education than the female. However, research suggests that the traditional view of the patriarchal society and gender roles among the Latina/o community in the United States are shifting to more egalitarian roles (Fraga et al., 2012). The current study highlights and illuminates this new perspective regarding gender roles and expectations in the contemporary Latina/o family. For example, new research has explored the notion that the dynamics surrounding Latino families in the United States are different from those in Mexico or other Latin American countries. For example, when immigrants from Mexico immigrate to the United States, they are exposed to more opportunities for employment and education (Fraga et al., 2012; Kane, 2000; Vazquez-Nuttall, Romero-Garcia, & De Leon, 1987). According to several studies, more and more Latinos are adopting the egalitarian view of gender roles, in which both males and females are

“perceived as equally qualified to participate and excel in the public domain” (Dore, 1997; Fraga et al., 2012, p. 320). This view also believes in the importance of women pursuing higher education, and is especially geared toward the younger Latina generation. However, it is important to note that Latinos in the United States are not homogeneous and gender roles may differ depending on the Latina/o subgroup (i.e., Puerto Ricans, Chicana/os, Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Central Americans, etc.).

## Results

### Field Observations

Only one elementary school principal was immediately interested in participating in this research. He administered a school where 98% of the students are at or below the poverty line, which qualifies them to receive free or reduced lunch and 95% of the students are of Latina/o ethnicity. Many posters and murals in Spanish greet those who enter this elementary school, clearly presenting the importance of valuing cultural diversity. Because this school is located in an area



where many students come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, educational resources such as highly competent certified bilingual and bicultural teachers, funding for arts and sports, and field trips as well as adequate facilities that include technology and equipment to facilitate learning are limited or nonexistent. The principal reported that upon first taking a position at the school, many students would identify gang members as role models, but over the years, the school has successfully steered them in a more positive direction. Now, when students are asked what they would like to be when they grow up, they point to police officers or firefighters as their role models. The principal posited that this may be because those are the individuals whom the students see or interact with on a daily basis in their neighborhoods. Despite the lack of resources in this school, a music program had recently been implemented in hopes of stimulating and improving student academic performance. This program also incorporated many aspects from the dual language program that the school district took away after deciding that students were not showing substantial improvements to merit this necessity. Consistent with principles of LatCrit, the removal of dual language programs in areas with a high concentration of Latinas/os (95% or more) whose ethnicity, language, culture, and parent's nationality are different from the dominant group can be interpreted as evidence of an educational system that imposes an internal colonial model (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) in an effort to strip students of their identity so they can be useful as participants in a capitalistic system.

### All Students (Race Scenario)

As predicted by our hypothesis, the most significant result was found with the first question that asked participants, "Which doll does well in school?" Approximately 80% of the Latina/o student participants selected Sally (the White doll) as the doll that does well in school versus Maria (the Latina doll), at 14%; a significant 63% crevasse between the White and Latina doll. In addition, to the question that asked, "Which doll does her homework?" 69% of participants selected the White doll versus 26% who elected the Latina doll, also a significant 38% chasm between the White and Latina doll. In addition, participants thought the White doll got in trouble a lot less than the Latina doll at 31% versus 66%, respectively, also a significant 35% crevice between the two dolls. Moreover, when participants were asked, "Which doll will go to college?" 66% selected the White doll versus 29% who selected the Latina doll, a significant 32% cleft between the two dolls. The majority of students, at least 60%, also believed that Sally was the doll who did better on tests, liked school more, and is favored by teachers. As predicted by LatCrit and CRT, "whiteness" is still very much favored and "works through hegemonic [educational] systems . . . at [the] material, ideological, local and global levels" (Anguiano et al., 2012, p. 128). In all instances, Sally (the White doll) was seen as more favorable than Maria (the

Latina doll). When asked, "Which doll looks most like you?" approximately 43% of the students identified with Sally, whereas 40% identified with Maria. In short, the majority of the participants identified with the White doll, in what we believed to be an effort to see themselves in a more positive light. The other 17% of student participants were ambivalent about their identity and did not know which doll to choose.

In addition, 3% of the students either refused to respond or did not know which doll did well in school or was smart; and, 9% did not know which, or refused to respond to which, doll was the dumb doll. Approximately 6% did not know or refused to respond when asked which doll is liked more by teachers or which doll had a better teacher. The "I don't know" responses by students as identified in Table 3 refer to students who specifically stated they were unsure of how to answer a question, or who preferred not to answer.

Only 3% of the students believed that both Maria and Sally do well in school, like school, have good teachers, and get in trouble at times, whereas 6% of students believed that both students do their homework and both Maria and Sally will go to college. It is important to note that participants were not verbally given the option to choose both of the dolls for each particular question. Regardless, several students provided this response when they deemed it necessary. Although this response was not anticipated, it has been included in this table to demonstrate the intellectual maturity, complexity, and diversity of student responses to each question. Table 3 shows additional details on these findings.

Despite all the students who participated being of mestizo/a heritage, most children identified with their European counterpart rather than their indigenous heritage. Although this was an unexpected outcome, it is not surprising that children would respond in this manner considering that, in the educational system and the Latina/o community, striving to be more European looking and shedding their indigenous identity is often stressed to children not only in the United States but also in Mexico and other parts of Latin America (Jackson, 2009). This outcome is predictable and consistent with LatCrit and CRT principles, which argue that whiteness is a common phenomenon that "works through hegemonic systems . . . at [the] material, ideological, and global levels" (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2001, cited in Anguiano et al., 2012, p. 128). In addition, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which categorized Mexican Americans as White even though they were treated legally and otherwise as non-White, may have been a contributing factor in this selection. Since then, some Mexican Americans in the United States have adopted their European identity and attempted to shed their indigenous or mestizo heritage often to avoid discrimination (Pulido & Pastor, 2013). Overall, more males identified with the White doll (50%) than females (38%). We hypothesize that some participants identified more with the White doll because they saw her more favorably and wanted to be more like her. The latter would be the conclusion of this analysis, which is consistent with the results of the Clark doll experiment.

### Male Versus Female (Gender Scenario)

Table 4 describes the responses for the gender scenario where all participants (girls and boys) were asked the same questions as in the first scenario, except “Which doll looks most like you?” This scenario included Jose (male doll) and Maria (Latina doll) with the ethnicity being constant and the gender of the doll being the changed variable. These variables were strategically utilized to ensure valid responses from student participants. Students who responded with “both” or “I don’t know” are also included in Table 4.

In the gender scenario, all participants’ responses, regardless of gender, perceived Maria (the female doll) more positively than Jose (the male doll) in all categories, except in “Which doll does well in school?” These results are consistent with our second hypothesis, which predicted that the female doll would be perceived more positively overall. These results indicate higher levels of self-esteem and efficacy exhibited among girls compared with boys as hypothesized, particularly on the question of “Who would go to college?” in which participants reported Maria would be the one to attend college by a 20% margin as indicated in Table 4.

In addition, when separating the responses based on gender (see Table 5), these differences are amplified with the majority of female participants, 81%, selecting Jose (the male doll) as the “dumb doll” and the doll that “gets in trouble at school,” whereas 71% of male participants selected Maria (the female doll) as the “dumb doll” and 57% as the

doll that “gets in trouble at school.” Moreover, on the question of “Which doll would go to college?” 71% of female participants pointed out that Maria (the female doll) would go to college versus 64% of male participants who cited Jose (the male doll) as the one who would go to college. Overall, regardless of gender, Maria (the female doll) is perceived more positively in all categories, except “Which doll does well in school?” in which 57% of female respondents cited the female doll versus 71% of male respondents reporting that Jose (the male doll) did better in school. These overall results suggest higher levels of negative perspectives about boys by female participants than there are about girls by male participants. In other words, overall male students had more positive views of their female counterparts than females had of their male counterparts, a characteristic that was predicted in our second hypothesis, which may suggest a gradual weakening of machismo and patriarchal views held by Latinos in the United States as reported by Dore (1997) and Fraga et al. (2012). Table 5 provides additional details on the gender scenario. Our analyses examining responses based on age and school district shows no significant differences from one another. Furthermore, the uneven distribution of student participants in our sample from each of the grade levels that were explored prevented us from reaching a definitive conclusion on whether or not any variation existed on the various scenarios based on age, grade level, or school district.

**Table 5.** Percent of Female and Male Responses for the Gender Scenario.

Students' responses	Name	Male/14 students		Female/21 students	
		No.	%	No.	%
Which doll does well in schools?	Jose/male doll	10	71	8	38
	Maria/female doll	4	29	12	57
Which doll is the smart doll?	Jose/male doll	9	64	6	29
	Maria/female doll	5	36	14	67
Which doll is the dumb doll?	Jose/male doll	4	29	17	81
	Maria/female doll	10	71	2	10
Which doll does his or her homework?	Jose/male doll	10	71	5	24
	Maria/female doll	4	29	15	71
Which doll does better in tests?	Jose/male doll	8	57	5	24
	Maria/female doll	6	43	16	76
Which doll gets in trouble at school?	Jose/male doll	6	43	17	81
	Maria/female doll	8	57	3	14
Which doll behaves in school?	Jose/male doll	8	57	3	14
	Maria/female doll	6	43	17	81
Which doll likes school more?	Jose/male doll	9	64	4	19
	Maria/female doll	5	36	17	81
Which doll is liked more by teachers?	Jose/male doll	8	57	4	19
	Maria/female doll	6	43	17	81
Which doll has a better teacher?	Jose/male doll	7	50	9	43
	Maria/female doll	6	43	11	52
Which doll will go to college?	Jose/male doll	9	64	4	19
	Maria/female doll	5	36	15	71

## Discussion

When data were broken down to show only male responses versus female responses, all participants seemed to hold high levels of self-esteem for their own gender. Female participants favored the Latina doll, Maria, whereas males favored the Latino doll, Jose. Although we did not predict that Latino males would favor Jose, there are several possible reasons as to why these responses were given. As previously discussed, proportionately, Latina females enroll and graduate from college at higher rates compared with their Latino male counterparts. Although gender and cultural expectations among Latinas/os in the United States are slowly changing to encompass more egalitarian roles, the results of this study indicate that males place a higher value on the acquisition of a job due to the immediate financial gratification without considering higher education as a viable option in the pursuit of this goal (Taylor & Behnke, 2005). This is despite researchers documenting the real tangible benefits for those who acquire higher education; for example, more education and formal training is typically associated with higher wages and lower levels of unemployment. In 2013, the expected earnings for a person with a bachelor's and a graduate degree were US\$54,257 and US\$71,277, respectively, with the likelihood of unemployment less than 5% and 3% (Monear et al., 2013). These findings are welcome for Latina children who foresee a pathway to college for themselves. However, this may be less promising for Latino male students who view themselves as academically unprepared and not as likely to attend college compared with their female counterparts, as indicated in the responses provided in this study, which are also reflected in the low college enrollment and retention rates among Latino males today.

However, as was predicted in our hypothesis, the level of self-confidence as measured by all variables dropped significantly with respect to their race-/ethnicity-based scenario. Because most student participants believed that the White doll would go to college, this has important implications for Latina/o students who do not believe they have an equal opportunity of attending college compared with their White peers. The results of this study have future social, economic, and political repercussions as suggested by LatCrit. If Latina/o elementary students do not believe they will attend college, or that less of their Latina/o peers will go to college, then visualizing social and economic mobility in their futures as a result of attending higher education will be less likely. This also suggests the level of symbolic representation of qualified Latinas/os in educational institutions, in positions of power, as well as in other domains must be more visible. Therefore, schools must be purposeful in their hiring practices that strive to achieve some level of parity and symbolic Latina/o representation among teachers, counselors, and administrators with the student population they serve. Furthermore, it is important that schools do more to thwart,

discourage, or minimize thoughts that are detrimental to Latina/o student's self-efficacy at an early age and to ensure these students function in a world in which attending higher education in the future is a real and tangible possibility. In this regard, the researchers reiterate the notion that college aspirations are molded as early as elementary school.

## Limitations

Limitations that emerged throughout the course of this research included difficulty in strategizing and finding dolls that we believed students would recognize as having obvious recognizable features of Latinas/os, and particularly in locating dolls that we felt represented the mestizo characteristics of most of the student interviewees. Also, the appearance of the dolls may have been misleading for some students. The Latina doll had dark brown skin, black hair styled in two braids, and brown eyes, and was dressed in a stereotypical traditional Mexican folkloric Jalisco dance costume to make it easier for children to identify her. This decision was made due to the first- and second-immigrant generational backgrounds of most of the students in our sample. The White female doll had light skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair in two pigtails and was wearing an orange T-shirt with a jean skirt. Finally, the male Latino doll also had dark brown skin, brown eyes, and a light brown hair color of medium length. The male doll was dressed in a plain white traditional Mexican guayabera shirt with black pants. All the dolls had similar facial features, but could be distinguished by their names, apparel, eye color, hair color, hair length, and skin color. Despite these differences, we acknowledge that an incredible array of diversity exists within the Latina/o population and it will be impossible to portray a typical "Latina/o" because it does not exist. We also acknowledged that the level of acculturation and generational status affect the identity of study participants and the way they responded to the various scenarios.

Although the mestizo heritage of Latinas/os results in a wide diversity of skin color, it was important to ensure that the students conceptualized the differences in the dolls according to the way they were dressed. In addition, we compensated for the often-ambiguous identity resulting from skin color by naming the dolls Sally (White doll), Maria (Latina doll), and Jose (Latino doll). Because several of the students interviewed had a light complexion, we acknowledge that students may have identified with the White doll (Sally) solely based on her skin and/or hair color without considering her intended ethnic identity. In addition, we acknowledge the results may vary depending on the geographic location of the study, country of origin, ethnicity, and the generational status of study participants. In other words, given these limitations, it is important to emphasize that our findings may not be generalizable and fully encompassing of all Latinas/os in the United States.

Another limitation consisted of the responses we received from elementary school principals and parents as we recruited participants for this study. Many of these principals cited the requirement of district approval before this type of study could be conducted in their schools. In the end, we were able to receive approval from four principals in three different school districts in Washington State. Based on our experiences, this response seems largely due to the risk-averse nature of school districts and, perhaps, a distrust of researchers who might find inadequacies revealed by the study with regard to their implementation of curriculum, instruction, or the quality of education they are providing to pupils in their districts. In addition, although we selected an equal number of participants based on age, gender, and schools, not getting 100% response rates prevented us from getting the ideal sample of participants.

Finally, contacting principals was the most difficult task because despite being public employees, access to their contact information on their district websites was not easily accessible. Of 15 schools contacted and after several emails, letters, and phone calls were made, eight school principals responded. Four of these principals declined to be a part of the study.

## Recommendations

Because all the schools in which this study took place are predominantly low income and lack funding for programs that other wealthier school districts possess to entice children to consider college, it is important to seek innovative ways to get children in these areas to consider college as a viable option at an early age. It is urgent for the K-12 system to address the pushout factors identified by scholars (Luna & Revilla, 2013), and rethink the zero tolerance policies (Heilbrun, Cornell, & Lovegrove, 2015), by developing and effectively implementing strategies addressing the vulnerabilities of children with language and cultural barriers as well as undocumented and low socioeconomic status as pointed out by scholars (Abrego, 2006, 2011; Chun & Dickson, 2011; Contreras, 2009; Crisp & Nora, 2009; Diaz Strong et al., 2011; Moreno & Gaytán, 2013; Pérez, Cortés, Ramos, & Coronado, 2010; Rouse & Barrow, 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Aside from striving to meet the needs of Latina/o students discussed in this study, schools can implement a variety of creative programs to promote higher education among Latina/o elementary students. For example, some school districts have begun implementing a Kinder to College Program, in which they encourage kindergarten students and their parents to visit college campuses in the state. This study suggests that the implementation of such programs will engage students who will view college as a reachable goal. Inviting colleges and universities to visit their school, implementing a college center, hosting college nights, and planning a college fair for all students to experience are cost-effective strategies for schools to

consider. These activities would provide parents and families with the information needed to begin thinking about college and develop strategies to meet the costs associated with attaining a higher education. The exposure to college, scholarships, college students, and college graduates may encourage parents and their children to view higher education as an achievable goal.

It is imperative that these types of studies involve a longitudinal component that ideally includes Kinder to high school. This would enable researchers to identify whether the perceptions noted in the data analysis of this study fluctuate as students mature and advance through the K-12 public school system. For example, among the questions to be explored further is whether male students lose some of their self-esteem or academic encouragement as they experience middle school and high school. Does Latina/o students' perception of their own race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status improve or diminish as they mature and acquire more education? Is it feasible that as male students get older, they are more prone to socioeconomic and peer pressures and fail to pursue higher education without considering the long-term effects of this decision?

Elementary and middle school boards and administrators must realize and define their role in exposing children to the idea of attending college at an early age; and higher education administrators need to be attuned to the factors affecting the Latina/o student population and develop effective programs that will help them build the skills needed to remain in, and graduate from, college. Finally, future studies should explore the perceptions of college among other marginalized groups in our society to assess the factors that hinder and help underrepresented students attain a higher education, which could help lead to a greater number of students attending and graduating from college.

## Conclusion

The results from data analyzed in this study supported both hypotheses. Self-perspectives among children with respect to ethnicity/race regrettably remain similar to those of several decades ago. These findings in which Latina/o children continue to perceive their ethnicity/race in less favorable terms than the dominant group will continue to have detrimental consequences for their cognitive development, self-esteem, and efficacy; teacher's expectations; and their current and future academic performance. This is particularly important at a time in which President Donald J. Trump was elected on a platform in which White male supremacy and wealth were the favorable traits while disparaging Latinas/os and other marginalized groups as foreigners and criminals. The full ramifications of this rhetoric has yet to be assessed, but it is likely Latina/o children will further shy away from developing a strong sense of ethnic/racial/cultural identity in the current political environment. This will likely affect their self-efficacy and cognitive development that may ultimately affect their



likelihood of attending college. Finally, if low levels of Latina/o children continue to foresee a college education as a viable option, this will have significant implications for the future of this community and that of the United States.

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