

Empirical study

School connectedness and valuing as predictors of high school completion and postsecondary attendance among Latino youth



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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study examined whether school connectedness and valuing were protective factors in contributing to positive educational outcomes (i.e., high school completion and postsecondary attendance) among a nationally representative sample of Latino youth. Participants were drawn from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 and included 1,743 Latino youth. Results from structural equation modeling, testing direct and indirect effects, showed that there were significant, indirect effects from school connectedness and school valuing to high school completion and postsecondary attendance, which were mediated by Latino students' classroom behavioral engagement. The structural equation model accounted for approximately 35% of the variance in Latino students' high school completion rates ($R^2 = .347$, $p < .001$) and 21% of the variance in their postsecondary attendance rates ($R^2 = .211$, $p < .001$). Results from multiple group analyses indicated that school connectedness and valuing may be protective factors for Latino students as compared to students from other racial/ethnic backgrounds.

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1. Introduction

The Latino¹ population is the largest minority group in the United States and is expected to more than double by the year 2060, rising from 55 million to 119 million people (Colby & Ortman, 2014). This population shift will be particularly evident within our nation's schools, as the number of Latino children and adolescents is projected to grow from 24% of the current youth population to 34% by the year 2060. Latino youth are not only receiving more attention in the nation's school systems due to their rapidly increasing numbers, but also due to their elevated risk of academic failure and dropout (Garcia & Jensen, 2009).

While dropout rates have been steadily improving in recent years, Latino students still have the highest dropout rate of any ethnic group as 13% of Latinos ages 16 to 24 are not enrolled in high school and have no high school credential (compared to 4% for Caucasians and 8% for African Americans; Kena et al., 2014). In addition to high dropout rates, Latino students achieve significantly lower levels of proficiency in reading and mathematics than do Caucasian and Asian American students across all grade levels (Planty et al., 2009) and

are less likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution (Ross et al., 2012). Consistent with contemporary research that suggests dropping out is a complex process influenced by numerous individual and contextual factors (Rumberger, 2011), Latino students often experience multiple risk factors in their academic trajectories (e.g., poverty, low achievement, immigration, acculturation stress, and discrimination; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008) that may culminate in leaving school early. Thus, it is becoming increasingly evident that additional support is needed for Latino students to promote positive educational outcomes throughout the high school years and beyond.

Two motivation-related factors important to students' educational success are the degree to which they feel supported by and connected to others at school (i.e., *school connectedness*; Libbey, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997) and the degree to which they are interested in and value school activities and tasks (i.e., *school valuing*; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010; Wigfield, Tonks, & Klauda, 2009). Among the general adolescent population, previous research has consistently shown that higher levels of school connectedness and school valuing are linked with more positive educational outcomes (e.g., Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Jia et al., 2009; Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles, 1990; Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010; Wigfield & Cambria, 2010). However, few studies in this area have focused specifically on Latino adolescents, which has resulted in a lack of understanding regarding how Latino students' perceptions of school valuing and connectedness may be linked with their educational choices and ultimately their academic success. In addition, little research has identified the mediators of key motivation variables such as school

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¹ For the purposes of this study, the terms Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably to be consistent with the terminology that was used by the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002) when collecting data. The ELS:2002 used the terms Latino and Hispanic to include individuals from Mexican, Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Central American, and South American descent.

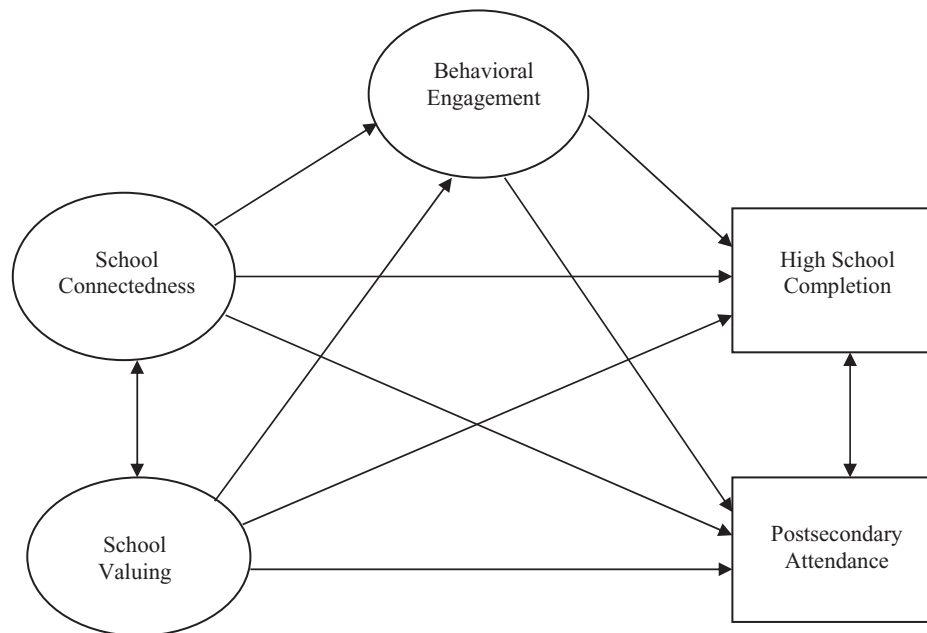


Fig. 1. Preliminary path diagram.

valuing and connectedness (Hughes, Wu, Kwok, Villarreal, & Johnson, 2012; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). As such, the current study seeks to address these gaps in the current literature by examining the contributions of school connectedness and valuing to high school completion and postsecondary attendance for Latino youth using a nationally representative sample of high school students. We also examine students' behavioral engagement in the classroom as a potential mediating variable linking school connectedness, valuing, and educational outcomes (see Fig. 1 for a preliminary path diagram), and we explore variability in these relationships across racial/ethnic groups.

1.1. Theoretical and conceptual framework

The overarching theoretical framework for this study is guided by contemporary perspectives on achievement motivation. According to Schunk, Meece, and Pintrich (2014), motivation in the educational context is "the process whereby goal-directed activities are instigated and sustained" (p. 5) and is influenced by students' beliefs, values, and goals related to academic tasks and performance. Contemporary views on achievement motivation emphasize that motivation is a complex, multidimensional construct shaped by a variety of personal, social, and environmental factors (Anderman & Dawson, 2011; Murdock, 2009; Schunk et al., 2014). Consequently, incorporating multiple theories, rather than being constrained within a single theoretical perspective, is needed to advance current knowledge of the various facets of motivation (Anderman, Gray, & Chang, 2013). Indeed, current research on achievement motivation has begun to utilize multiple theories of motivation in an attempt to gain the most comprehensive understanding of individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (for examples, see Lazarides & Watt, 2015; Mega, Ronconi, & De Beni, 2014; Wang, 2012), but such work is still nascent.

Consistent with contemporary perspectives on the multifaceted nature of achievement motivation, the current study examines two key elements of motivation particularly relevant to educational outcomes among Latino adolescents: school connectedness and school valuing. The significance of these particular variables is supported by two contemporary theories of motivation, namely,

self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and expectancy-value theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). We chose to focus on these specific variables because of their relevance to the unique sample and outcomes examined in this study. More specifically, previous research has shown that connectedness and relatedness at school are particularly important to Latino students' academic outcomes, which researchers have hypothesized may be due, in part, to the emphasis on interdependent relationships and social bonds in many Latino heritage cultures (Espinoza & Juvonen, 2011; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Hill, 2009). Prior studies have also consistently shown that school valuing is a critical predictor of students' intentions, choices, and persistence in their educational careers (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wang, 2012; Wang & Degol, 2013; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Thus, the current study maintains a dual focus on school connectedness and school valuing as important contributors to educational choices and outcomes among Latino adolescents.

1.1.1. Importance of school connectedness

A central tenet of self-determination theory is that human beings have several needs, one of which is the need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The need for relatedness is the need "to seek attachments and experience feelings of security, belongingness, and intimacy with others" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 252). Our need for relatedness can be met through connections with important institutions and individuals (Finn, 1989; Hirschi, 1969). As school is a primary environmental context for youth and their learning, developing positive relationships at school and feeling connected to school are critical for promoting positive academic outcomes (Davis, 2003; Finn, 1989; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Consistent with this framework, adolescents who perceive a positive school environment and positive relationships with teachers have higher grades, achievement test scores, academic self-efficacy, and school engagement (Davis, 2006; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). In addition, students with higher levels of school bonding (i.e., attachment to school and commitment to school tasks) not only have better grades and achievement test scores, but are also less likely to repeat a grade or drop out of high school (Catalano, Haggerty, Oosterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).

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