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# Latino Students Identified as at Risk for Emotional or Behavioral Disorders: Descriptions of Their School Experience

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LATINO STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS AT RISK FOR  
EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS:  
DESCRIPTIONS OF THEIR SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

by

Ryan Balagna

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education

Brigham Young University

May, 2008

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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This dissertation has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the dissertation of Ryan Balagna in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### LATINO STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS AT RISK FOR EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS: DESCRIPTIONS OF THEIR SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Ryan Balagna

Department of Counseling Psychology and Special Education

Doctor of Philosophy

Latinos are the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority in the U.S. (NCES, 2004). Despite dramatic increases in Latino enrollment, a dearth of information exists regarding culturally responsive services. Latino students face poor education outcomes, including the highest dropout rate of any race (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans [PACEEHA], 2003), and disproportionate over-representation in special education programs (Aaroe, 2004; Artiles & Trent, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1992, 1995, 2000). The present study explored issues relevant to serving Latino students who may be at risk for emotional or behavioral disorders. This study used qualitative interviews to better understand the school experiences of Latino students identified as at risk for emotional or behavioral problems using the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD). Themes from the interviews were organized into four general areas; the results provided in-depth

information regarding positive and negative school interactions with peers, characteristics of positive and negative teacher-student interactions, school adjustment issues, and home issues which were relevant to students' education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Population projections indicate that minorities will comprise the majority of the U.S. school enrollment by approximately 2020 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004). Currently minorities comprise 43% of the student population (NCES, 2007) and Latinos are the largest and fastest growing minority population in the schools (NCES, 2004). Latinos constitute 13.3% of the U.S. population (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003) and 19.8% of the U.S. school population (NCES, 2007).

The Latino population is expected to continually grow at faster-than-average rates. Latinos' higher birth rates and increased immigration are two factors that are expected to contribute to this growth rate. The Latino population is expected to account for more than 50% of the total U.S. population growth between the years 2000 and 2050; over these same 50 years the Latino population is also expected to triple (NCES, 2004).

### *Challenges for Latino Students in the U.S. Education System*

These statistics clearly indicate that U.S. schools are becoming increasingly diverse. However, research focusing on Latinos and the specific issues they encounter in the school system is lacking (Akiba, Szalacha, & Coll, 2004). Authorities have questioned the quality of education that Latinos are receiving (President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans [PACEEHA], 2003).

Latinos' high dropout rate (PACEEHA, 2003) and their over-representation in special education programs provide evidence of the challenges that are faced by these students and the challenges that the U.S. educational system faces in meeting their needs (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 1995). The over-representation of minorities and Latinos in special education classes,

specifically emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD) classes, has raised questions about how to increase culturally appropriate services for these at-risk students (Aaroe, 2003; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). The integration of Latino culture with risk factors for EBD has received little attention in the research literature. However, it has been documented that youth with EBD face many short- and long-term difficulties in the areas of relationships, mental health, career, and academic achievement (Gresham, MacMillan, & Bocian, 1996).

There are many challenges that Latino students, educators, and school systems encounter which may aggravate problems and make it difficult for Latinos to succeed (PACEEHA, 2003). The current challenges that Latinos and students who are at risk for EBD will be outlined.

#### *Challenges for U.S Educators Serving Latino Students*

One of the specific challenges for the U.S. educational system is the lack of Latino teachers. Despite increasing numbers of minority populations in the schools, 90% of teachers in the U.S. are European Americans (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000). This imposes a contrast in cultural backgrounds between the students and the teachers that may be the source of misunderstandings, differential treatment of Latino students, and cultural mismatches between Latinos and their teachers (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000; Artiles & Trent, 1994). Several manifestations of cultural mismatches that reinforce European American values, thought, and behavior have been articulated in the educational literature (Jones, 1988). The lack of understanding that stems from cultural mismatches may inappropriately perpetuate Latino stereotypes (Henze & Hauser, 1999), reinforce low expectations of Latino students, and encourage misinterpretation of minority students'

behaviors (Davison Avilés, Guerrero, Barajas Howarth, & Thomas, 1999; Trent & Artiles, 1995).

Another factor that could contribute to poor outcomes for Latino students and their over-representation in special education classes includes the use of tests or instruments that lack evidence of validity for minority populations (Anderson, 1988). Numerous researchers have argued that tests are not adequately designed or normed for Latino populations (Coutinho & Oswald, 1998; Coutinho, Oswald, Best & Forness, 2002; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). Normative samples typically include advantaged, Caucasian, middle-class students (Anderson, 1988).

Other relevant factors that possibly contribute to Latino problems include inadequate teacher training of minority students (Scott, 1995) and teachers' differential treatment toward minority populations (Buriel, 1983; Valencia, 2002). For instance, teachers exhibit partiality towards fictitious students described as Caucasian and negative attitudes towards fictitious students described as Latino (Wayman, 2002). The documented poor outcomes for Latino students indicate a need for understanding the experiences and perceptions of at-risk Latino students. This study used individual qualitative interviews to understand the perceptions and experiences of Latino youth who had been identified as at-risk through an EBD screening process.

## Review of the Literature

As will be described throughout the literature review, students identified with EBD tend to be at a great risk for multiple short- and long-term problems. Many efforts have been made to describe, identify, and intervene with these students in order to improve their educational outcomes and their quality of life. One way in which researchers and educators have attempted to better meet these students' needs is through early identification of those who may be at-risk via school-wide screenings. While such screenings have generally been deemed effective, there still remain questions about the validity evidence with multicultural populations, like Latinos.

The Latino population is greatly increasing in the U.S. school system and they face a number of obstacles that interfere with their academic and personal success (PACEEHA, 2003). Despite the increasing numbers of Latino students and the issues they tend to face, research is lacking in how to meet the needs of students who are at risk for educational problems, specifically EBD (Akiba, et al., 2004).

The literature review will fully explore EBD, the characteristics of students that are at-risk for EBD, outcomes of students who have EBD, and how educators attempt to identify such students. The literature review will then explore educational and cultural issues that Latino students and their educators encounter in the school system.

### *The Nature of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*

While there are several categories that fall under the umbrella of special education (e.g., cognitive delays, learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, emotional/behavioral problems), this research focuses on the experiences and perceptions of Latino students deemed to be at risk for emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD). This is an area

that has not yet been extensively or exclusively researched with Latino groups because it is typical to combine the special education and minority categories into a single group in order to complete analyses in a simple and straightforward manner (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Youth with EBD or those who are at risk for such problems are likely to be classified, or to eventually be classified, as having an emotional disturbance (ED), a serious emotional disturbance (SED), or an emotional or behavioral disorder (EBD) if effective preventative measures are not taken. For the sake of parsimony, these descriptors will all be referred to as EBD in this paper.

The Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act describes EBD as a condition in which a person exhibits certain maladaptive characteristics (e.g., inability to learn, inability to create satisfactory relationships, exhibits inappropriate behavior and feelings) over a long period of time which adversely affects educational performance (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities [NICCYD], 2004).

According to the Council for Exceptional Children, EBD “refers to a condition in which behavioral or emotional responses of an individual in school are so different from his/her generally accepted, age-appropriate, ethnic, or cultural norms that they adversely affect educational performance in such areas as self-care, social relationships, personal adjustments, academic progress, classroom behavior, or work adjustment” (NICCYD, 2004, p. 1).

#### *Categories of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*

Students with EBD may be divided into two general, yet not totally mutually exclusive, categories: externalizers and internalizers (Merrell, 2001; Walker & Severson, 1992). Externalizers are youth who manifest aggressive behavior, hyperactivity, anti-

social behavior, and noncompliance. These problems arise from undercontrol as these students have difficulty regulating their behavior (Merrell, 2001). The American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV-Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR)* diagnoses that are compatible with children that manifest externalizing problems include, but are not limited to, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and disruptive behavior disorder (APA, 2000; Merrell, 2001).

An example of internalizing symptoms is when "individuals attempt to maintain too much or inappropriate control or regulation of their internal emotional and cognitive state" (Merrell, 2001, p. 2). Examples of internalizing behavior include youth that manifest excessive timidity or shy behavior, anxiety, depression, withdrawal, and school phobia. Children who exhibit these kinds of behaviors might be thought of as a model student who has few problems. However, long-term consequences can eventually result in *DSM-IV-TR* diagnoses that include anxiety disorders, depression, mood disorders, and social phobia (APA, 2000; Merrell, 2001).

#### *At-risk Behaviors and Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*

While there is little specific information about Latinos with EBD in the literature, it is important to differentiate those students who have been identified as having EBD from the students that are deemed at risk for EBD. One way to conceptualize the differences between students who are at-risk and those which have emotional or behavioral problems/disorders is articulated in the Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) three-tiered model which includes primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of interventions. This model is represented on a continuum of interventions that range from



prevention (primary) to reducing the severity or intensity (secondary and tertiary) of problem behaviors through increasingly involved interventions (Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

Primary preventions are directed toward all students and focus on strategies that meet the needs of the entire student body. An example of this is creating a common focus and language for all teachers, school personnel, families, and community members. These strategies are designed to be simple, efficient, and consistently implemented across all school settings. While directed to all students, research suggests that 80% of students respond favorably to primary level interventions (Lewis & Sugai, 1999).

The next tier, secondary prevention, consists of more intensive and specific interventions developed for small groups of students who possess risk factors like low academic achievement, poor peer relationships, and limited family support. Secondary interventions are commonly directed toward 10-15% of the student body and these interventions include teaching behavioral and social skills and strategies to increase the likelihood of academic and social success (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). These students are often referred to as at-risk and are the focus of this research. While the secondary level makes up a small number of the overall student population, it is possible that the risk factors and problems of these students could worsen and become exacerbated if not appropriately addressed.

If at-risk students' issues are not remediated, their behaviors may become similar to those in the third tier. The third tier, or tertiary interventions, is the most intensive level of intervention and it is typically comprised of 1-5% of the student body (Sugai & Horner, 1999). This small group of students typically consists of those who have chronic behavioral problems and who are unresponsive to the interventions of the first two levels

(Lewis & Sugai, 1999). Interventions at this level become highly individualized, intensive, and involve a team of people, including special educators, school psychologists, and behavior interventionists (Sugai & Horner, 1999).

#### *Outcomes for Students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders*

Children and adolescents classified as having EBD tend to exhibit a wide variety of problem behaviors that set them apart from their peers. In fact, a total of 64% of youth with behavioral disorders do not complete high school (Zigmond, 2006). The dropout rates for other at-risk populations are notably less than for students with EBD. A total of 32% of students with learning disabilities do not graduate from high school; 29% of students with mental retardation do not complete high school (Gresham, MacMillan, & Bocian, 1996). Children and adolescents who are identified as having EBD are at a greater risk for a plethora of short- and long-term problems in the areas of education, peer relationships, vocation, and mental health.

*Education.* Students that are classified as having EBD have difficulty making school adjustments, have attendance problems, achieve lower grades, and are more likely to be placed in more restrictive classroom settings and be diagnosed with a learning disability (Kauffman, 1993; Rock, Fessler, & Church, 1997). These students often also have severe reading problems which contribute to their lower grades (Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). Students with EBD are described as demonstrating unacceptable classroom behavior, as well as having an increased likelihood of a referral to a mental health professional (Gresham, et al., 1996). Unfortunately, the negative outcomes of having EBD extend beyond primary and secondary education: these students are also less

likely to attend college (Rock, et al., 1997) and only one in five attend post-secondary educational institutions (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

*Peer relationships.* Children and adolescents that experience emotional and behavioral disturbances often have social skills deficits and they experience numerous difficulties in peer relationships (Bullis & Cheney, 1999). They lack positive reciprocal interactions with peers and tend to not be accepted by them (Kauffman, 1993). Youth with EBD have more troublesome social experiences than students with any other type of disability (Bullis & Cheney, 1999).

*Vocation.* Individuals with EBD were also found to have significant difficulties with post-school employment. For instance they experience poor job performance (Gresham, et al., 1996), are underemployed, and tend to have jobs that lack stability (Rock, et al., 1997). They are likely to not be employed in a job long enough to advance or increase their pay, which then makes it difficult to increase their standard of living (Wagner, et al., 2005). In one study researchers interviewed students three years after leaving school, half of youth with EBD were unemployed, compared to one-third of students with learning disabilities (Wagner, D'Amico, Marder, Newman, & Blackorby, 1992).

*Mental health.* According to Rock and colleagues' summary of the literature, as adults these individuals regularly utilize mental health services, welfare, and public health services. They also frequently abuse substances and are referred to juvenile justice and criminal justice services (Rock, et al., 1997). As indicated above, the challenges that students with EBD face continue through adulthood. The adjustment problems frequently experienced as adults include chronic mental health difficulties like diminished self-

esteem, poor social relationships, and suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completions (Gresham, et al., 1996; Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Merrell, 2001; Rock, et al., 1997). As adults they are also at an increased risk for divorce, alcohol, drug abuse, higher rates of crime, and incarceration (Gresham, et al., 1996; Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Merrell, 2001; Rock, et al., 1997). As reported by Helgeland and colleagues (2005), high rates of personality disorders and a range of psychopathology in adulthood have been linked to childhood and adolescent EBD. Rock and colleagues summarized relevant literature on the outcome of this population and reported that “students with a diagnosis of [EBD] have the least positive outcomes of any group of children with disabilities” (1997, p. 247).

Despite these staggering short- and long-term outcomes regarding students that have EBD, Gresham and colleagues (1996) posited that the current education system traditionally makes accommodations for at-risk students resembling control and containment instead of prevention, remediation, and treatment. “Frequently the initial referral and identification of students having behavioral disorders occur after it may be too late to intervene effectively with maladaptive behavior patterns” (Gresham, et al., 1996, p. 278). Based on the evidence that there tends to be poor long-term outcomes, there is a definite need to increase effective, preventative services with these students rather than focus on controlling and containing current out of control behaviors. Hence, it is a necessity to accurately identify students who are at risk for EBD to diminish the possibility of future problems in later adolescence and adulthood (Gresham, et al., 1996; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995).

### *Screening for Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*

The argument has been made that to effectively intervene with at-risk populations, teachers and schools should conduct proactive screening measures that reliably identify at-risk students for emotional and behavioral problems (Gresham, et al., 1996; Kazdin, 1987; Walker, et al., 1995). Such screenings should also be done early and often in students' educational career to increase the likelihood of preventing serious emotional and/or behavioral problems (Gresham, et al., 1996; Kazdin, 1987; Walker, et al., 1995). Completing screenings early and often would likely pay high dividends and be congruent with the axiom, "An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of the cure." If screenings are to be done often they need to be efficient and effective; McConaughy (1993) reported that information and perceptions from teachers should be utilized since they can and do accurately identify students with internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

The Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD) uses a school-wide screening process used to identify those students who need early intervention for behavioral concerns in elementary schools (Walker & Severson, 1992). It was also used in this exploratory research to identify at-risk secondary school students, some of which were Latinos. However, using instruments that are culturally responsive is crucial and imperative when working with Latinos and other minority groups. Using culturally responsive instruments and processes helps to ensure that intervention efforts are appropriately directed.

### *Latinos in the U.S. School System*

Higher than average birth rates and increased immigration of Latinos are two of the factors that have contributed to the Latinos becoming the largest and fastest growing

minority population in the schools (NCES, 2004). Latino growth is expected to continually increase. Historically school systems have not been prepared to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). However, multicultural issues in educational settings have recently received an increased emphasis in the research literature as educators work to meet the needs of a wide variety of students.

Increasing multicultural populations, inadequate teacher education regarding diversity, and lack of acknowledgement of biases concerning these differences has led to miscommunications and misunderstandings (Trent & Artiles, 1995). These misunderstandings make diversity issues seem like obstacles to overcome rather than understanding the strengths and contributions of each group and individual. Respecting diversity and seeing multicultural issues as benefits and assets requires understanding differences and similarities and overcoming stereotypes and biases.

#### *Latino Growth in the Schools*

One difficulty that educators have had in meeting the needs of multicultural students has been their rapid growth rate. The U.S has always been culturally diverse; however, peoples of color in the U.S. will soon become the majority. Currently minorities comprise 43% of the student population (NCES, 2007). The largest and fastest growing minority population in the United States is Latinos (NCES, 2004). Currently, Latinos account for 13.3% of the U.S. population (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003) and 19.8% of the U.S. school population (NCES, 2007).

The recent growth rate of Latino children foretold future adult growth rate of Latinos: in 2000 Latino children surpassed African American children and became the

largest child minority (Clutter & Nieto, 2004). Three years later it was reported that Latinos became the largest minority group (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003). The Latino population is expected to continually grow—tripling and accounting for more than 50% of the total U.S. population growth between 2000 and 2050 (NCES, 2004).

The growth in the school system is similar to that of the national growth. In 1990 European Americans comprised 69% of the U.S. school population. African Americans consisted 15% of this, while Latinos constituted 12%, and Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans comprised the remaining 4% (NCES, 2004). In total, minorities accounted for 31% of the student population. Data from the year 2004 by the National Center for Education Statistics (2007) reported that minorities then comprised 43% of the school population, a 12% increase in fourteen years.

As mentioned previously, Latinos are the largest and fastest growing minority population. While the population explosion of Latinos is evident in the school system throughout the country, the largest concentration of Latinos exists in the Western states, accounting for 32% of the student body in 2000 (NCES, 2004). However, with increasing rates of immigrants each year and higher than average birth rates, this percentage is expected to increase dramatically over the next decades (NCES, 2004).

In Utah, where this research took place, the Latino population is similar to the national growth rate and is the largest and the fastest growing minority group. In 1970, approximately 34,000 Latinos lived in Utah, comprising 2.2% of the total state population (Perlich, 2002). This number steadily increased by increments of about 2,000 each year in the 1980s and by 11,000 new residents per year in the 1990s. In the first four years of the twenty-first century, the Latino population increased by nearly 25,000

residents per year, reaching 300,000 and making up 12% of the state population (Iber, 2004; Perlich, 2002). The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) reported a Latino growth rate of 138% from 1990 to 2000 in Utah—twice the rate of the national Latino growth rate. Projections indicate that the Latino population in Utah will reach over 830,000 by 2030 and comprise over 20% of the total state population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

### *Latino Issues in the Schools*

The President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (2003) has also outlined numerous problems that currently exist which contribute to poor Latino student outcomes and possibly exacerbate issues Latinos face. These problems include low societal expectations, weak cognitive and language development due to poverty and transience, limited parental resources, lack of early-childhood education opportunities, and lack of community resources. This commission also documented that there are a lack of teachers who are properly prepared to teach Latinos students. While it is beyond the scope of this literature review to thoroughly discuss each of the above-mentioned obstacles specifically, the following relevant areas will be examined: (a) dropout rates, (b) special education issues, (c), environmental risk factors, (d) acculturation and cultural mismatches, (e) lack of test validity, (f) school personnel bias, (g) teacher bias, (h) teacher training, and (i) teacher-student relationships. Specific examples of each of these factors will be outlined below.

*Dropout rates.* Latino students are underserved or appropriate interventions are not forthcoming because they have the largest dropout rate of any ethnicity (NCES, 2004; PACEEHA, 2003). The exact causes of dropout are not well understood, but likely include individual factors (e.g., low achievement, dissatisfaction with school) and group



factors (e.g., poverty, language, immigration status) (Martinez, et al., 2004). Recent immigration and limited English proficiency increase the risk of Latino students dropping out (Rumberger, 1995). Students that have acculturated are less likely to dropout; Latinos that experience discrimination, school dissatisfaction, and unwelcoming incidents tend to have lower GPA and higher dropout rates (Martinez, et al., 2004). In fact, one out of every three Latino students in the U.S. fails to complete high school (PACEEHA, 2003). The dropout rate among Latinos is four times higher than that of Caucasians and twice the rate of African Americans (NCES, 2004). Standard, in reviewing nation- and state-wide statistics regarding dropout prevalence stated, “Research has consistently shown that the failure of students to graduate from high school has serious individual and social consequences” (2003, p. 218).

Standard (2003) summarized the numerous statistics regarding outcomes of individuals who drop out of school include: (a) 56% of high school dropouts were unemployed or were not enrolled in college as opposed to 16% of high school graduates; (b) those who drop out of high school can expect to earn considerably less money, achieve lower levels of academic achievement, and experience poorer mental and physical health than do high school graduates; (c) the estimated cost of high school dropouts to the United States is approximately \$250 billion in social services, lost wages, and taxes; (d) dropouts constitute 52% of welfare recipients, 82% of the prison population, and 85% of juvenile justice cases; and (e) drug use among 17- to 22-year-olds is highest among high school dropouts. Dropouts are at tremendous risk for a wide-range of problems; Latinos and students with EBD—or those that are at risk for EBD—are also at greater risk of dropout (PACEEHA, 2003; Zigmond, 2006). Thus, these groups face

challenges, necessitating an enhanced understanding of their school experience to appropriately and effectively intervene for the student and society.

While there is a definite need to serve Latino students and identify those who are at risk for dropout and other poor outcomes, it is also vital that such a process have evidence of reliability and validity for Latinos. Martinez and colleagues (2004) hypothesized that Latino outcomes will only get worse because of their increasing growth rate coupled with limited school budgets. They argue for the need to increase the research in an effort to decrease the risk of Latino school failure.

*Special education issues.* For nearly 30 years researchers have reported a disproportionately large number of Latinos and other minorities in special education classes (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Latino over-representation has been reported in numerous special education programs, like learning disabilities (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Figueroa, 2005; Finn, 1982; Harry, 1992; Wright & Santa Cruz, 1983), mental retardation (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Figueroa, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1992; Wright & Santa Cruz, 1983), speech and language disabilities (Aaroe, 2003; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Figueroa, 2005; Finn, 1982; Harry, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 1992; Wright & Santa Cruz, 1983), and emotional disturbances (Aaroe, 2003; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Disproportional over-representation in EBD classes was especially noticeable in areas of the country that were predominantly Caucasian (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002).

When Latinos live in a predominantly Caucasian community, there may be a slight increase in the likelihood of minorities being identified as needing special services solely because they “stand out” from the majority, “a result based on difference rather

than on disability” (Coutinho, et al., 2002, p. 121). These authors purported that disproportionality in special education may be influenced not only by gender, ethnicity, community demographics, and risk factors, but it also may be influenced by inaccurate teacher assumptions and preconceptions about minority groups. For instance when school districts have a higher percentage of minority populations, they tend to have lower over-representations of Latinos and African Americans in special education (Coutinho, et al., 2002; Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006).

Several authors have purported that one of the reasons Latinos are over-represented in special education classes may be due to the lack of culturally sensitive testing instruments. Figueroa & Hernandez stated that, “Special education testing with Hispanic students has very little empirical, research data to support many of its extant practices” (2000, p. 36). For example, researchers have highlighted that multicultural factors can affect reliability and validity evidence because meanings and values behind behaviors are not accounted for in traditional measures (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Coutinho & Oswald, 1998), nor are students’ unique contexts (Obiakor, 1999). In fact, the American Psychological Association stipulates the consideration of cultural characteristics during evaluation and interpretation of test results (Ortiz, 1995). Even the definition of EBD put forth by the Council for Exceptional Children states that in order to be considered as a student with EBD, this person must differ markedly from ethnic or cultural norms (NICCYD, 2004). Thus, Latino students may be identified as having EBD without markedly differing from their ethnic or cultural norms.

Latinos identified as having EBD may be manifesting culturally appropriate behaviors. For instance, Utley and Obiakor argued that, “some indicators that are

determined to be ‘problematic’ in one culture may actually have a positive effect on behavior in another culture” (1997, p. 4). Yet, it has been argued that it is important to take into consideration the context and culture of the child when intervening with students of color (Akiba, Szalacha, & Coll, 2004; NICCYD, 2004). While Latinos likely experience emotional or behavioral problems—and hence merit enrollment in special education classes—it is possible that some Latinos are identified as having EBD due to a cultural mismatch or to being in a school environment that struggles to provide culturally responsive services.

*Environmental risk factors.* Community and home risk factors are highly correlated with lower SES and ethnicity (Coutinho, et al., 2002); low SES is one of the many environmental risk factors that a large number of Latinos experience. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), 28% of Latino children and adolescents in the United States live in poverty (three times the rate of Caucasian youth) and 61% of Latino youth live in “low-income” homes, compared to 26% of Caucasian youth (2005).

According to Prelow and colleagues’ (2007) review, low SES is associated with an increased likelihood of being exposed to inadequate housing, neighborhood crime, negative role models, and having health and development problems. Individuals from lower SES backgrounds are also faced with the likelihood of having a single-parent home and having a mother with poor health (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002). Lower income is also correlated with poorer cognitive abilities, lower school achievement, and lower rates of high school graduation (Prelow, Loukas, & Jordan-Green, 2007); it also

places students at a greater risk for meeting the criteria for EBD (McLeod & Shanahan, 1993).

Latinos are more likely to encounter environmental toxins, to receive punitive and restrictive segregating interventions, to work and associate with underpaid, overworked, low-status professionals, and to be suspended, expelled, adjudicated, and sent to juvenile justice facilities than Caucasians; Latinos are also less likely to receive appropriate health care (Sutherland, Osher, Artiles, & Zion, 2004). When other sociodemographic variables are held constant, the likelihood of a minority student being identified as having an emotional disturbance increases with poverty (Coutinho, et al., 2002). Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds experience an increased risk for identification and placement in special education (Valles, 1998); students typically identified as having EBD are male, non-White, poor, and from single-parent homes (Gresham, 1999). In short, environmental risk factors—such as poverty and its correlates—put Latino students at a disadvantage in school.

*Acculturation and cultural mismatches.* Acculturation levels also play into teacher ratings of students and can affect teacher identification of potential student problems and student outcome. Students whose parents were born outside the U.S. are more likely to be placed in special education classes (Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). Less acculturated Latino students received significantly lower ratings in the areas of learning, motivation, creativity, and leadership than were their more acculturated Latino peers (Masten & Plata, 2000). Teachers, however, have received little training concerning the effects of how students acculturate, acquire a second language, and how these factors influence students' learning (Coutinho, et al., 2002).

Henze and Hauser argued: “Learners from non-mainstream backgrounds have often been seen as deficient, because they do not possess the experiences and cultural knowledge that our educational system expects children to bring to their schooling” (1999, p.16). Native-born students of color typically learn values and rules of behaviors in their home cultures that are inconsistent with school norms (Gay & Howard, 2000). With increasing numbers of Latino students immigrating to U.S. schools, this can magnify cultural differences and increase the possibility that Latino children may be viewed as having inappropriate behavior when that behavior is acceptable in their culture. School staff is encouraged to be aware of differences between home and school environment and be more sensitive to these differences before deciding if behaviors are problematic (Aaroe & Nelson, 2004).

Latinos often experience a mismatch between their culture and the mainstream educational environment (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000; Artiles & Trent, 1994). “Many scholars contend that the misclassification of culturally diverse students in programs for students with EBD may be attributable, at least in part, to the mismatch between the behavioral expectations present in the students’ home environments and those prevalent with the school environments” (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000, p. 314). Artiles and Trent (1994) stated that dissonance between home and school cultures could explain minority students’ school problems:

Home culture shapes the behavior, learning, and cognitive styles of children. In turn, the school culture is oblivious to these cultural differences. Thus, it is the mismatch between school practices and home culture that produces problems for culturally and linguistically different children. (p. 420)

Students from different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds talk, write, think, and listen in ways that are different from school patterns and expectations; “these differences can be seen in relationships between speakers and listeners, problem-solving processes, task engagement, organization of ideas, self-presentation, how individuals gain entry into conversations and how speakers relate to the content of conversation” (Gay & Howard, 2000, p. 11).

In a qualitative study of Latino dropouts, former students reported that cultural mismatches contributed to their difficulties (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999). Some of these participants suggested that Latino students were discouraged from participating in school activities and extracurricular programs because they were not part of the “in group” due to their ethnicity. The cost of participating in some activities and fitting in kept many Latinos away from school activities and, in some cases, from regular school attendance.

American school systems are part of the dominant culture and Caucasian teachers may reinforce racial differences and hold little regard for Latino cultural values (Calabrese & Barton, 1995). How some teachers talk and communicate with their students has been found to incite racial remarks and problematic behavior by students. By recording students’ public and private conversations during class, Alton-Lee, Nuthall, and Patrick (1993) found that the Caucasian teachers’ verbal messages can facilitate racial problems during class. Teacher identification with the Caucasian population in general and their Caucasian students specifically (by saying “we” and “us”) and their exclusion of minorities (by saying “they” and “them”) may play a part in some classroom problems. For example, a Caucasian student who heard this type of racial distinction by

the teacher verbally provoked a minority student out of the teacher's ear-shot. The minority student retaliated physically and was punished by the teacher.

Researchers have also made further arguments that the predominant values present in the schools are at a mismatch with Latino cultural values. For example, competition is an integral part of American education and is often seen in students competing for academic success, but it is not necessarily compatible with multicultural norms (Delgado Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997). In fact, some minority adolescents see academic success as a rejection of their ethnic culture (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000). Minorities may feel pressure to act White and gain the favor of teachers because they feel that their culture is not accepted (Wayman, 2002). However, acting White may be betraying their ethnicity and culture. It would be culturally responsive to emphasize cooperation over competition when working with Latinos (Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1999).

Another cultural aspect of schools is the prevalence of rigid rules. Cartledge (1999) stated that "some cultures have conflicts with such strict rule enforced school systems and need rewards, not punishments" (p. 77). Lack of flexibility in school protocol, curriculum, and the stress of punctuality in the school system go against traditional Latino characteristics of focusing on the present and immediate, short-term goals (Delgado Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997).

Latinos are not a homogenous group and they have both similarities and differences with the predominant Caucasian culture; understanding the individual student context is imperative when working with students. Considering if the behaviors are so different from his/her generally accepted, age-appropriate, ethnic, or cultural norms as outlined by the Council for Exceptional Children (NICCYD, 2004) is an important and



necessary aspect of culturally responsive interactions and assessment. While there is a definite need to identify at-risk Latinos, it is also extremely important that such screenings have evidence of measuring what it purports to measure instead of measuring confounding cultural factors.

*Assessment instruments.* Numerous researchers have hypothesized that inappropriate tests contribute to disproportionality of minority students in special education and that these tests are not adequately created or normed for diverse populations (e.g., Anderson, 1988; Coutinho & Oswald, 1998; Coutinho, et al., 2002; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). The norming group, the wording of the test items, perceptions of administrators in the testing sample, lack of awareness of the minority cultures and context by the authors, and/or inadequate interpretation of test results can result in discrimination against minority students (Coutinho, et al., 2002). For example, the meanings or values behind certain responses or behaviors are not always evident and may not be understood by a test examiner or a teacher (Coutinho & Oswald, 1998).

Minorities, including Latinos, are not always included in normative samples—typically the more advantaged, Caucasian, middle-class children are selected as normative samples (Anderson, 1988). Hence, when minority youth are assessed by instruments in which more advantaged, Caucasian children were the norm, minority children “are unfairly evaluated as being less adequate or actually deficient” (Anderson, 1988, p. 194). Individual characteristics of Latino students may not parallel the characteristics of the norming group because of the diversity in the proficiency of English, acculturation, SES, cultural ancestry, and cultural experience in the U.S., “Yet Hispanic students . . . are tested every day and compared to middle class America in the

unique reification of democracy and assimilation that tests impose” (Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000, p. 1).

Jones (1988) listed other shortcomings of tests that are relevant to Latino students: (a) most tests largely reflect Caucasian values and attitudes and not the experiences of minorities, (b) persons giving tests at times do not understand the culture and language of minority students and how they affect performance, and (c) poor results from tests can serve as self-fulfilling prophecies and cast minority students in a negative light when there might not be a problem. Summarizing research regarding testing students of Latin background, Figueroa and Hernandez (2000) said “more recent studies have clearly documented that the greater the degree of exposure to Spanish the lower the predictive validity of English tests” (p. 20).

Others have attempted to make tests more suitable to Latinos by translating English tests to Spanish, but “equivalence of tests merely through translation does not work” (Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000, p. 22). These researchers go on to say, “The new translated test, in all likelihood, will not be equivalent to the first” (p. 22). Literal translations and keeping items in the same order are not sufficient because of the strong cultural values and experiences that pervade tests (Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). In addition, it has been argued that IQ tests are merely a device for assessing a person’s level of acculturation to the dominant culture, regardless of the language of the test (Miller-Jones, 1989). Using norms that do not include proportionate numbers of minorities also has inherent problems which are influenced by cultural factors. When English-language standard norms of the Wechsler Memory Scale-Revised were used in its Spanish form for Latino students, normal Spanish-speakers scored an average of one

standard deviation below the average English-language score (Demskey, Mittenberg, Quintar, Katell, & Golden, 1998).

Behavior rating scales may be especially prone to being a measure of cultural rather than measuring behavioral deficits and strengths. Rating scales are a common tool used when attempting to identify students with EBD or those that are at risk for EBD (Merrell, 2000). While behavior rating scales are efficient and timely, they are not based on immediate observation which makes it likely that they are prone to greater teacher bias (Elliott & Argulewicz, 1983). The validity of such scales has been questioned, especially when used with students of culturally diverse backgrounds (Dominguez de Ramirez & Shapiro, 2005). “While some [behavior rating scales] have adequate psychometric properties for assessment of White, U.S., English-speaking children, the appropriateness of item content, factor structure, and other psychometric properties for children of other cultures is still uncertain” (Dominguez de Ramirez & Shapiro, 2005, p.1). Of the little data that exists regarding utilizing behavior rating scales, Caucasians were rated significantly higher than Latinos on positive behaviors (Masten & Plata, 2000).

Until more research that addresses validity and reliability evidence is available, concerns about the accuracy and usefulness of tests with Latino students will remain. When high stakes decisions (e.g., special education classifications) are made for Latino students, it is especially important to integrate the cultural contexts of the students and the psychometric properties of the instruments being used in evaluations. In short, lack of test validity for Latino populations can lead to making inadequate, inappropriate, and even hurtful decisions about their educational needs and contribute to the

misrepresentation of minorities in special education programs (Coutinho & Oswald, 1998).

*School personnel bias.* Latino students also frequently encounter negative stereotypes and prejudice at several levels within and without the school system which may account for some of the difficulties they experience and possible over-representation in special education settings. There are various forms of bias that Latino students experience, including bias from peers, teachers, school personnel, and the general community (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999).

Latino dropouts reported that teachers, principals, and counselors demonstrated differential treatment, held negative attitudes toward them, and expected them to act in a particular way. These students reported receiving messages from teachers and other school personnel that they were not “good enough,” that they would not succeed regardless of the amount of effort put forth, and that they were not capable of graduating (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999). Latino students have reported that they perceive various types of negative stereotypes from school personnel, including being in a gang, being destined to fail (Katz, 1999), acting out, using drugs, not taking things seriously, acting tough, fighting, and dropping out (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999). According to Latino students who dropped out of school, school staff performing hall monitor duties frequently questioned them but ignored Caucasian students. Latino students felt that the differential treatment was due—at least partially—to their ethnicity (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999).

*Teacher bias.* Latinos report facing specific difficulties in the classroom with their teachers; even though teachers might not do so deliberately, understanding the

experiences of Latino students identified as at-risk would be helpful. The President's Advisory Commission, when discussing the present condition of Latinos in the schools, stated, "Low expectations [of Latino students] can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Teacher . . . expectations have a long-term, pervasive influence on [Latino] children" (2003, p. 5). Research has recorded multiple examples of teachers' lower expectations and differential treatment. For example, Latino students who were at-risk reported being labeled problem students by teachers since elementary school, a label which they felt followed them throughout subsequent grades (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999).

Teachers gave less affirmation to Mexican American students following correct responses and less praise when compared to Caucasian students (Buriel, 1983; Valencia, 2002). Teachers also exhibited negative perceptions toward fictitious students described as African American and Latino and positive perceptions toward fictitious children described as Caucasian and Asian (Myles & Ratzlaff, 1988; Wayman, 2002). Valencia (2002) reported that teachers held negative stereotypes toward Latino students, like being lazy and non-intelligent. Latino students reported that teachers reacted surprised both verbally and facially when they answered questions correctly (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999). Teachers also attribute Latino students' problems to the individual, whereas they attribute Caucasian students' problems to their environment (Jackson, 2001).

Using case vignettes that were identical except for culturally diverse names that were used as ethnic indicators, Zucker and Prieto (1978) found that teachers deemed special placement as more appropriate for Mexican American students than for Caucasian students. In a similar vein, Latino dropouts reported feeling that teachers pushed them toward alternative school programs, special education programs, and English as a Second

Language (ESL) programs (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999). As a result, these students reported feeling that teachers did not want to help them despite their desire for direction. Teacher misperceptions may contribute to inappropriate referrals for special education testing and they are traditionally the ones responsible for initiating a referral into special education. Once a teacher has made a referral the probability that a child is placed in special education is significantly increased (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Similarly, Latinos and other minority groups are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Salend, Duhaney, & Montgomery, 2002). Teachers also show a preference for Caucasian students in leadership roles over Latino students (Valencia, 2002).

Mexican-American males are disproportionately over-disciplined by Caucasian female teachers (Calabrese & Barton, 1995). This fact may contribute to Latino males perceiving teachers and school as being less supportive of them (Finn & Rock, 1997). Research has also provided evidence that Latino students were more likely to be suspended from school than their African American or Caucasian peers (De La Rosa & Maw, 1990). This finding was consistent with Latino dropouts who reported “being disciplined for infractions, which, when committed by Whites, were likely to be ignored” (Davison Avilés, et al., 1999, p. 469). It should be noted that suspensions remove students from class, prohibiting participation in class and perhaps making these students fall further behind in their studies—possibly leading to more problems and eventually dropping out of school.

*Lack of teacher training.* The lack of teacher training regarding Latino students is well documented; all “too often the least experienced and least qualified teach minority and low-income students” (PACEEHA, 2003, p. 7). Teacher-student demographics may

explain some of the inherent problems regarding inadequate teacher training or experience. Caucasians account for over 90% of teachers, despite the fact that presently 43% of the school population consists of non-Caucasian students (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000). The culture of American schools, as is manifested by the demographics of its teachers, is middle class European American, but the fact that the number of minority students and the number of Caucasian teachers are increasing “imposes a contrast in cultural backgrounds” (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000, p. 314).

Typical educators may have little understanding of minority students’ backgrounds, strengths, and challenges (Gay & Howard, 2000; Scott, 1995). The disproportionality of Caucasian teachers and minority students may exacerbate different values, languages, perceptions, assumptions, gestures, turn-taking procedures, and other elements in social interactions between teachers and students. Teachers’ and society’s “inadequate education about cultural differences and [their] lack of acknowledgement about [their] own biases” will most likely produce negative consequences and “the development of communication gaps and misunderstandings” (Trent & Artiles, 1995, p. 225). Yet, these communication gaps have not been fully explored or viewed from the perspective of the minority students. This research hopes to fill this important gap.

Training of teachers should include language development, principles on multicultural education, culturally appropriate classroom management practices and assessment strategies, and strategies for working with parents (Valles, 1998). “If teachers are going to work in classrooms with more diverse groups of students, now and in the future, it would seem apparent that culturally and linguistically appropriate methods and materials should be an emphasis of preservice training” (Valles, 1998, p. 53).

Others argue that the literature on at-risk minorities in the schools too often blames the problems on the students and/or their culture (e.g., their attributes, behavior, attitudes, academic performance, generational status, language, and ethnicity); instead research should focus on the school and its culture and how they may perpetuate students' problems (Veléz & Saenz, 2001). The attention needs to be shifted from the students and their perceived deficiencies to the school and the school's responsiveness to the needs of all students and families (Harry & Klingner, 2006). These authors hypothesized that the school setting has more of an impact on academics and behavior of minority students than the characteristics, skills, or behaviors of the students. School environmental factors are significantly more powerful in pushing Latino students out of school than individual student factors (Anderson, 2004).

*Teacher-student difficulties.* Focusing specifically on relevant literature that has been done regarding Latinos and their relationships with teachers, Valencia wrote "very little research of teacher-student interactions involving Chicano students has occurred . . . it is safe to assume that some teachers in our nation's schools continue to respond more positively to White students than they do Chicano students" (2002, p. 11). When teachers lack familiarity with their minority students, teachers tend to misunderstand, fear, and resist them (Gay & Howard, 2000; Noguera, 1995). Teachers are more likely to refer students for special education services when they do not feel they are capable of creating effective changes (Frey, 2002).

Instead of gaining understanding about their minority students and knowledge of cultural values, teachers may have relied on inaccurate stereotypes; a lack of understanding of one's culture can lead to misinterpretation of students' behavior (Aaroe



& Nelson, 2000). If teachers ignore or devalue a minority students' culture, then students will often ignore or reject the teacher and his or her message (Cloud, 2002). As a result, students may become disinterested and begin a negative downward cycle that leads to behavioral problems and clashes with the teacher (Trent & Artiles, 1995). Veléz and Saens hypothesized that Latinos act out in school as a strategy to protect their self-esteem and that lashing out at teachers and the school system is an attempt to enhance their self-esteem level (2001).

Effective teacher-student relationships tend to be built on appreciating similarities and differences; it is difficult to build these effective relationships if teachers and students cannot or do not move away from stereotypes. Henze and Hauser (1999) have suggested that teachers move away from relying on stereotypes and generalizations based on ethnicity and move toward specific knowledge of individuals. Stereotypes lead teachers to misidentify and misrepresent problems and their source. At times teachers expect all children of a particular cultural background to act in a certain way, without attaining personal and specific knowledge of each child. Teachers see many different cultures in their classrooms and they may not realize the complexity of understanding each culture and individual within the culture. While teachers might mean well, this demonstrates that the “agenda of the schools [is] to homogenize students to the mainstream” (Henze & Hauser, 1999, p. 8).

#### *Latino Ethnic and Cultural Factors in the Schools*

Despite the lack of extensive research regarding Latinos and their experiences in school, some literature does exist that could help teachers and administrators better serve this growing population. Mexican American students may report significant bias because

there is a lack of promotion and/or acceptance of their culture (Wayman, 2002), however, when Mexican American students perceived the school environment as multicultural, they also perceived school as being easier, they got better grades, and they stayed in school (Tan, 1999). Latino students tend to place a strong emphasis on their interpersonal relations with adults in authority (Delgado Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997). In fact, Wayman posited that poor teacher-student relationships or alienation is “a significant factor of dropout and low academic achievement, particularly among minorities” (2002, p. 27). A good teacher-student bond is especially important to Mexican American students and influences educational outcomes (Alva, 1995).

Teachers’ interactions with Latino students were studied through an ethnographic case study; findings indicated that interactions which were congruent with Latino values had positive effects on students. These positive outcomes resulted in students becoming less disruptive, skipping school less, and completing more homework assignments (Wortham & Contreras, 2002). The teacher attributes which were associated with these positive outcomes included acting as a maternal figure, holding high standards for the students, and expressing care for them. According to this study, offering encouragement, focusing on cooperation, utilizing other students as a resource instead of competition, and allowing students to be involved in several activities simultaneously were culturally responsive attitudes and actions of the teacher.

Teachers play an important role in the success and retention of students. As students perceived increasing teacher support, their problem behavior decreased and their school attendance and engagement increased; teacher support even had a more powerful effect than parental support (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). For Latino youth, perceived

social support from teachers is associated with positive affect toward school (Valenzuela, 1999). These findings support the importance of proactive and accurate interventions on the part of teachers and school personnel.

Data revealed that teachers “played a crucial role in the students’ success” and that teachers “became the students’ essential link to resources and opportunities in the educational system” (Hernandez, 1994, p. 136). Students in this study desired teachers that were persistent, involved, and caring. While all students likely benefit from teacher support it may be more important for youth designated at risk of school failure than for other students and they may benefit from protective factors like teacher support (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Support is also important for the academic success of ethnic minority students to compensate for the risk factors that many experience (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

In a study of protective factors of Latino high school students, students with resilient characteristics reported receiving support from teachers, having positive perceptions of the school atmosphere, being involved in extracurricular activities, and receiving help from peers (Hernandez, 1994). Results indicated that teacher support may be more important for middle school students than for high school students, because high school students rely more heavily on peers as sources for support (Wenzel, 1998). Latino students stated that teacher fairness, caring, and praise for effort as the most important dimensions of school climate (Slaughter-Defoe, 1996). It was found that a positive teacher-student relationship was more beneficial for aggressive Latino students than for aggressive Caucasian students (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). A link between teacher attributes and Latino achievement has been reported: the degree to which teachers listen to, encourage, respect, and offer support to students relate to the academic

achievement of Latinos (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). As the quality of the teacher-student relationship improves so does the academic performance of Latino students (Anaya, 2001).

Assuming that all Latino students share the same generalized cultural values is not helpful when responding to the needs of individual students. However, when educators understand the typical cultural values they may be more likely to understand the needs of the youth with whom they are working. For example, according to Baruth and Manning's (1992) summary, typically Latinos avoid competitiveness and setting themselves apart from peers. They also adopt unique sex-role behaviors (e.g., strong sense of masculine pride or *machismo*) and value *afecto*, *dignidad*, and *familismo*. Latino students traditionally value *respeto* and *personalismo*: they highly merit having significant relationships with their teachers or other adults in authority. When teachers show interest in a Latino student's life and culture it demonstrates value and respect. In fact, when doing assignments in school settings, Latino youth expect more time and attention from teachers than do Caucasians. However, due to traditional respect for those in authority, it is unlikely that these students would ask for assistance (Cloud, 2002), yet they favor individualized attention (López & Sullivan, 1992).

Latino students are typically more comfortable with closer personal space than Caucasians (Baruth & Manning, 1992; Delgado Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997) and they may feel more comfortable than students of other ethnicities with close physical contact and frequent emotional expressions (Baruth & Manning, 1992). However, Latinos also typically tend to avoid eye contact with authority figures as a sign of respect rather than inattention (Baruth & Manning, 1992; Delgado Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson,

1997). Latino students might also perceive lack of physical contact and lack of emotional expression from the teacher as rejection (Zuniga, 2004).

While a slowly growing body of literature exists regarding Latino culture and how it influences educational experiences and outcomes, a lack of extensive data exists that delves deeply into the lives of at-risk Latinos. While many risk factors for Latinos have been identified, as a group, they continue to exhibit unfortunate and adverse dropout rates (PACEEHA, 2003) and are overrepresented in special education classes (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Chinn & Hughes, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 2000; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). This research was done to increase educators' awareness of the experiences and perceptions of students who have been identified as having behavioral concerns that may lead to school failure.

### *Summary*

The review of the literature has shown that the concerns of the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans (2003) regarding Latino students being underserved are well substantiated: differential outcomes and processes in the school system are evident in several areas (e.g., environmental risk factors, lack of tests that have evidence of validity, acculturation and cultural mismatches between students and the school system). As can be seen, Latino students face a great deal of opposition that makes it difficult for them to succeed in most U.S. school systems. These problems can be compounded, making it difficult for Latinos and other minorities to receive necessary services and culturally responsive services. Despite this, it appears that a good teacher-student relationship has the potential to address several areas of concern.

Unfortunately, a deficiency of research exists that explores and describes effective teacher-student relationships from the perspective of at-risk Latino youth. This study used qualitative interviews of Latino students identified as at risk for EBD via the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD). These interviews served the purpose of better understanding how Latinos describe their existing relationships with school adults and other aspects of their school experience in order to intervene appropriately and effectively serve the ever-increasing Latino population.

## Method

### *Participant Selection*

The present study was conducted at a local school district as part of a larger research project led by K. Richard Young and Ellie Young (2003) entitled *Preventing Emotional Disturbance with Secondary Age Students: Achievement Plus, A Comprehensive School-wide Approach*. This larger project was being conducted in collaboration between the university and the school district. The school district was located in a midsized city in the intermountain west. As part of the larger research project, teachers at four secondary schools (two middle schools and two junior high schools) of a local school district used the Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD) to identify students who were at risk for emotional or behavioral problems. The SSBD—which will be more thoroughly discussed below—is a three-stage multiple-gating screening procedure used to identify students with significant behavior problems. One middle school (grades six and seven) and one junior high school (grades eight and nine) were designated as the treatment schools and the others as the control group. Students in the treatment schools who were identified by teachers via the SSBD were eligible to participate in a class titled, Achievement Plus. The Achievement Plus core curriculum contained strategies and skills taught for the purpose of preventing more severe and future behavioral or emotional problems. The class specifically focused on self-management skills, emotional resilience skills, and social skills.

Those students identified as at-risk by teacher nominations from the SSBD Stage One criteria were then ranked by those same teachers from most to least at-risk student. Students not ranked in the top three were not included in further screening processes. The

most at-risk students from each teacher were included in Stage Two of the SSBD. The second stage of the SSBD has normed cutoff scores (Critical Events Index and Combined Frequency Index) to estimate the individual student's level of needed interventions (primary, secondary, and tertiary). Only those students who met or exceeded the normed cutoff scores of the secondary level of risk were eligible for the Achievement Plus program and the qualitative interviews.

After the school-wide screenings were conducted, the present researcher received the names of the identified at-risk Latino students. The parent(s) of students who were identified as at-risk via this school-wide screening in the spring of 2005 and spring of 2006 were contacted and invited to participate in this proposed study via telephone. The phone conversations occurred in the language that the parent preferred—English or Spanish. During the phone conversation, parents were asked to confirm their child's Latino/Latina ethnicity and parents were given a brief description of the purpose of the study and its rationale. Following parents' verbal consent over the telephone, appointments were made to visit the child and his/her parent(s) in their home. Again, the primary researcher spoke to the family in the parents' preferred language. Initial visits were done so each party could get acquainted with the other, to help the parents and child feel comfortable with the researcher, to provide time for the parents and students to ask questions, to allow the researcher to more fully explain the process of the study and answer questions, and to obtain written assent and consent from the student and parent, as required by the university Institutional Review Board. Those willing to participate signed a statement of informed consent/assent indicating that they understood the purpose of the study and its possible risks. Following the receipt of assent and consent, an appointment



was made to return (with a secondary investigator) to conduct the interview in the preferred language of the student.

While the research of K. Richard Young and Ellie L. Young included students in grades six through nine, efforts were made by the researcher to only include those students identified by the SSBD for whom the instrument had been developed, normed, and validated (grades K-6). Also the researcher attempted to first gather participants from the treatment schools in order to not contaminate the concurrent research.

In the school-wide screening of spring 2005, a total of fifteen Latino students were identified by their teachers via the SSBD procedures. Five of these students were junior high students (eighth and ninth graders) so they were eliminated from the possibility of being interviewed. (At the time of the screening the SSBD had not yet been validated for grades seven through nine.) The remaining ten students were all enrolled in the middle school treatment group. The researcher attempted to contact the parent(s) of each student. However, only three students of those who were contacted had parents who consented to the interviews. Each of these students was in sixth grade when the screening was conducted.

In the school-wide screening of spring 2006, a total of 25 Latino students were identified by their teachers via SSBD Stage One criteria. Two of these 25 were also identified in the screening from the previous year, leaving 23 unique students. Three of these remaining 23 students were in junior high and eliminated because of their age and grade status. The other 20 students identified were students at the treatment middle school. Six of these 20 students did not meet the cut-off criteria of the SSBD Stage Two, meaning that they were not deemed to be at a significant level of risk for behavioral or

emotional problems so they were eliminated from the study. The researcher attempted to contact the remaining fourteen students and their parents as they met the participant selection criteria. However, four of these either did not consent to the study or return calls after repeated attempts; the other ten did consent and were included in the study. Thus, from the two yearly screenings, thirteen Latino students and their families consented to the study and were interviewed. All students who assented to this study were in the sixth grade at the time of the screening and enrolled in the treatment school.

As stated above, all potential participants came from a pool of Latino students who were identified by their teachers as at risk for emotional or behavioral problems via teacher nominations and based on SSBD criteria. All students who assented and whose parents consented were interviewed. Although thirteen students were interviewed, two participants were dropped from the final analysis because of their lack of cooperation and participation during the interviews. Kvale (1996) recommends the typical number of  $15 \pm 10$  participants in order to ensure saturation while taking into consideration time constraints and the law of diminishing returns. After conducting the interviews and analyzing the data of the eleven students, saturation was met and there was no need to contact junior high students or non-treatment school students.

#### *Families of the Participants*

The parents of all of the students included in the final analysis were from Mexico, except for one set of parents who were from Central America. Nine of the eleven adolescents came from two-parent homes and lived with their original family. Two of the students had parents who were divorced, and at the time of the interview they lived with

one parents. Of the eleven students, all twenty of the live-in parents spoke Spanish; four of whom spoke English proficiently with the primary researcher.

The amount of time that each student and his/her family had lived in the United States varied widely. Three of the students' mothers attended school in the United States as children. All of the other parents had moved to the United States as adults. Five of the eleven students were born in the United States; four of these students had one parent who spoke English fluently. The remaining six students were born in Mexico, some of them had attended school in Mexico, but most of these had only attended school in the Southwest United States.

All twenty live-in parents were employed at the time of the interviews, some of which worked part-time. Parents were typically employed in service and labor occupations. Some reported working long hours, which at times made it difficult to reach them via phone and conduct interviews with at least one parent in the home.

### *Participants*

As stated above, all of the students who participated in this study were identified via the school-wide screening when they were in sixth grade. The initial interview with each student took place following their sixth grade year (in the summer of their sixth grade year or during the beginning of the seventh grade). Follow-up interviews were held during the students' seventh grade year.

All but one of the students interviewed reported speaking Spanish fluently. Spanish was the primary language spoken in eight of their homes, although English was also spoken in four of the homes. All eleven students preferred to do the interview in English. Eight of the eleven interviewees were male; three were female. According to the

SSBD Stage One screening conducted by the teachers, the three females were identified as primarily exhibiting internalizing behaviors such as excessive shyness, anxiety, or sadness/depression. One female was also considered to have both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Externalizing behaviors included acting out behaviors that typically included non-compliance to teacher requests, physical aggression, obscene language, and damage to others property. Seven of the eight males were identified with primarily externalizing behaviors, and only one with primarily internalizing behaviors.

### *Data Collection*

Prior to asking the students questions regarding the research topic, the primary researcher reviewed issues of confidentiality with the students. The researcher continued to build rapport that was initiated at the first meeting when consent/assent was obtained. The participants were interviewed by the primary and secondary investigator in their preferred language (English or Spanish) at their home—all eleven interviews were done in English. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. The interviewer prepared and tested sample questions with non-identified middle school students prior to the actual interviews and received approval of the questions by members of the researcher's dissertation committee. During the interviews, subsequent questions were asked based on spontaneous responses from the participants.

The primary researcher recorded each interview, transcribed them, and conducted an initial interpretation of the data gathered from the interviews. Following the transcription and initial analysis, the researchers returned to the home of each participant to confirm the data, ask follow-up and clarifying questions, and compensate the student for his/her time—two free movie tickets to a local theater. The confirmation and follow-

up questions were done to protect against biased subjectivity in the analysis and increase the likelihood of coherence in the final in-depth analysis (Kvale, 1996).

### *Instruments*

#### *Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD)*

The SSBD, developed by Walker and Severson (1992), is a three-stage, multiple-gating procedure used to identify elementary students (K-6) that are at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders via school-wide screening. Most behavior disorders can be grouped into the dichotomous dimensions of the two previously mentioned categories, externalizing and internalizing. Students with externalizing behaviors need interventions to reduce their maladaptive behavior, while internalizing students require interventions to remediate skills and increase appropriate pro-social behavior (Walker & Severson, 1992).

*SSBD Stage One.* Stage One relies on teacher judgment and ranking of students based on internalizing and externalizing criteria. (For SSBD Stage One protocols see Appendices A1 and A2.) Teachers are given behavioral descriptions of internalizing and externalizing behaviors and asked to list and then rank the top five to ten internalizing and externalizing students in their classes that match the behavioral descriptions. Internalizers and externalizers are ranked separately. Examples of externalizing behaviors, according to the SSBD, include displaying aggression toward objects or persons, arguing, defying the teacher, and being hyperactive. Examples of internalizing behaviors on the SSBD include not talking with other children, acting in a fearful manner, having low or restricted levels of activity, and being unresponsive.

*SSBD Stage Two.* Stage Two asks the teacher to mark the Critical Events Checklist which the students have manifested during the school year (e.g., vomits after

eating, has tantrums, exhibits painful shyness, physically assaults an adult) in order to describe students' behavior, provide a basis for normative comparisons, and to assist in determining eligibility for special services (Walker & Severson, 1992). (For SSBD Stage Two protocols refer to Appendix B.) These critical events have been described as “behavioral earthquakes” that have “high salience and intensity, but relatively low frequency” that differentiate normal, internalizing, and externalizing students from one another (Gresham, et al., 1996, p. 277). There are a total of 33 critical events and students who receive a score of five or more progress to Stage Three. Students who receive one to four on the Critical Events Checklist can also move on to Stage Three depending on the adaptive and maladaptive indices as will be described below. The Critical Events Checklist is the same for students nominated as either internalizing or externalizing.

Stage Two also includes an index of adaptive and maladaptive behavior with 12 and 11 statements, respectively on a Likert-scale from Never (1) to Frequently (5). Examples of statements regarding adaptive behavior include the following: follows established classroom rules, expresses anger appropriately, cooperates with peers, and complies with teacher requests. Examples of statements regarding maladaptive behavior include: requires punishment, refuses to participate, manipulates other children, and creates a disturbance during class. Although the SSBD has a third stage, it was not used as a part of this study.

*Reliability of SSBD scores and validity evidence.* The SSBD has been standardized, normed, and received adequate support for its use with elementary students based on its evidence of reliability and validity (Kelley, 1998; Zlomke & Spies, 1998). One reviewer of the SSBD wrote there is “no other measure equal to the SSBD in

comprehensiveness, practicality, and psychometric soundness for use in identifying behavior-disordered children” (Kelley, 1998, p. 995). While no standardization data were provided for Stage One, internal consistency was estimated above .80 for the Stage Two subscales (Walker & Severson, 1992). Test-retest reliability for Stage One rankings of internalizing behavior was .72 and externalizing behavior was .79. Inter-rater agreement on the internalizing and externalizing dimensions of Stage One ranged from .82 to .94 (Walker & Severson, 1992). While the SSBD was originally developed and normed for K-6, a research project done in conjunction with this research found preliminary substantiating empirical support for careful use of the SSBD with older adolescents in grades six through nine (Caldarella, Young, Richardson, Young, & Young, 2008).

*SSBD limitations.* The overall screening process of the SSBD is logical, practical, and well supported by research. However, some limitations exist, e.g., there is no empirical basis for cutoff scores for continuing from one stage to another (Kelly, 1998). Also, the authors of the SSBD did not report standardization samples for Stage One in the manual (Zlomke & Spies, 1998). Another criticism is the fact that Western states were overrepresented in the nationwide sample, a sample which included only eight states and eighteen school districts (Zlomke & Spies, 1998). Along with this, no data were present on the breakdown between urban, suburban, and rural school populations. Additionally ethnicities and SES are only shown as breakouts of school populations, respectively referred to as “non-white” and “low-income” enrollment (Zlomke & Spies, 1998). Minorities comprised only 5.7% of school populations used in the sampling (Walker & Severson, 1992), which does not match current population trends, with minorities making up over 40% of the U.S. school system (NCES, 2007).

This disproportional representation of the norming sample manifests a weakness in the SSBD. For example, test developers are recommended to collect data for subgroups when evidence exists that scores might differ across populations (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999, Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, Standard 9.2, p. 97). Examples of subgroup norms include populations based on SES, ethnicity, sex, or linguistically diverse populations.

The few researchers who have published material regarding the SSBD other than the creators of the instrument have identified some problems when it is used with diverse populations. For instance, Jenkins (1997) found that identified students in a culturally diverse school had adaptive mean scores that were significantly lower and maladaptive mean scores that were significantly higher than the SSBD norms. Also, students from an ethnically diverse sample obtained significant differences on the SSBD than the norm population (McKinney, Montague, & Hocutt, 1998). Thus, the SSBD may not be measuring the characteristics of culturally diverse students in the same way it measures at-risk status for non-minority students (Jenkins, 1997).

### *Qualitative Interviews*

Following approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local school district, interviews were conducted with Latino students identified as at risk for EBD by teachers using the SSBD. Using qualitative interviews is viewed as a valid method in scientific research (Kvale, 1996; Schwandt, 2000) and was deemed appropriate for answering the current research questions. Using qualitative interviews also avoided the use of quantitative tests and methods that often lack cultural sensitivity for minorities in



general and Latinos specifically (Anderson, 1988; Coutinho & Oswald, 1998; Coutinho, et al., 2002; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). It was determined that qualitative interviews would be an effective way to gather important experiential data in this unexplored area that might spark greater understanding of the school experiences of at-risk Latino youth.

### *Data Analysis*

There are several different philosophical approaches to qualitative research. This research took the qualitative approach of interpretivism, based in hermeneutic principles. Interpretivism assumes that human action, as opposed to the movement of physical objects, is inherently meaningful. Understanding human action entails grasping the meanings that constitute these human actions. The following are features of the interpretivist philosophy: human behavior is meaningful; understanding the life world/context of the interviewees is essential; and it is possible to understand the subjective meaning of one's actions (Schwandt, 2000). Hence, the interpretivist approach is a hermeneutic approach in that it emphasizes "that one must grasp the situation in which human actions make meaning in order to say one has an understanding of the particular action" (p. 193).

Culture plays a large role in the meaning of behavior and problems that Latino students face in school may be partially caused by misunderstandings or educators lacking knowledge about the life and world context of students. It was assumed that qualitative interviews would capture the meanings behind student actions and that valuable information would be gleaned regarding the students' life context. The interpretivist philosophy emphasizes the importance of context or culture when interpreting meaning. Understanding the meaning of human actions entails the inclusion

of the context under which the social actions occurred; the same human action can be interpreted differently due to context (Schwandt, 2000).

In order to grasp meanings, semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study. Kvale (1996) stated that the purpose of such interviews is “to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon” (pp. 5, 6). The purpose of interviews as outlined by Kvale is consistent with the purpose of this present study, which was to obtain descriptions of the school experiences of Latino students identified as at risk for EBD. A group of sample questions and guidelines that were tested with non-identified students and approved by the research committee were used to help avoid the use of leading and biased questions, and follow-up questions were based on the spontaneous responses of individual students. (See Appendix C for the list of interview questions.)

Of the five analytic approaches emphasized by Kvale (1996), this research employed the *meaning interpretation* approach. Some forms of qualitative analysis condense or categorize interviews into main dimensions or subcategories. However “[in] contrast to the decontextualization of statements by categorization, [meaning] interpretation recontextualizes the statements within broader frames of reference” (p. 193). This approach to qualitative analysis coincides with the purpose of this study: understanding the unique and individual context of each individual interviewed in order to find meaning in those individuals’ actions.

Kvale (1996) described several principles of a hermeneutic meaning interpretation. These principles of interpretation were critical in the analyses of the interview transcripts. These principles will be briefly outlined:

1. The interpreter utilizes a “continuous back and forth process between the parts and the whole” (Kvale, 1996, p. 48). In other words, the interpreter reads the interview to grasp its general meaning. Then he/she goes back to certain themes, develops their meaning, and returns again to the “more global meaning of the interview in the light of the deepened meaning of the parts, and so on” (p. 48).
2. The interpreter continues step one until he/she can organize the themes into reasonable patterns that form a cohesive whole.
3. The interpreter compares the interpretation of single statements to the global meaning.

As mentioned previously, two interpreters, the primary investigator and a member of the research committee, analyzed the data. The primary researcher followed the above-mentioned methodology and involved the assistance of the interviewees to corroborate or contradict the primary researcher’s initial analysis during follow-up interviews. These follow-up interviews lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes. In each interview, the primary investigator reviewed student content from the initial interview and asked clarifying questions to guarantee more accurate meaning and interpretation. This follow-up process served as a control and was intended to be an enrichment of the analysis (Kvale, 1996); it allowed the researcher to ensure meaning while giving participants the opportunity to elaborate or clarify statements. After the follow-up interviews with the participants, the primary investigator and a member of the committee independently reviewed and analyzed the transcripts. The two interpreters then discussed the identified themes to ensure the consistency of the analysis and qualitative themes.

## Results

Results from this study were obtained following the procedures outlined in the method section. Themes from the interviews were organized into the four general areas of positive and negative school interactions with peers, preferred teacher-student relationships and characteristics, orientation/adjustment issues, and home issues. Each of these themes was relevant to and appeared to impact interviewed students' educational experience.

### *General Topic 1: Peers*

#### *Theme 1.1: Negative Verbal Statements*

While direct questions about discriminatory experiences related to race/ethnicity did not exist on the list of initial interview questions, it became evident after the first two interviews that the participants experienced negative statements from peers, which quickly became an issue that required a specific focus in future interviews. Participants reported experiencing varying levels of negative statements, most of which reported occurring on nearly a daily basis. For the few students who did not report experiencing this, they did report seeing it happen to their Latino friends. (Negative verbal statements, for the purpose of this research, are defined as negative and/or critical statements made about a person based on his/her ethnicity.)

According to the students, negative verbal statements were made most frequently out of the awareness of school personnel (e.g., in the hallway, lunchroom, and outside). The Latino students expressed their perception that teachers and administrators were not fully aware of the frequency and intensity of negative statements and hence, teachers were not observed responding to the inappropriate behaviors and hurtful comments.

According to participants, school adults did not proactively or reactively respond to the inciting remarks. Participants reported that when they heard negative statements directed at them, they became angry and had a desire to fight those who made the remarks. Some participants reported retaliating physically, making their problem behaviors more salient and increasing the likelihood of experiencing negative consequences for their actions. At other times students attempted to avoid those who consistently made negative statements and gravitated to peers and friends who helped them to feel safe and protected.

Students provided multiple examples of negative racial remarks that they heard at school. For example, a female student said, “When I get mad I get mean. Something that makes me really mad is if someone says something mean about me or one of my friends. . . . Sometimes they say that ‘Mexicans are stupid and dumb.’ . . . They say it when the teachers can’t hear or see and we don’t tell on them.”

Another student said, “Most of them [White students] call us ‘Mexicans’ and tell us to ‘go back to Mexico.’ It makes me mad. Some people were born in Mexico, but I wasn’t. I was born here.” This interviewee went on to share a dilemma in how to respond to the harassing messages. He said that while wanting to physically fight back, he did not want to be suspended and that by fighting back, “We [Latinos] get in trouble, not them [White students].”

A male student identified as exhibiting externalizing behaviors said, “They call me and my friends ‘beaners’ or like ‘wetbacks.’ Or they ask me where my green card is and stuff and they tell us to go back to our country. I could tell them that this is my country.” This student continued to describe his frustrations with Caucasian students and reported wanting to retaliate physically. When asked more about it, he said, “No, it

doesn't make me feel sad, it just makes me feel angry . . . and like I could never hit them because there is always a teacher around." Another male student said, "I don't really get along with some kids at school. Some of them are racists . . . [and] they always want to fight." He went on to say that they say "bad stuff to us." When questioned further, he seemed embarrassed and did not want say what the "bad stuff" was. However, he did share that such remarks "make me mad" and that he wanted to "fight them," but that he "didn't want to get suspended" for fighting. He reported that the negative statements and fighting happened "the whole last year last," but that "we [Latinos] got in trouble, not them [White students]." He said that as a result of negative statements and the fighting his sister "wants to go to a [another] school." When asked later in the interview what he would do if he were in charge of school for a day, he said "make people not be racist."

Some students reported that knowing they would frequently endure racial statements made it difficult to go to school and that it was a factor in deciding to skip school. Others described being on vigilant about comments or actions by Caucasian students and sometimes even teachers. In addition to experiencing negative verbal comments from peers, almost all of the students reported both being in fights and observing fights at school, most of which occurred with Caucasian students.

A female student reported, "There was this girl who was saying mean things to me . . . a 'stupid head' and that I was a 'Mexican.' And I said, 'You better shut up,' and the teacher was behind me and said, 'What did you say?' and then she sent me to the office." This student went on to say that the accumulation of similar instances made her feel "unsafe" at school and that she wanted more supervision in the hallways. To

compensate for the perceived lack of adult supervision, she and her friends walked as a group when going to and from class.

Another female student reported experiencing repeated negative verbal messages. For instance, she said, “[White kids] were like trying to fight me and they would go and leave notes on my locker saying that bad stuff like, ‘Oh you brownies go home’ and I would throw it away. And now I know who was writing it, because I caught her putting it on my locker and I just threw it away because they always said mean things.” She later said, “. . . she [a White female student] started everything. She would always try to make people get in a fight you know. And then she . . . wanted to get in a fight and so I was like, ‘Okay let’s fight’ and she wouldn’t go and fight. That was a problem that if she wanted to get into the fight, but she won’t step up to the fight.”

One of the students who transferred to another school after being initially identified as an at-risk student said getting in fights “made me not want to go to [that middle school], that is what triggered it for me.” Another student who also left the middle school said that she did not feel safe at school because of the fights and that she often avoided classes and certain students so she would not get in fights.

A male identified as exhibiting externalizing behaviors added, “With the students, like when I’m walking down the hall, they [White kids] would say stuff like ‘Hey grease bum’ and ‘grease ball’ and stuff like that. . . . They shove in the hall and trip people on purpose. One day I was walking through the hall and I walked in the main hall and a kid said ‘Hey grease bum’ and he pushed me and I fell on this kid who bit my ear and I started bleeding. Then he pushed me back and . . . and I got so mad that I got up and started swinging and pushing. . . . I just got so mad that day so I started swinging so fast

that I wasn't even thinking about the consequences. And I was bleeding all over my shirt."

*Theme 1.2: Friends*

Participants reported highly valuing their peers, especially their Latino/Latina peers. Many students mentioned looking to their friends for support, protection, and strength. For example, a student who did not report being the recipient of negative verbal statements said that his friends served as a protection from it: "I have White friends and [other White kids] don't mess with me because some of my older White friends stick up for me." A female student added, "I kind of think that some kids are really mean and I kind of don't feel safe, so I hang out with my friends."

As alluded to in the previous quote, those students who skipped classes tended to do so with a small group of friends, and they also defended their friends. One student said, "I got bored in that class because I was always getting in trouble, so I was like, "If he doesn't want me in that class then he won't have me. . . . We would go outside every single day and do things. . . . I'm not always outside, sometimes I am inside school. . . . We walk in the halls."

A number of the students interviewed looked to peers for assistance with academic assignments. For instance, one female student said, "They [my friends] are my heroes because when I have trouble with my homework, they help me. They help me out a lot." Students reported that oftentimes they would get in trouble in school for talking to friends during class, when the interviewees actually indicated they were seeking academic help from peers. Many students reported feeling more comfortable in class when they had friends in that class. However, students discussed the pros and cons of



having close peers in their classes. While the students reported feeling more comfortable when their friends were in the same class, there was also a tendency for them to report getting in trouble and achieving lower grades with greater frequency. Some students also identified peers as a positive resource because they used friends in class to more fully understand assignments.

Some of this help, however, came at inopportune times—during instructional times—and students reported experiencing conflict with their teachers, contributing to increased teacher-student problems. One female student said that the only way she was able to do math questions correctly on the board was because a friend sitting a few seats behind her consistently wrote her a note with the correct answer without the teacher noticing. According to the student, she was previously embarrassed in front of the class by not writing the correct answer on the board. Thus, the friend helped the student avoid potential embarrassing situations and helped her feel more comfortable in class. She went on to explain that she did not like to be in classes without her friends, “I don’t have that many friends [in the classes I don’t like].” Between the initial and follow-up interviews, this student was dismissed from school and was being home-schooled by her non-English speaking parents and an older high-school-aged sibling.

A male student said, “I think I noticed . . . I liked to get along with the students in the class and I guess I talked . . . and whenever I talked, she would see me . . . she called on me a lot just because I was talking and she would take away [Citizenship] points every time I was talking and I got a lot of points taken away.” Consistent with the above-mentioned statements, participants indicated that they felt most comfortable at school “When I am with my friends” and “hanging out with my friends.”

Another student reported that his favorite classes were English and Reading, which were taught by the same teacher. When questioned further about those classes, the student responded that they were his favorite classes because “I have lots of friends in those classes and there is a five-minute break between classes and we just talk and stuff.” While he reported that his friends contributed to him being more comfortable in class, he also stated that he frequently got into trouble in those classes because he talked to his friends during class. Other participants said that they repeatedly talked to friends during class and found classes “boring” in which they did not have friends.

The students interviewed appeared to have a strong loyalty toward their friends, most of whom were Latinos. Some students reported having such strong allegiance to their friends that if one got into trouble the others would also get in trouble by defending the friend and engaging in verbal or physical altercations. If one member of a tight-knit group was having problems others would become involved—which would sometimes lead to further problems for the students not initially involved. For example, one student said, “But if I get in trouble, then my friends are like, ‘If you get in trouble, then we’ll get in trouble.’ So we all get in trouble.” The students also reported that when they skipped class, they tended to do so with a close group of friends. “I kind of don’t feel safe [at school], so I hang out with my friends.” She went on to say that they typically hide out in the bathroom or sneak outside. When other students talked about skipping class, they often spoke in the collective “we.”

*General Topic 2: Behaviors and Attributes of Teachers*

*Theme 2.1: Kindness and Leniency*

A large portion of the interviews consisted of talking about specific teachers—from both elementary and middle school—with whom the students had favorable and unfavorable experiences. Nearly all of the students remarked that they preferred teachers who manifested attributes consistent with kindness and understanding. Students liked it when their teachers were flexible and responsive, e.g. allowing students to make up late assignments. They also favored teachers who gave them a second chance both academically and behaviorally; in return, students responded positively to those teachers.

A male student who was identified as exhibiting externalizing behaviors stated several reasons for liking his favorite teacher. This student shared that he felt comfortable in this teacher's class. He said that this teacher was "understanding" and "not hard" on him. He said, "If you tell her why your homework is late, then she understands. She'll give you a couple of more days to do it. You have to give her a reason for it being late. I would say, 'I was [running] late' that day and she would give me extra time." This student went on to explain that this teacher would also offer extra credit to the students to make up for poor performance on assignments.

When asking another student to describe a teacher who showed understanding toward him, he said, "If you have a bad grade in her class, you just do a little extra credit and boost it up a lot." Another student said that she was having a difficult time in school and not understanding or turning in assignments for a class. She reported that the teacher noticed her struggles and "gave me easier tasks because I couldn't understand what we were actually doing and I ended up getting really good grades after that." After this and

similar instances, the student reported “liking” the teacher and holding her in higher regard than she had previously. She reported also putting forth more effort in class as a result of the teacher’s kindness.

A male student who was identified as having externalizing behaviors acknowledged that he tended to be a problem student; he also expected teachers to treat him well despite his negative behaviors. “[If I were the teacher] I would probably not treat people by their attitude and behavior. . . . My other teachers aren’t as cool, like for every little thing that I would do, they would treat me badder and badder every day. . . . One of my teachers, like I would turn in homework, and I wouldn’t say I was the best student, but sometimes I wouldn’t go to class and I would be tardy. I would just not even go to school and when I did go I would turn in my homework. And then at the end of the year when I was working as hard as I could, it seemed like she kind of didn’t add all the points that I had. And I barely passed the year by a hair.”

This student went on to explain that he values and feels most comfortable with teachers that give “me second chances.” He added, “I loved [a teacher]. She was the nicest lady you’ll ever meet. When I was really struggling in her class . . . her class was the only one I really tried at all, like to do my best in. And she would be like ‘I can see that grades are a big issue in your house.’ And I said, ‘Ya.’ So she said that she was going to give me another chance. So I really liked her.” He reported having Fs in her class and as a result of her responsiveness he improved to Cs and Bs.

Another student reported that one of his least favorite classes was math because of his perception that the teacher lacked understanding regarding his anxiety. The student reported doing poorly in the class and he initially said this about the teacher, “She hates

me and I want to get out of her class.” Based on the student’s report, his mother intervened and then the teacher better understood the cause of the student’s behavioral and academic problems; the teacher allowed the student to make up assignments and his grade slowly improved. The teacher also began making time for the student after school to receive help on make-up assignments. “[Now] I stay after school with [the teacher] and she helps me.” He reported that the teacher’s willingness to work with him had a positive effect on the effort that he put forth in the class; his behavior in that class improved and he increased his positive perceptions of the teacher. While he previously described this teacher in negative terms during the initial interview, after the intervention by his mother and during the second interview, he expressed his gratitude toward the teacher and his appreciation for her kindness. He said that he doesn’t “get anxious anymore” and he “now likes the teacher because she is willing to help.”

In regards to one of his teachers, another student said, “He’s like the best teacher. He doesn’t separate you into different groups [based on ethnicity]. He treats everybody like a somebody. Even when I get in trouble in class on one day, he would treat me really nice the next day as soon as I got there.” This same student went on to describe several other teachers who did not facilitate a feeling of forgiveness or warmth; he stated that he began being tardy and eventually skipping a number of those classes.

Other students’ statements were consistent with this student’s experiences. One student expressed unexpected satisfaction that he got a good grade in a class. His surprise was partially due to the fact that he missed a number of days of school, and he did not expect his teacher to count his late work into his final grade, “. . . it was unbelievable because I got an A and I missed some days because I was sick.” Another student spoke

highly of one teacher in particular who would frequently tell him, “Turn it in tomorrow” if his homework was not complete.

Teachers offering rewards also fits in the category of kindness and leniency. Students spoke highly of “Friday free time” that they could merit in class if the entire class completed their work and behaved appropriately during the four previous days. Other reinforcements which students reported served as motivation included getting candy bars, playing games, and earning points for class parties. Regarding a teacher that he liked, another student said, “She was a really good teacher and I liked her a lot. She wasn’t funny, but she was just really nice and she would give out treats to the kids.” Another male student said he preferred a teacher because “She gives us treats for doing good. We have game day or activities every two weeks on Fridays if the class earns enough points.” A male student identified as an internalizer said, “Every time we would do something good, she would reward us with candy. Like if you [the whole class] did something, like being prepared then she would give you something.” This same student said, “They could give us free time, that’s what most of the teachers do [to show that they care].”

In addition to rewards, students expressed their desire to receive positive and affirming feedback from their teachers. One female student expressed her frustration with teachers as she felt they only gave her individual time and attention if she was doing something wrong: “If I get in trouble they come and talk to me.” She went on to say that she would prefer more affirming statements when she is doing well. Another student said this regarding teachers, “Well if they would say nice things to get my confidence up and then I would probably actually do the work. . . . They could say, ‘I know you are really

smart and I know you can do this.” She identified one teacher that “would say nice things and that I was a ‘good kid.’ . . . And after that I tried to work harder to get the grade that I wanted.”

*Theme 2.2: Willingness to Give Individual Attention*

Students also reported valuing teachers that afforded them more individual attention for both personal and academic issues. When teachers took an interest in students’ personal lives and disclosed details about their lives students reported feeling closer to them and also sensed the teachers understood them; the students were likely to have a positive opinion of the teacher and the class in general. Students expressed appreciation for one-on-one time with teachers.

A male student, who initially attended the school where he was identified by teachers as being at-risk but later transferred to another school, contrasted the differences between the two schools he attended. “The teachers at [my new school], they really get to know me a lot better. They aren’t just there to give me an assignment or to teach me. At [my new school] they try to get to know everybody and they ask you what you did over the weekend . . . and I really like that.” This student later went on to say that his favorite classes were the ones in which “the teachers are a lot nicer and get to know me a lot better.”

Another student preferred teachers who showed him that they cared about him and wanted to get to know him. He stated that some teachers “would have you write stuff about you.” He also reported preferring to have associations with teachers outside of class, like when “[they] would just hang out with [me].” In addition to wanting teachers to get to know them, participants also stated that they wanted the teacher to disclose more

about themselves. One interviewee said she had more fun, a better time in school, better grades, and class was better and more “fun” when she “got to know [teachers].”

One student who had hopes of being a teacher when she grew up, talked about how she would approach her future students. “Well, I would just tell them about me and what I have been through.” She reported that by doing so she thought the students would trust her more. She added that if she were a teacher her students “could tell me their story.” She also mentioned experiencing a more reciprocal relationship with one teacher who told the class about herself and then had each of the students present themselves in front of the class and share personal information. This same teacher had students fill out a biographical information sheet at the beginning of the year, which also contributed to the student feeling the teacher made efforts to have a more personal relationship with her.

Another student said that he benefited when teachers shared “life stories and experiences.” In discussing more about this teacher, the participant said, “The other teacher wasn’t there to get to know you as much I don’t think. But my new teacher is trying to get to know us all really well. He knows all of our names.” Another student added something similar. She said that teachers make her feel special by showing an interest in her, “[They] ask me what I like to do.” Yet, she reported that only two teachers over the past year had asked her that question. A male student said that math was his favorite class “because the teacher is a lot nicer and gets to know you a lot better.”

Regarding one-on-one time, a male student stated that his favorite teacher would sit down next to him during class and explain things to him. He reported that he enjoyed one class in particular, partially because the class size was smaller and he was able to have more time with the teacher. He said he liked these smaller classes “because I can get



help, because she can come around and help me . . . and like when there are big classes, they [teachers] don't have time to go around and help." This student also reported being shy and hesitant to seek help, especially in larger classes. Another student voiced a similar statement, "When I have trouble in a class, they could come over and talk to me about it."

Students made other statements that were consistent with receiving individual attention from teachers. For instance, "She [a teacher] would really show us what to do. Like she helped us like when we didn't know how to do it. We could go ask and she would try to explain it back to us. So it's not like she just explained it once. And on another day she can help us more if we run out of time, like after school." A male student shared a similar point of view, "And he will keep teaching us until there are no more questions and then he lets us do our assignment in class. But if we ever have a question, we just raise our hand and he will help us get the answer for it." He went on to say that not all teachers seem as willing to do this.

A female student said that she had difficulties in class until a teacher offered her more individual attention. "[My teacher] talk[ed] to me because I had problems and . . . well, I can't remember the words, but he talked to me about changing some things and I did change some things because before I was goofing off. . . . So he just talked to me and that was all." She reported that after talking to him, "I don't know, I just didn't goof off that much. And after that I started cleaning up the classroom [and being nice]." She went on to say, "He was trying to help me out with my grades because I had really bad ones because I was goofing off. And then I got better grades!"

*Theme 2.3: Active and Engaging Manners*

Students also expressed a strong preference for active and engaging teachers and/or practical class activities or applications to learn. Examples of teacher characteristics which students mentioned included energetic, upbeat, creative, and fun. This preference also seemed to coincide with students being able to play a more active role in participating in class and being able to exercise their voice in class. Students expressed a desire for teachers who were responsive to their mood and who were flexible. Students also positively commented on teachers who helped them with study skills or suggestions to help them learn class material better.

One student spoke highly of a math class in which the teacher implemented a series of games to teach the class. “Well the teacher, she invented games, but she does it with math so we can learn.” The student then explained the game and how much she participated, learned, and enjoyed that activity and similar ones. Other students also mentioned preferring more interactive assignments/activities like “games” or using “flash cards.”

Other students spoke of their preference for teachers who were upbeat and responsive to student mood. One female student, who reported doing particularly well academically in a class, said she was not as interested in class and did not do as well “if a substitute taught the class” because the substitute was not typically as upbeat and did not have activities or games prepared to help her learn. Another student said he preferred “. . . energetic and live people. Well, there are some teachers that aren’t enthusiastic and that are falling asleep, so I would just try to find people that could keep the class up.” A female student said something similar when talking about positive attributes of one of her

teachers, “If we were tired she [the teacher] would try to make us laugh or do something to help us out a lot.” Another male student commented on the type of teacher his friends had and his preference for a similar type of teacher: “I think I had friends that had math teachers that were a lot nicer and they made the lesson a lot more fun for the students. I would like [teachers] to do that and make it more interesting and make it a little more fun.”

A female student recalled many positive learning experiences as a result of a history teacher who came to class on several occasions dressed as famous historical figures. “Well the teacher was fun. . . . He played out the characters. He made it so funny and I liked it. He pretended he was one of the [people we were learning about] in class. And he pretended to be people like Alexander the Great.” In a similar vein, the teacher assigned students to present famous historical people to the class, “Sometimes [he] makes us be the teacher. And one [student] was like Cleopatra. [When I dressed up] it was kind of fun, but a little embarrassing.” She reported that as a result of these activities, class was enjoyable and fun and that she felt she learned more. This history teacher also employed other activities that the student liked. “Well in that class, we did a lot of drawing and we would get a big piece of paper and draw the [person that we were learning about] and write some information down and then we would try to say it and then he [the teacher] would write down some more information down for us.” During the interview, the student was able to recall several people that they discussed in class and reported doing well in the class.

Other students reported a lack of active and engaging teacher attributes in middle school; they mentioned that these positive attributes were more evident in elementary

school. A female student said that a good class “would [include] more experiments.” She spoke highly of an elementary school science class, “We learned about the planets and we made cakes to learn about them. We made the cakes look like the planets and we learned about them. Like Mars is a hard planet so we made a round cake and put hard stuff on top. . . . [and then we got] a balloon with really hot water [in it] and painted it red. I learned that Mars is a hot and red planet.” She went on to talk about other planets and despite the activity taking place more than a year before the interview she was able to remember facts about some of the planets.

In addition to active and engaging teachers, students reported appreciating teachers who shared specific skills or study aids. A male student said, “She was cool and she had great study ideas and stuff. . . . Instead of doing it by yourself, you got to do it in groups and that helped a lot. Ya, and it helped. I didn’t do a lot [in the group], but I studied.” Another male student told of a teacher who motivated him, “Well, he would just give us little stories . . . to teach us skills and life lessons.” Another one of this student’s teachers offered suggestions on how to make up work: “Well right now I am in a couple of classes that I have to do makeup work from before, so I had to do my homework and makeup work, so my grades were down a little to B-minuses and C-pluses. My teacher said, ‘Just do the assignment for the day and a makeup assignment for the day, so you have two assignments, then it would be easier than trying to play catch up the whole term.’ So this is what I was doing, I was trying to do makeup [work] instead of the main assignment . . . so I was getting behind with that one too.” A male student added, “That is what a good teacher would help me do, she would teach me skills.”

Most of the students commented that one of the worst parts of school was homework. “What I like about [that class] is she doesn’t give us that much homework.” One example of a popular class that was indicative of teachers or projects being active and engaging (and with less homework) was a technology education class. “I like TLC [the technology education class]. We get to build stuff. We got to build real rockets and shoot them off. And rubber band cars . . . [and the rubber band is] like a propeller and you put it on the back and then let it go.” Later he went on to state another reason he enjoyed this class, “I don’t have homework [in that class].” Regarding this same class another student said, “I liked it a lot. And so in his class he had a video game that simulated riding in an airplane and it was really hard. But I didn’t get to know it that much because I just was in his class for a month, [but] it was a lot of fun.” Other students also indicated that this class was one of their favorites. The students reported that the class was heavy on practical applications and applying things that were discussed in class. In addition—and as already mentioned—students built rockets, rubber band cars, and other things based on principles they learned in class. They reported that the class also had minimal homework, another factor that seemed to contribute to their high regard for the class.

P.E. class and the teacher were consistently identified as one of the most enjoyable parts of school for these research participants. These students consistently regarded the teacher highly and described him as being laid back, personable, engaging, forgiving, and giving them a voice. For example, one student said, “He’s like the best teacher. He doesn’t separate you into groups. He treats everybody like a somebody. Even when I do get in trouble in his class on one day, he would treat me really nice the next

day as soon as I got there. I really like that.” Students also appreciated the fact that the P.E. teacher involved them in daily decision-making. As a class, the students were given the opportunity to decide what activity would be done that day. “We would do all of our warm-ups and stuff and then we would vote on what we wanted to do.”

Regarding this teacher, students said, “He is a great teacher,” “He is fun to be around,” and “He is always making a joke.” When another student was asked what a teacher did to make him feel important or special, he mentioned the P.E. teacher by name and said, “. . . he was the teacher [from my old school] that I made best friends with because he would give . . . I think he would just really know your name and stuff about you and he would play with us every day and made me feel important like that. I don’t know . . . he just made me feel special. I have a yearbook from him and he signed it. . . . He’s funny and he jokes around with everybody.” Another student said he liked the P.E. teacher because “Well he tries to make me better . . .” and another student said that he liked “everything” about the teacher, “He is funny. Ya, he is awesome. He’s cool.”

Students reported that this teacher also worked to develop rapport with each student and he demonstrated a great amount of care for each individual. In class, students highlighted that there appeared to be a sense of equality and camaraderie, partially due to the fact that he was pleasant to all students; he also had a preferred style of discipline. According to students, if one person misbehaved, the entire class received a punishment of a “fitness day.” A fitness day is “a whole day of just doing push-ups and crunches and stuff like that,” which many students regarded as extremely unpleasant and painful. “I didn’t like those days at all. It is no fun” Regarding fitness days, another student said, “It’s bad because it is pure torture.” It appeared that after enduring fitness days, some

students took on a more active and intentional role in behaving and avoiding future punishment.

*Theme 2.4: Negative Interactions*

On the other end of the continuum, all but one student shared that they disliked teachers whom they described as being “cranky,” “picky,” “mean,” or who had numerous class rules. Students reacted adversely to teachers whose personal problems seemed to negatively affect their teaching. Teachers who were angry and who yelled were also identified as being more difficult for Latino students; in fact, most students attributed at least part of any problems they had to a particular class or teacher.

For example, one student described that she did not like a certain teacher, “Sometimes she was nice and sometimes she was like . . . she had a hard time and she like brought her problems to school and then if you would say something, she would get mad and everything. And we were trying to do the work and when we asked her for help then she was mad she wouldn’t help us. And we would try the hardest that we could. She was mad because she had a lot of problems with her husband. Things happened and they were getting a divorce and her son was going to report to the Army and go over and fight terror. And nobody liked her when she was mad.”

Students described a dislike for other teachers whom they regarded as overly strict or mean. A male student said, “She was so strict that we couldn’t talk in class . . . and she would tell us to stop really loud, like ‘Hey, shut up!’ . . . I thought she was mean.”

Another male student said this regarding a teacher he did not like, “I had a teacher who was just really strict. If you asked her a question and she had already answered it before, then she wouldn’t answer it again. So you would have to ask your other question.” A

male student shared this about a class that he did not enjoy, “I didn’t like her because she yelled at everyone even if I asked for help.”

A male student regarded one teacher as a “witch” because she “screamed a lot.” He said that “she used to be nice and then she changed . . . and once she made a kid cry.” He reported often talking to friends who had the same teacher earlier in the day to gauge how difficult class might be for him. He also added, “Every time we have an assembly and we have to miss [her class], I am like ‘YES!’ And my friends are . . . like, ‘Oh we get to get away from the witch.’”

Another male student said that his least favorite class was one in which his teacher would get angry and yell. He also said this about the same teacher, “If you forget your book in your locker, he marks you tardy just for that. Even if you ask him and he lets you, he marks you tardy. And none of my other teachers do that like when I forget stuff.” The student said that when he asked this same teacher for help, “Ya, he comes over, but he says that I need to pay more attention in class. And I say, ‘I was paying attention.’ But then he just tells me to pay more attention.” In general, students reported responding negatively to such teacher characteristics; the effects of which will be more thoroughly explored below.

### *Theme 2.5: Reciprocity*

In addition to having preferences for certain teachers and the tendency to label classes as “boring” if they did not like them, students also reacted to how they perceived teachers responding to them. Students reported they were likely to act out if they did not like the class or if they did not feel they were understood by the teachers. Students responded both passively (skipping class) and aggressively (acting out) when they



perceived teachers' interactions with them as negative. For example, one student said, "I am nice to teachers if they are nice to me." As mentioned above in the teacher attribute section, students tended to respond well to positive teacher characteristics, including improving their grades and decreasing behavioral problems. On the other hand, a male student said, "If a teacher didn't like me, I would be mean."

A male student talked about negative experiences he had with teachers, "It's not that she would say anything. It's like that look, that one look. When I am walking, she kind of looks down at me, and I could see that I was not wanted. So I just got to the point that all of the teachers that I didn't like, I just wouldn't go to their class." In describing an incident, one participant said, "It depends what kind of thing that she does . . . I would probably say something to her and or tell her she was mean [if I didn't think she liked me]. How she treats me is how I will treat her back. I never listened to the teacher that is mean to me." This same student reported skipping a lot of her classes during her first year in middle school, partially due to teachers which she considered to be mean.

As mentioned above, students attempted to avoid teachers with whom they had difficulties. For example, one student said, "And I wanted to change my class after that, after she yelled at me. So I talked to the counselor, but I couldn't change it." This same student also reported not paying attention in one class and ignoring the teacher because he thought that the teacher did not like him. During the initial interview, this same student expressed a great deal of praise for one teacher because of the teacher's kindness, individual attention, and help. However, during the follow-up interview, this student reported not liking the teacher after an incident in which the teacher expressed disappointment in him.

Other students, especially those with externalizing behaviors made similar statements, “If a teacher didn’t like me, I would be mean. It got to the point that I thought the teacher didn’t like me, so I stopped going to class.” One female said, “I would be depressed and wouldn’t do what the teacher told me to do [if I thought a teacher didn’t like me].” This participant said that initially she did not think that one teacher liked her—partially because an older sister had the teacher—so the student refused to do the class work and ignored the teacher. “I didn’t like that class because I thought [the teacher] hated me because of my sister. [My sister] used to have [that teacher] and she got in a lot of trouble in that class, so I didn’t think she liked me.” She continued, “I didn’t do the work, and I just ignored her, and didn’t do the work.” She said that she realized the teacher liked her when the teacher “gave me easier tasks . . . and I got good grades after that.”

A female student said this about a class and a teacher which she did not enjoy, “I got bored in that class because I was always getting in trouble.” She said that she was often called upon to write answers on the board, “I don’t raise my hand because I don’t want to do the problem . . . and I don’t raise it and he always calls on me. And I’m like, ‘I don’t know the problem.’ And he goes, ‘Oh, you can try it.’ According to the student, she was embarrassed to write on the board, especially since she was not that good at math. She also said that this class “wasn’t fun so I tried to make it more fun [by talking].” According to her, talking led to getting in trouble. As a result of talking out of turn and getting in trouble, she perceived that the teacher did not like her and she said, “So I was like if he doesn’t want me, then he won’t have me.” After a while she began “sluffing” this class with her friends. Another student reported not putting forth as much effort in a

class in which he thought that the teacher did not like him. One male student commented that if teachers were not that friendly toward him, “I would not want to get to know them that much either.”

If students did not feel liked by teachers, it was still possible for the teachers to create trust and rapport with the students to overcome the relational difficulties. One male student, who initially had problems with a teacher due to some anxiety issues and her apparent lack of care about making accommodations for him, reported that “[The teacher] hated me and I wanted to get out of her class.” According to the student, he became more disruptive and his grade began dropping. His mother intervened and discussed the issue with the teacher. After the student’s issues were communicated to the teacher, the student made both behavioral and academic progress in the class and reported liking and appreciating the teacher more than he had before. It also appeared that the teacher, with increased understanding of the student’s challenges, responded positively and made herself more available to help the student. Later in the interview the student said, “now I’m getting along with her.”

As mentioned in a previous section, one student said that his “grades kept dropping . . . I had two Fs this term.” He then said that a teacher’s willingness to work with him helped him improve his academics in that class, “[I] then brought them [my grades] up.” A female student reported having trouble in a class until her teacher offered her more individual attention. “Well one of [my teachers] had to talk to me because I had problems and . . . he talked to me about changing some things and I did change some things because before I was goofing off. . . . So he just talked to me and that was all.” She reported that after talking to the teacher, “I don’t know, I just didn’t goof off that much.”

She stated that his initiative prompted her to change her academics and behavior, “He was trying to help me out with my grades because I had really bad ones because I was goofing off. And then I got better grades!”

### *General Topic 3: Orientation/Adjustment Issues*

As mentioned previously, all interviewed students were identified as being at risk for EBD at the end of their fifth or sixth grade year. (Sixth grade was the first year of middle school.) Students reported difficulties adjusting to middle school in a variety of areas. Participants reported preferring teacher and school attributes that were consistent with elementary school; difficulties seemed to arise when increased responsibilities were required (e.g., homework, acquiring more organizational skills, academic performance).

#### *Theme 3.1: Perceiving Higher Expectations*

Students verbalized an increase in their expected responsibilities when they entered middle school—responsibilities to which it took time to adjust. Students consistently reported desiring different daily schedules, experiencing a drop in grades, trouble learning to organize assignments and course materials, and difficulty with the increased amount and difficulty of homework.

*Daily schedules.* When participants were asked how their school experience could be better or what changes they would make if they were in charge of school, students frequently reported similar ideas. One student’s response was representative of other students’ answers: “More P.E., more lunch time . . . and no homework.” A shy male student added that he wanted teachers who “give me [more] breaks [like recess]” and another said, “[Elementary school] was better. We had one teacher, recess, less homework, and more projects.”

*Organization and grades.* One student who eventually left the middle school where he was identified as at-risk and then transferred to a charter school said, “Ever since I moved from the elementary school where I was getting As and Bs and then I moved to the middle school, it was really hard because I had to be more organized, and it was harder for me to get an A. So I remember that my mom would always be checking my grades and always be trying to help me organize my stuff so that it would be easier for me.” This same student later added, “I was having a harder time because the teachers, they would give out a lot of assignments and I would have seven classes, so you really didn’t get to do homework in class, so I had to take all of my homework home. So I would have seven classes of homework every day.” He then went on to speak about the school to which he transferred, which taught him study skills and motivational tools which helped him adjust to higher expectations. “We have a leadership class that prepares us for the day so we can get going with a good attitude, and so we can stay on top of things and to learn study skills.”

A number of other students echoed this student’s response, especially concerning “lower grades” and “more difficult” classes in middle school. For example, one female said, “I used to like math and be good at math at my old [elementary] school because they used to teach us in games and now they just put us on the chalkboard and we need to guess what it is.” Another student added, “My grades kept dropping [since starting middle school]. . . . I had two Fs this term.” Regarding her grades, a female student said she did well when she started middle school “and then they went down to Bs, then Cs, then Ds;” she reported good grades in elementary school.

*Homework.* Homework was another challenging factor, which required the participants to make adjustments. When participants were asked what they found to be most difficult or what they disliked the most about school, “homework” was a frequent response. For example, “[We didn’t have much homework in elementary school]—not much, especially on Fridays. We didn’t have homework on Fridays, but now, Gosh! We have lots of homework,” said a male student. Another participant, when asked what classes he liked the most, replied, “Classes with no homework.” A female student responded similarly to the opposite question, “Homework. When we have to do homework and we have to do a lot of work in class.” One student said that homework was the hardest thing about middle school, “I had homework like every day, but I didn’t understand most of it. . . . Some of the time I didn’t turn my homework in because I didn’t always understand it.” Also, as mentioned in the *Organization and grades* section, one student said, “I was having a harder time because the teachers, they would give out a lot of assignments and I would have seven classes, so you really didn’t get to do homework in class, so I had to take all of my homework home. So I would have seven classes of homework every day.”

The challenges of having seven teachers, each with different homework assignments required students to adjust to higher expectations for independent work. A male student who was born in Mexico said, “I used to have like one teacher and now we have like seven teachers and I can’t keep up. . . . All the grades I got in elementary school were good grades because we had cubbies and we could put our stuff in there and then I didn’t lose stuff. And now we have lockers and my locker is a mess.” As mentioned above, a student said that since “I moved from the elementary school where I was getting

As and Bs and then I moved to the middle school, it was really hard because I had to be more organized and it was harder for me to get an A.”

*Theme 3.2: Adjusting to the Larger School Community*

Students also expressed feeling overwhelmed by the larger middle school, having more teachers, and different classrooms with a variety of rules. Students typically regarded their elementary teachers highly, and they perceived that those teachers knew them and cared for them individually. A male student identified as having externalizing behaviors said, “Elementary school was easier and I didn’t get as distracted. My teachers knew me better and they found out what I liked and they don’t do that in middle school. . . . And I didn’t have to go anywhere [from class to class].” Another male student added, “School was better [in elementary school]. We had one teacher, recess, less homework, and more projects.”

A female student said that during her sixth grade year, “I was leaving school too much . . . because, I don’t know, [be]cause the teachers were kind of mean and I was scared. I had never been to that school or the classes that I had. And it was more and the teachers didn’t really talk about the same things [as they did in elementary school] and I started sluffing.” She added that the following things contributed to her problems: “Ya, new school, new classes, and I didn’t know how people would treat me.”

Part of the difficulty adjusting to middle school seemed to have to do with experiencing negative verbal remarks from fellow students for the first time. Numerous students reported that they had not experienced discriminatory remarks in elementary school, but that it was a nearly daily occurrence in middle school. One student said, “Kids didn’t actually say racist stuff in elementary school” and another student added, “[In

elementary school] there weren't White kids that picked on us." A number of other interviewed students also shared that they had not experienced discriminatory remarks in elementary school.

One student attributed some of her difficulties to not knowing as many people as she had in elementary school, "I had never been to that school or the classes that I had . . . and I didn't know how people would treat me . . . [and there were people] who wanted to fight [me]." Others also commented that a lack of friends initially was difficult for them. For example, one student said, "At the beginning of the year, I was shy because I didn't know anybody. I had just a few friends, but by the time I got new friends I started to talk more."

### *Theme 3.3: Difficulty Asserting Needs*

As mentioned previously, if problems arose, students tended to avoid the teacher or act out in class. Some of the students' difficulties with teachers appeared to be summarized by one student's statement, "If a teacher didn't like me, I would be mean." Based on their reports, students seemed to want teachers to understand their needs and to work towards helping them feel comfortable and successful in school. Rather than identifying and expressing their needs through appropriate assertiveness, students appeared to choose to act out or skip class.

Students agreed that they often felt embarrassed raising their hand and did so on rare occasions. One student reported being shy and hesitant to seek help, especially in larger classes. He reported wanting a teacher who could perceive if he was having difficulties and then help him solve the problem. He said the only way he indicated he was struggling was by not turning in homework or by doing it poorly, "If I don't do the



homework it means I am having trouble or I didn't understand [the assignment]." He then went on to say that if he did not have it done, teachers would simply respond, "Turn it in" instead of asking him if he was having difficulties—something he wanted them to ask.

Another student also expected his teachers to perceive his needs instead of asking them for help, "When I have trouble in a class, they could come over and talk to me about it."

One male student mentioned the embarrassment of having to stand in front of class, "So everyone would look at me and she [the teacher] would stop you and tell you what is wrong, but she is just trying to tell you what is wrong so you can get better."

Another student said "It's kind of embarrassing . . ." when teachers help her in front of the rest of the class and others agreed that it was embarrassing to have to ask for help.

Another female student reported throwing a note with discriminatory marks away instead of telling a teacher. According to her the note said, "Oh you brownies go home." She then said "and I would throw it away." Another female identified as exhibiting internalizing characteristics said, "They [White students] say it [negative verbal remarks] when the teachers can't hear or see and we don't tell on them." In each of these situations the students did not verbalize their problems or concerns with teachers or school administrators.

Two students, however, had parents who intervened on their behalf. For example, one student said this about a teacher, "She hates me and I want to get out of her class." He reported that his academic performance dropped and his negative behavior increased. According to his mother, he reported feeling more anxious and he told the teacher that he "needed to use the bathroom" in an attempt "to avoid class." The mother stated that he did the same thing with another class, falling further behind and eventually having to stay

after school to catch up. However, this student's mother (who worked in the school and who was also raised in the U.S.) intervened on behalf of her son. As a result, the teacher expressed an increased understanding of the student and made special accommodations for him.

Another student, whose mother was also educated in the U.S. and spoke English fluently, reported that his mother was disappointed with the middle school. The student reported that his mother was also concerned when he got into a fight at school. That incident, the school curriculum, and the large class sizes prompted the mother to seek another school setting. "My mom kept on looking and she found a school . . . and she liked the curriculum . . . that is what she told me anyway. So we [my siblings and I] started going there."

Based on the data from the other interviews, these interventions (e.g., consulting with teachers or looking and then finding a new, responsive educational setting) initiated by the students' mothers were the exception rather than the rule—when other students had difficulties with teachers or the school, few parents intervened.

#### *Theme 3.4: Adjusting During the Second Year of Middle School*

During the follow-up interviews, which took place during the participants' seventh grade year, students reported doing better with the initial, difficult adjustment to middle school. Students appeared to have acclimated better to the increased expectations and culture of the school and reported improving in many areas when compared to their first year in middle school. A male student identified as having internalizing behaviors expressed more confidence in himself during his seventh grade year. He said, "I got

better grades this year [seventh grade] and I've been trying harder, and I feel more comfortable.”

A female student who attributed some of her problems to the school size, teachers, and people she did not know also reported that she had more difficulties during her sixth grade year, “[I was going to the office a lot in sixth grade] because I got in trouble a lot [and] I was sluffing.” She also reported getting in fights and doing poorly with her academics. During the follow-up interview, she indicated that she had fewer difficulties her seventh grade year. When asked specifically about problems she was having in seventh grade, she said, “Not this year” and “[problems] this year? No.”

#### *General Topic 4: Home Life*

While the original interview questions were specifically about the participants' school experiences, it became evident after a few interviews that home life, the participants' families, and their culture influenced their school experience. In general, participants did not report having adult help with homework and videogames played a large role in their home lives. While consent was not received to include parents' comments, the researchers made relevant observations pertaining to family dynamics and culture which offered additional information and context to the students' school experience.

#### *Theme 4.1: Videogames*

Videogames played a large part in the lives of interviewed students. After a few interviews it became apparent that having knowledge of videogames would allow the researcher to build better rapport with students. In fact, one student when asked how school would be different if he was in charge, said, “Pure videogames like *Xbox* and

*Playstation* . . . and I would play all day. And that would be the last class that every kid would have.” Another student, when asked what his friends would say about him, responded, “That I am a good videogame player.” Another male student said he wished that teachers would use videogames to motivate him and teach him. Acting as if he were the teacher talking to a student, he said, “. . . and when you get this, we get to go on to like the next level!”

#### *Theme 4.2: Homework*

Just as students perceived and used peers as meaningful and effective coping mechanisms at school, participants often used siblings, extended family, and neighbors for academic support outside of school. For example, students reported that it was not common for parents to consistently and frequently help them with homework. Instead, students sought help from peers or family members close to their age. Based on the interviewees’ comments and the researchers’ observations, parents often had busy work schedules and they may have had emerging English skills that were challenged by their child’s school assignments.

A male who was identified as having externalizing behaviors said that homework was his least favorite part of school; he indicated that homework was difficult to understand and complete in a timely manner. He said, “Some kids sit next to me [in class] and show me how to do the homework.” He also said that although his parents did not help him “I can call my cousin. He will probably help me.” This cousin lived across the street and was one year older than the interviewed student.

Another student reported that her parents were not able to consistently help her. Instead she referred to some of her classmates and friends as her “heroes” because “. . .

when I have trouble with my homework [they] help me.” Upon returning for the follow-up interview, this student had been dismissed from school and was being home schooled by her high-school aged sister and her non-English speaking parents.

When one student was asked more questions about her dislike of school work, she said that neither of her parents was able to help her significantly because of language issues. The student said, “My cousin can help me. She is eighteen. She lives with us.” When asked more about her cousin, it was learned that the cousin had not gone to school in the United States. Regarding the cousin’s English abilities, the student said her cousin “[does not speak] English good, but she knows how.”

Regarding parental involvement in homework, a quiet male student said, “No [my parents don’t help me]. My brother sometimes helps me.” The brother was two years older than the participant. Other students indicated that their parents provided limited help with homework. Several students said that when they ask their parents for help with homework, “I tell them what it says.”

#### *Theme 4.3: Parental Availability and Response*

While parental interviews of the identified students was not a part of the original research question, the researchers made several observations while interacting with the students and their families which seemed pertinent to the research question. Contacting parents and scheduling appointments with their child tended to be quite challenging: none of the parents returned phone messages when the researcher called to schedule an interview. Being able to reach a parent on the phone was a lengthy process, and it often required calling parents numerous times to find them at home. Once parents were contacted it was difficult to arrange a time when their child could be interviewed while a

parent or adult was present in the house. This may be explained by the challenges that all parents experience when balancing work and family life. These parents reported being employed in service or labor occupations where flexibility tends to be minimal and the work hours are extensive in order to earn a living wage. Furthermore, returning a phone call to an unknown researcher may not have been a priority for most parents.

Despite the challenges in contacting and communicating with parents and parents' initial hesitations, once the researcher built rapport, the parents seemed to respond favorably to the interviewer. The majority of the parents expressed appreciation that someone took an interest in their family and in their child's educational experience. Parents frequently deferred to the researcher and asked what the researcher could do to solve their child's school issues. Parents consistently expressed appreciation for the researcher's efforts despite the lack of direct benefits to their child.

#### *Theme 4.4: Parents as Advocates*

Students rarely reported that their parents played an active role in their education. The two parents who took a more proactive approach had children who reported being satisfied with their education and their parents' involvement. As mentioned above, one student reported instances of feeling unsafe at school which prompted his mother to become more involved and look for other educational avenues, "That's what happened at school when I got in that fight that made me not want to go to [to that middle school]. That is what triggered it for me." He went on to say, "But my mom kept on looking [for a different school] and she found a school . . . And she liked the curriculum, I guess, that is what she told me anyway." He had many positive attributes to share about his new school. In short he said, "I like the teachers and the students a lot better."

When asked about his least favorite class one student mentioned the teacher by name and reflected how he felt before his mother's intervention, "She hates me and I want to get out of her class." He reported feeling anxious symptoms in her class and said, "I had to go to the bathroom and she wouldn't let me . . . and then my mom went in and talked to her." He also added that he began doing poorly in class and was not behaving well either. After his mother's consultation with the teacher, he said this about the teacher, ". . . but now I'm getting along with her." He said that now the teacher "Talk[s] to me . . . about what I need to do and help[s] me with my homework, because I stay after school with [the teacher] and she helps me."

According to the other interviews with the students, these incidents were the exception rather than the norm. A number of students (and their parents) expressed grievances with the school, but they did not report actively attempting to remediate their grievances (or their children's difficulties). Parents (and students) seemed to expect the school to be proactive in taking responsibility for the problems which they saw the student experiencing. Some parents described the educational system in Mexico and appeared to have expectations that the U.S. school system should be similar. Other parents complained of the language barrier and the lack of initiative which the school took in contacting them.

## Discussion

As can be seen by a review of the literature and the themes presented in the current study “many Latino students face difficulties succeeding at school [yet] little is known about the specific factors that promote and hinder success for these students” (Martinez, et al., 2004, p. 144). This research attempted to learn more about at-risk Latino students’ experiences and hoped to tap into factors that support and impede them. The themes that emerged from the interviews provided valuable insights into the experiences of at-risk Latinos and supported the President’s Advisory Commission’s (2003) concerns that something needs to be done to improve the educational outcomes for Latinos.

When attempting to understand the experiences of Latino youth, it is important to understand some of their context. While some demographic information about the participants and their families was provided in the methods section, in general Latinos tend to have high rates of undereducation (Gloria, Ruiz, & Castillo, 2004), unemployment (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000), and low-income earnings (NCCP, 2005). More than three-fourths of Latinos speak Spanish in the home (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999), and they often lack the ability to sufficiently speak English (Echeverry, 1997).

Latino students do not report that their parents are less likely to encourage their schoolwork than non-Latinos. However, Latino parents are more likely to have lower academic skills and supervise their children’s academic work less than non-Latino parents (Martinez, et al., 2004); this appeared to be the case with the students interviewed in this research project. The parents appeared to lack involvement with their child’s education—possibly because of language issues, work schedules, or lack of educators’ responsiveness to the cultural values and needs of Latino students.



As mentioned previously, the researchers had difficulty contacting the parents of potential participants. This difficulty holds some implications (e.g., if teachers and schools have similar difficulties they may assume, perhaps incorrectly, that parents are not committed to their child's education) which may decrease the likelihood of continued school initiatives to reach the parent. This may limit the likelihood of at-risk Latino students getting the help they need and could partially explain why Latino students face one of the poorest outcomes among ethnicities (PACEEHA, 2003).

### *Latino Cultural Values*

The participants in this study appeared to be manifesting behaviors which were culturally consistent for the Latino culture, but these behaviors may have been exacerbating school problems. Some of these behaviors appeared to be incongruent with the values of the predominant culture, which is inherent in the U.S. public school system. The students appeared to struggle when their surroundings were inconsistent with traditional Latino values; exercising behaviors that were congruent with traditional Latino values often contributed to problems or misunderstandings (e.g., looking to peers for support, not asserting their needs to school adults, exhibiting behavioral problems when they did not feel teachers cared about them). Based on the students' descriptions of their experiences, their actions appeared to be harmonious with the typical Latino cultural values of *afecto*, *respeto* (Baruth & Manning, 1992), *personalismo*, *simpatía*, *familismo* and having meaningful relationships with *personas de confianza* (Gloria, et al., 2004). While these values are not mutually exclusive, each will be defined and corresponding themes from the results section will be discussed.

### *Personalismo*

One prevalent value in Latino culture is the emphasis on *personalismo*, which means interpersonal interactions are based on providing emotional support, personal connection, and encouragement instead of completing tasks (Gloria, et al., 2004). This value emerged as a principal area of discussion across the themes. The students appeared to be considerably and negatively affected by a lack of *personalismo* from both peers and teachers. For example, participants tended to choose friends over completing coursework and following school rules. They also stood up for their friends and risked getting in trouble to protect their friends. Students also reported desiring more personal and reciprocal relationships with their teachers.

*Relationships with peers.* Interviewed students strongly valued their peers and they looked to their friends for support, protection, and strength. Even though Latinos commonly value *personalismo*, Latino middle and junior high school students report receiving less social support from teachers and Caucasian students than their non-Latino peers (Martinez, et al., 2004).

Thus, Latino students may desire supportive (*personalismo*-like) relationships, especially from the predominant Caucasian culture, namely teachers and Caucasian peers. Lack of *personalismo* among non-Latino peers could have been demonstrated by the chronic, discriminatory remarks that these participants reported. No literature was found regarding the construct of negative verbal remarks or their effects, but when minority students perceive a similar construct—discrimination—it predicts psychological distress like depression, anxiety (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999), lower academic achievement (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006), lower perceived academic ability, an

increase in the likelihood that friends are not interested in school (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003), and behavioral problems (Vega, Khoury, Zimmerman, Gil, & Warheit, 1995). While the correlates of perceiving discrimination are similar to the students' experiences of the present study, they are also similar to traits of students deemed to be at-risk. Thus, it may be that the effects of the frequent discriminatory remarks explain a portion of the students' at-risk behaviors. Such remarks could have contributed to or exacerbated their behavioral and/or emotional issues.

*Social support and personalismo.* Social support is a construct that appears to be congruent with personalismo. Perceiving social support has many positive and significant correlates: social skills, academic competence, leadership, and adaptive skills (Demaray & Malecki, 2002a); social support is also related to positive outcomes of at-risk students and buffers the effects of discrimination (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Demaray & Malecki, 2002b). Social support can be a safeguard to Latinos (Martinez, et al., 2004), yet, based on the results of this current research, it appeared that Latinos' efforts to offer support to peers is seen as inappropriate in school systems built on Anglo-American values. Significant negative correlates of social support include conduct problems, aggression, hyperactivity, anxiety, depression, and withdrawal (Demaray & Malecki, 2002b). The students in this study did not appear to be receiving as much social support and personalismo-like behaviors as they desired, possibly aggravating their school problems and contributing to the negative correlates of social support listed above. It is possible that the effects of a lack of social support better explain the students' at-risk behaviors.

Efforts by the participants in this study to gain social support often led to school problems. While all students benefit from peer support (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Demaray & Malecki, 2002a), it may be that Latinos benefit more from peer support because of their cultural upbringing and values. Latino socializations at school may be proactive efforts to seek support, connection, academic assistance, and help to cope with stressors. Whatever the reason, Latinos in this research appeared to be in a double-bind when it came to utilizing the potential support their friends offered. Attempts to seek peer support were often interpreted by adults as disruptive to the school culture. Peer support and its consequences for Latino students needs to be more thoroughly studied in order to create and provide school settings that facilitate appropriate and healthy peer relationships.

*Relationships with teachers.* According to Jackson (2001), teachers tended to blame Latinos' behavioral problems on the individual and Caucasians' behavioral problems on the environment. Yet, the research posits that environmental factors—like discrimination—negatively affects Latinos and other minority students (Kessler, et al., 1999). In addition to this, students in this current study reported feeling angry, and they engaged in fights as a result of frequent disparaging remarks. Based on the students' reports, the negative remarks notably affected the students' normal routine, sense of well being, safety, and their desire to attend school. This research not only highlights that negative verbal remarks were prevalent, but also that such remarks were often out of the awareness of school personnel, further aggravating students and making it less likely that teachers would see the entire context of students' unacceptable behaviors—unacceptable behaviors which may actually have been culturally appropriate ways of coping. Some

participants reported being concerned that if they responded to the discriminatory remarks, they would get in trouble rather than the instigator of the negative remark, thus possibly impacting the Latino students' sense of fairness and justice.

The at-risk students in this research also desired a teacher-student relationship that was compatible with *personalismo*. Students had strong preferences for teachers who were kind, lenient, and used active, engaging teaching methods. Teachers who provided individual attention also were valued and respected. While previous literature has found that Latinos emphasize positive relationships with teachers (Cloud, 2002; Delgado Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997), very few have used qualitative interviews from the students' perspectives to closely examine and understand the world of at-risk students and their school experiences. The responses of interviewees offered a descriptive and illuminating view of at-risk Latino preferences of teachers.

While research has shown that a good teacher-student bond is important to Latinos and their success (Alva, 1995), half of Latino students report that their interactions with school personnel do not allow for a supportive relationship (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). In addition to this, teachers perceive Latinos as less favorable (Delgado Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997). The above-cited research articulates that teachers are commonly at odds with what the research suggests—Latinos need wide-ranging support from teachers, but teachers tend to see these students less favorably than Caucasian students, which likely affects the teacher-student relationship and student outcome.

According to the students in this research, they appeared to work harder in classes and problem behaviors decreased when they had positive experiences and relationships with their teachers. This perception is consistent with Brewster and Bowen's (2004)

findings: problem behavior decreases as Latinos receive teacher support. Based on the existing literature and this study it appears unlikely that these students are consistently getting the support they need. Some students spoke of teachers who were responsive to their needs, provided individual attention, and were flexible with due dates. These students also implied that when teachers understood their academic, social, and familial contexts they were more likely to demonstrate behaviors that were deemed appropriate in the dominant culture. However, this experience with caring teachers was not consistent for the participants.

According to this study, ways in which teachers can show support and personalismo-like characteristics include not only getting to know students individually, but also allowing the students to get to know the teachers. Doing so would be in line with the value of personalismo and would demonstrate to students that teachers are interested in the students' lives and that they understand and respect the students' culture. Teachers could attempt to fully understand the unique issues of the students and possible reasons for their issues while also offering encouragement and building the confidence of the students. Teachers could also be flexible with at-risk Latinos and offer them second chances, like the opportunity to do make-up work. Such things are likely to positively affect the teacher-student relationship, academic performance of students, and be consistent with Latino values like personalismo and *afecto*. (*Afecto* literally means affect and refers to warmth and demonstrativeness.) At-risk students might especially benefit from such interactions when adjusting to a new, unfamiliar school and also decrease the likelihood of them engaging in negative coping styles.

Since the current study was not quantitative or comparative, it could be assumed that non-Latino students would also benefit from similar teacher characteristics and school experiences. However, such experiences and teacher-student relationships appeared to be especially salient and important for Latino at-risk students. Teachers that act in culturally sensitive ways can do much to facilitate the success of Latino students who often face numerous obstacles with poor short- and long-term outcomes.

### *Respeto and Simpatía*

*Respeto* is a general Latino value that refers to the idea that adults or those in authority are held in high regard (Baruth & Manning, 1992). This predominant Latino value reinforces the idea of deferring to and not questioning the roles of teachers, administrators, or others in authority. While all of the students reported experiencing problems at school, none of the students reported proactively or effectively dealing with the situations, e.g., when they heard discriminatory remarks directed at them. Students in this research were frequently passive or aggressive in how they responded to problems. The students tended to be overtly deferential to teachers, while simultaneously confused or frustrated when they perceived that teachers were not providing appropriate supervision, which could have protected them from negative remarks from Caucasian peers.

This same passive style was consistently demonstrated when dealing with academic problems or difficulties with teachers. Instead of asking for help, it appeared that participants hoped that those in authority would notice their difficulties and intervene accordingly; Latino students are unlikely to ask for assistance from people in authority (Cloud, 2002). Along with this and consistent with the value of personalismo and *respeto*,

when Latino students lack trust in teachers they are less likely to assert themselves and seek help from teachers (Martinez, et al., 2004). Respeto toward those in authority, while likely being an appropriate and effective manner of behaving in Latino culture, caused problems for at-risk Latinos. Not asserting self or asking for assistance may exacerbate Latino students' difficulties and increase the likelihood of teachers misinterpreting the meaning of behaviors; misinterpreting students' passivity (i.e., not being academically engaged) and aggression (i.e., being behaviorally out of control). This potential misreading could further distance students and teachers and decrease the likelihood of building positive, supportive relationships.

Deferring to those in authority not only resulted in problems for the students but for their parents as well. Based on conversations with the parents, the educational system in Mexico appears to be built on the versatile and powerful role of a teacher who is given full authority by students and their parents. Despite the fact that a number of the parents openly shared their misgivings about their child's education to the researcher, very few reported articulating their concerns to the school. Parents, for the most part, were passive in how they dealt with issues their children were facing, perhaps assuming it was the teachers' role to intervene if problems arose. Parents appeared to expect the school to be proactive and responsible for their child's education.

Only two incidents were reported in which parents played a proactive and assertive role in the education of their child. Of note, in each of the instances the mother was the intervening parent who spoke English fluently and had attended school in the United States; hence, they probably were more familiar with culture of U.S. schools. In both of these incidents, positive outcomes were evident, and the students reported being



successful because the teachers responded positively to the parents' interventions. While respeto may work in the Latin American school system, passively deferring to teachers in the Anglo American culture could be misinterpreted by the school as a lack of care regarding a child's education. Again, common Latino values are at odds with the dominant values in the U.S. school system, aggravating problems instead of ameliorating them.

The interviewed students (and their parents) appeared to lack trust or rapport with multiple teachers and school personnel, which may have contributed to their lack of assertion. Furthermore, if the parents had previous negative experiences in U.S. schools, they may have been less likely to engage in problem solving with educators. School cultures that lack awareness of the needs of Latino (or other minority groups) may put off effective contributions of Latino parents. Lack of assertion and timidity regarding their concerns is also consistent with *simpatía*. *Simpatía* emphasizes conformity, behaving with dignity, and respecting others to maintain harmony and avoid conflict (Gloria, et al., 2004).

#### *Personas de Confianza*

Latinos prefer to seek help from trusted friends, even if those friends are not skilled or experienced in the targeted area (Triandis, Marín, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). In Latino culture, such people are referred to as *personas de confianza* or people of trust. Someone can become una persona de confianza by showing a genuine interest and getting to know others and their culture (Gloria, et al., 2004). Content from the interviews stressed the importance which students placed on trusted relationships with peers and teachers. These relationships were of utmost importance to the extent that

students would even get into trouble to be with and support their friends. In fact, one student considered getting in trouble more at school so she would be sent to an alternative school where some of her close friends attended. Another example of students reaching out to *personas de confianza* includes seeking academic help from their peers. Peers, siblings, and cousins were likely not the most capable sources of assistance, yet students commonly looked to them for help instead of looking to teachers.

While conducting interviews and interacting with the parents, the families appeared to begin regarding the researchers as *personas de confianza*. Parents often deferred to the researchers and sought solutions regarding their child. During some visits the researchers sat with parents for a significant amount of time as the parents shared their experiences with the school, their own adjustment, and struggles from their personal lives. Parents appeared to have the impression that the researchers would be able to solve the students' problems, their problems, and some even asked for the researchers to speak to other children in the family.

Parents and students were warm and kind to the researchers and expressed appreciation for their time and efforts to speak with them and their child, despite the fact that potential benefits to their children were minimal. Teachers and administrators could exercise similar behaviors that are congruent with the values of *personas de confianza* and doing so could have positive and reciprocal effects on all parties. Teachers or those in authority can become *personas de confianza* as they work to understand and appreciate the specific contexts of their students (Gloria, et al., 2004).

### *Familismo*

Unlike its name may infer, *familismo* is a value that is not limited exclusively to the immediate family. Familismo is not only the value of a profound sense of family and duty to family, but also an emphasis strong feelings of loyalty, unity, support, commitment, and reciprocity (Gloria & Peregoy, 1996) toward extended family and non-related family members (Comas-Díaz & Griffith, 1988). Thus, familismo extends beyond the traditional family and could include personas de confianza like teachers, mentors, and friends.

Familismo can be both a strength and a liability to Latinos (Gloria, et al., 2004). If Latinos take familismo to the extreme, family members may not receive professional services they require or ask others for the help they need. Along these lines, Latinos may have difficulties interacting with people that do not manifest familismo behaviors that their culture values. The principle of familismo appears consistent with the theme of reciprocity discussed in the results section; students tended to reciprocate when teachers were warm and kind, but resisted when such was not the case. If teachers better understood familismo and saw Latino students' behaviors in context of typical cultural values, teachers would be better informed regarding how to more appropriately interact with students and their families. Teachers hold a respected role in Latino culture and as such, they could serve as an extension of Latino families.

If a teacher-student relationship starts poorly, it is possible for the relationship (and the outcome of the student) to be salvaged through more positive, sensitive, and culturally appropriate teacher interactions and characteristics. Research has highlighted the importance of a positive teacher-student relationship for Latinos and expounds

negative and positive outcomes of such relationships (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Hernandez, 1994). While the existing research emphasizes the importance of teacher relationships, no literature was found regarding the principle of reciprocity. The fact that this current research highlights that a negative teacher-student relationships can be repaired by positive teacher qualities can propel future research on this topic and instill hope for positive gains for teachers and their at-risk Latino students.

### *Adjustment and Acculturation*

When considering the students' experiences in elementary school, parental descriptions of the Mexican education system, and Latino cultural values, it is understandable why one of the themes that emerged from the interviews included difficulty orienting and adjusting to middle school. In general, transitioning to middle or junior high schools for children and adolescents can be difficult; as students transition to another school their grades decline, they receive less attention from teachers, they deal with more emotional issues, and lowered self-esteem. In short, adolescents view secondary schools as less favorable than their elementary school experience (Berk, 2007). These descriptors seem especially applicable to the at-risk Latinos in this research as they relied on peers, desired closer relationships with teachers, and had difficulties with homework and academic performance. These interviewees' stories are consistent with normal transition difficulties, yet their experiences appeared to be more complex due to personal, familial, and cultural issues which sometimes posed further problems for their adjustment.

Based on parental descriptions of schools in Latin America, students and parents were ill-prepared for the changes in expectations from the teachers and the students'

increased responsibilities as they progressed from elementary to middle school. The U.S. elementary school system appears consistent with the parents' experience of school in Latin America and perhaps contributed to their expectations of the entire U.S. school system.

For example, a father's descriptions of the Mexican school system corroborated with student preferences (e.g., a teacher who was fun, was highly engaging, took upon responsibility of each student, and formed a personal relationship with students). Thus, Latino students (and their parents) appeared to lack an awareness regarding principles and practices of the U.S. secondary schools for early adolescents, partially because Latino cultural values and experiences are not consistent with the values of the U.S. school system. The dissonance between cultural values and the school may lead to misunderstandings and problems.

Less acculturated Latinos and their families may benefit from an orientation to teachers, the schools, and the school system. This process could allow all parties to have a better understanding of one another, increasing the likelihood of all parties having a better understanding of the expectations for specific roles and relationships. At-risk Latino students are likely to benefit from having a mentor or someone that is familiar with the school system, Latino culture, and adjustment issues which can arise for these students. In addition, orientations and mentoring relationships are harmonious with the previously stated general Latino values.

While benefits of mentoring programs have been documented, only one reference was found regarding mentoring programs with Latino adolescents. This reference solely pertained to improving academic achievement, and it is outdated (Aspira Association,

1990). Mentoring at-risk Latinos (and their families) is not a topic addressed in the literature and one which currently lacks support for being an evidenced-based intervention; even so, it is an intuitive intervention which could be evaluated.

### *Summary*

In short, interviewed students desired more attributes that were consistent with traditional Latino values. Latino expectations and values from cultural backgrounds pose problems for students, their parents, and the educational system. These values of personalismo, afecto, simpatía, familismo, respeto, and having personas de confianza are frequently at a mismatch with the values of the school system and possibly exacerbate school problems. These cultural mismatches may reasonably account for students' school difficulties. As such, educators can consider focusing on providing systemic changes and individual interventions that address the cultural differences.

### *Limitations*

The researchers acknowledge that this study had limitations. Despite the limitations at various parts in this research project (e.g., properties of the SSBD, qualitative interview shortcomings), the participants provided great detail of their school experiences which may prompt further research that affects proper intervention with at-risk Latino students.

### *Systematic Screening for Behavior Disorders (SSBD)*

As mentioned above, the SSBD was developed and normed for elementary school students (K-6) and not for secondary school students. Traditionally students have one teacher in elementary school. Having multiple teachers in secondary school means that students may have been nominated by several teachers; other students may have been

nominated by only one teacher. Even with these challenges, having more perceptions and information about a student was generally helpful, even though the SSBD did not accommodate for varying teacher perceptions and nominations. Using an instrument on a developmentally different population is generally not recommended, however, a research project done in conjunction with this research found preliminary empirical support for using the SSBD in secondary schools (Caldarella, et al., 2008).

As mentioned in the review of the literature, the SSBD has limitations (e.g., lack of empirical support for cutoff scores, limited national sample, lack of minority populations in the norm group) (Kelley, 1998; Zlomke & Spies, 1998). The lack of research regarding the SSBD and its use with Latino populations makes it difficult to state with certainty that the SSBD appropriately captures and accounts for the individual and cultural differences of Latinos. There is the possibility that the students identified may not actually be at risk for EBD, however, the data obtained from the students is valuable and informative.

#### *Comparison Group*

Some of the responses from participants are likely consistent with non-Latino student preferences. For example, students in secondary schools report that their teachers are less friendly than those in elementary school (Berk, 2007) and this likely impacts their well-being and their desire to have teachers with kind and warm attributes. Many of the teacher characteristics noted (e.g., active and engaging; personable, kind, and lenient) are qualities that youth from any background would appreciate and want. Thus, the current research cannot conclude that Latinos desire or require more positive teacher attributes than students of other ethnicities; however, the participants' responses provided

important descriptions that can contribute to developing interventions and supportive environments for at-risk Latino youth.

### *Qualitative Interviews*

In performing a qualitative study there are inherent limitations because the researchers are the tools or instruments used in the study, and as such, they approach any qualitative study with their own lens of seeing the world. The primary researcher of this study acknowledges that preexisting assumptions determined what was included in the literature review, the methods of the study, the interview questions, and what was reinforced in the interviews. In an attempt to limit bias, the interview questions were approved by the research committee, the themes from interviews were presented to the participants for their confirmation, and an independent reviewer from the research committee was used to ensure consistency and trustworthiness of results and interpretations.

As the primary researcher was the main instrument in this project, some disclosures regarding him were deemed appropriate. The researcher was interested in doing this study because of his affinity for Latino culture. He lived in Latin America for two years and grew to appreciate and respect the people and their culture. Since returning to the United States, the primary researcher has attempted to use his knowledge of Latin people, culture, and the Spanish language to engage in social justice activities. The primary researcher is also a counselor in training and highly values getting to know and understand individuals and their life stories to more appropriately and effectively work with them and their concerns.



The researcher was also limited by the responses of the students. While the researcher made every attempt to build rapport with students and their families in order to ensure their comfort and personal disclosure, at times student responses were limited. The researcher made numerous attempts to facilitate disclosures and rephrased questions in order to get more details, but some students provided short answers that at times had age-appropriate, but limited, introspection that had emerging abstract thought. Despite this limitation, the responses were to be expected, based on the participants' development and age.

### *Summary*

While there are limitations to this research, the participants gave voice to a group of students that have not been documented in the educational research literature. While research exists regarding this population, this is one of a few studies that sought to explore the descriptive experiences of at-risk Latino students. The existing literature does not go into the depth of this study; if schools had an awareness of the results of this research, they may address similar students in ways that incorporate their cultural contexts. This information has the potential of prompting continued and more refined research efforts on behalf of at-risk Latino youth.

### *Implications*

While research does exist regarding at-risk Latinos, little exists from the students' perspective and even less qualitative studies exist that contribute to understanding the rich experiences of these students. This research attempted to fill a much needed area and provide descriptive information regarding the experiences of Latino students identified as at-risk. Using the themes identified by these participants, it is hoped that educational

systems can increase their responsiveness to the needs of these students. While systemic changes are in order, this research can also contribute to designing individual interventions and understanding the circumstances of Latino youth.

#### *Need for Future Research*

Developing culturally sound and sensitive research projects are of utmost importance (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Continued efforts should be made to increase the amount of rigorous and comprehensive quantitative and qualitative research regarding at-risk Latinos. Research needs to be conducted that provides information regarding factors that increase and decrease risk for school failure and how to implement appropriate interventions for Latinos that incorporate respect and appreciation for Latino values, perspectives, and experiences (Martinez, et al., 2004).

Research from various vantage points—teachers, school personnel, students, and families—could add to the knowledge that exists and better inform educators. Of utmost importance is to investigate the students' experiences, their culture, and the effects these have on academic and personal well-being. From such concerted and thorough efforts all parties involved can share the responsibility for the successes and problems Latino students encounter (Artiles & Trent, 1994), whereas previous literature has focused the blame upon students and their culture (Harry & Klingner, 2006). It might also be helpful to focus on the strengths of Latinos by interviewing successful Latino students regarding their experiences and the factors that helped them succeed.

This study did not include parents or teachers as participants, but it is suggested that future research gather more data from these groups to better understand students and their behaviors in different settings. Studies have reported benefits to positive Latino

parent involvement in the school which can mediate poor outcomes (Martinez, et al., 2004), but a lack of data exists on the topic. Involving Latino parents and using their perceptions in the education process is especially important since Latino parents report more negative and unwelcoming instances with the school system than non-Latinos (Martinez, et al., 2004). In short, robust and sensitive research efforts which promote utilizing resources and teaching skills while also integrating family, community, and school approaches are needed (Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan, 2000).

This research highlighted several aspects of at-risk Latinos' experience which were previously unknown and which need to be more fully studied. While literature does exist regarding discrimination (e.g., Kessler, et al., 1999; Vega, et al., 1995), no existing literature was found regarding chronic and moderate negative verbal statements in the schools or their prevalence and effects. Due to a dearth of research in this area, it is yet to be known if consistent negative remarks better explain the behaviors which deemed the identified students as at risk for EBD. On a positive note, some literature exists that emphasizes the benefits of peer support among Latinos (e.g., DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Demaray & Malecki, 2002a; Demaray & Malecki, 2002b); it is suggested that continued efforts be made regarding such support as well as possible benefits of mentor relationships for at-risk Latinos.

The students' responses to questions regarding their relationships with teachers offered more insights into positive and negative teacher-student interactions than previously known. Students' responses provided specific behaviors which teachers can employ that go beyond current teacher-student relationship principles. Further research could be done which clearly articulates the effects of positive and negative teacher

attributes on a variety of areas (e.g., student attitude, behavior, attendance, grades, and school outcome). It is obvious that those that spend the most time with students have the potential to positively impact at-risk students in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner, but current research is limited in its breadth and depth.

The idea of reciprocity in teacher-student relationships is a concept that has not yet been explored. The descriptions of effective teaching behaviors are exciting and promising; a poor teacher-student relationships can be changed by teachers sensitively investing more time and interest in their at-risk Latino students. Furthermore, when teachers understand students' context (i.e., disparaging remarks from peers, needing additional time and support for completing academic work, home life, and culture) they may demonstrate an increase in culturally responsive educational practices. An investment of teachers' time has the likelihood of paying significant positive dividends, and further research can be completed to more thoroughly assess the various benefits of such actions.

While literature exists regarding traditional Latino values (Baruth & Manning, 1992; Gloria & Peregoy, 1996; Gloria, et al., 2004), very few articles translate those values into concrete behaviors or the meanings behind them. The students in this research provided a wealth of anecdotal data which can be explored on a deeper level to better describe and quantify values and their subsequent behaviors. It would also be helpful to more thoroughly assess acculturation/cultural values and how they affect students and their experiences in school.

*Creation and Utilization of Appropriate Assessment Instruments*

Researchers have argued that tests are not adequately created or normed for Latino populations (Coutinho & Oswald, 1998; Coutinho, et al., 2002; Figueroa & Hernandez, 2000). A number of screening instruments exist to help identify at-risk students, but some of these behavior rating scales have inadequate psychometric properties for diverse populations (Dominguez de Ramirez & Shapiro, 2005). For example, while the SSBD has sufficient reliability and validity characteristics (Kelley, 1998), concerns still exist regarding its validity evidence with diverse populations (Jenkins, 1997). The SSBD and other instruments should continually be studied to determine if the measures are assessing risk or culturally appropriate behaviors; some of the at-risk behaviors could be better accounted for by other factors like negative verbal statements and cultural mismatches.

Current and future instruments need to be appropriately normed for diverse students and test developers need to be more aware of and sensitive to diversity issues (Artiles & Trent, 1994) so that students are not inaccurately identified and offered inappropriate and unnecessary services. Instruments and screening measures should be used as tools to understand students and lead to more personalized and appropriate questions. Instead of deficits, instruments could also assess diverse students' strengths (Brewster & Bowen, 2004) as well as relevant family and cultural issues (Artiles & Trent, 1994). Until more research is done, there will remain questions about the efficacy of utilizing tests with Latinos that have been constructed with the values of traditional Caucasian America.

*Need for Qualified Teachers and Multicultural Training*

According to the interview data, numerous problems arose from cultural mismatches between the students, their teachers, and the school system. Inexperienced teachers that often teach Latinos and the disproportionate teacher-student demographics reinforce Caucasian values and invalidate minority students' behaviors and values (Aaroe & Nelson, 2000). Teachers may lack the knowledge of instructional methods that are especially appropriate for ethnically diverse populations. The use of evidenced-based instructional models for Latinos and at-risk groups could improve the academic performance of these populations (Trent & Artiles, 1994). Educators should also have access to culturally inclusive curriculum materials and be willing to adapt materials when multicultural curriculum is unavailable (Martinez, et al., 2004). Schools should become more flexible and accommodating of students' values to increase the likelihood of success for a broader range of students (Martinez, et al., 2004). Teachers and schools could also become more familiar with their own values and assumptions and how they may affect students of different ethnicities.

Having more ethnically diverse school personnel would likely offer positive role models for diverse students and their outcomes (Artiles & Trent, 1994), but of more importance is properly training those that teach Latinos and other minorities (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). As has been shown in this study and others, Latinos highly value a quality teacher-student relationship and teachers' efforts to get to know and understand the values of their students may promote Latinos' feelings of acceptance and contribute to their engagement in school (Brewster & Bowen, 2004).

Finally, teachers that understand the importance of considering the reasons of students' behaviors may be less likely to respond with punitive measures. Teachers may need to increase their awareness of the discrimination that may be happening outside of their awareness. Latino students may be responding as targets of aggression rather than as perpetrators of aggressive acts. Considering this possibility may increase the sense of justice and fairness for all students. Furthermore, increasing the supervision and types of supervision may decrease the chronic negative remarks that are directed at Latino students. As teachers and other school adults develop trusting, personal relationships with students, students may be more willing to share their perspectives and advocate for themselves rather than fear that they will be simply blamed for misbehavior.

#### *Efforts to Involve Parents*

The involvement of parents of Latino students is essential to positive student outcome (Stanton-Salazar, et al., 2000). Efforts could be made to harness parental and cultural strengths and refine intervention strategies that enhance parents' abilities to understand the U.S. school system and promote success of their children. Most school policies encourage adult involvement at the elementary level, but less participation as students move on to secondary schools (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). Increasing the amount of family-school connections throughout students' academic progression could be a valuable resource. As schools learn more about Latino culture through students and their families, it is likely they will learn and use practices and interventions that are effective (Brewster & Bowen, 2004).

While Latinos and at-risk Latinos face many difficulties in their lives and in the school system, there is much that can be done to facilitate more positive outcomes. This

research fills a much needed gap in the literature, provides further and more in-depth insights into the lives of at-risk Latinos, and opens the door for further research to help the at-risk Latino population. All individuals and school systems need to “dedicate [themselves] to ensuring educational excellence for Hispanic Americans *now*” (PACEEHA, 2003, p. 3). Addressing research questions and focusing on the needs of Latino students have not been commensurate with the growth of Latino youth in the schools. Increasing research efforts in this area can help to achieve educational success for these students (Akiba, et al., 2004).



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## List of Appendices

Appendix A1: SSBD Stage One Externalizing Protocol

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## Appendix A1: SSBD Stage One Externalizing Protocol

**Rank Ordering on Externalizing Dimension**

Externalizing refers to all behavior problems that are directed outwardly by the child toward the external social environment. Externalizing behavior problems usually involve behavioral excesses, (i.e., too much behavior) and are considered inappropriate by teachers and other school personnel. *Non-examples* of externalizing behavior problems would include all forms of adaptive child behavior that are considered appropriate to the school setting.

**Examples include:**

1. displaying aggression toward objects or persons
2. arguing
3. forcing the submission of others
4. defying the teacher
5. being out of seat
6. not complying with teacher instructions or directives
7. having tantrums
8. being hyperactive
9. disturbing others
10. stealing
11. not following teacher or school – imposed rules

**Non-examples include:**

- cooperating, sharing
- working on assigned tasks
- making assistance needs known in an appropriate manner
- listening to the teacher
- interacting in an appropriate manner with peers
- following directions
- attending to task
- complying with teacher requests
- following school rules

**Instructions:** Review the definition of externalizing behavior and the list of all students you teach. In Column One, enter the names of students whose characteristic behavior patterns most closely match the externalizing behavioral definition. Then choose up to 3 of the names from Column One, and rank order them in Column Two according to the degree or extent to which each exhibits externalizing behavior. The student who exhibits externalizing behavior to the greatest degree is ranked first and so on until the up to 3 students are rank ordered.

**List Externalizers**


**Rank Externalizers *Most to Least* M/F**

1.		
2.		
3.		

## Appendix A2: SSBD Stage One Internalizing Protocol

**Rank Ordering on Internalizing Dimension**

Internalizing refers to all behavior problems that are directed inwardly (i.e., away from the external social environment) and that represent problems with self. Internalizing behavior problems are often self-imposed and frequently involve behavioral deficits and patterns of social avoidance. *Non-examples* of internalizing behavior problems would be all forms of social behavior that demonstrate social involvement with peers that facilitate normal or expected social development.

**Examples include:**

1. having low or restricted activity levels
2. not talking with other children
3. being shy, timid, and/or nonassertive
4. avoiding or withdrawing from social situations
5. preferring to play or spend time alone
6. acting in a fearful manner
7. not participating in games and activities
8. being unresponsive to social initiations by others
9. not standing up for one's self

**Non-examples include:**

- initiating social interactions with peers
- having conversations
- playing with others, having normal rates or levels of contact with peers
- displaying positive social behavior toward others
- participating in games and activities
- resolving peer conflicts in an appropriate manner
- joining in with others

**Instructions:** Review the definition of internalizing behavior and the list of all students you teach. In Column One, enter the names of students whose characteristic behavior patterns most closely match the internalizing behavioral definition. Then choose up to 3 of the names from Column One and rank order them in Column Two according to the degree or extent to which each exhibits internalizing behavior. The student who exhibits internalizing behavior to the greatest degree is ranked first and so on until the up to 3 students are rank ordered.

**List Internalizers**


**Rank Internalizers *Most to Least*****M/F**

1.	
2.	
3.	

## Appendix B: SSBD Stage Two Protocol

SYSTEMATIC SCREENING FOR BEHAVIOR DISORDERS (SSBD)  
**SSBD Stage Two Rating**  
**For Externalizing Students**

## Critical Events Index

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

Student \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Check one: Stage One SSBD Rank:  1  2 or  3

INSTRUCTIONS: Check each behavior from the list below that you are aware the student has exhibited during this school year.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Steals.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Sets fires.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Vomits after eating.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Has tantrums.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Physically assaults an adult.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Exhibits painful shyness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Exhibits large weight loss or gain over past three months. (Significant weight fluctuation would be excess of 20% change in body weight.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Exhibits sad affect, depression and feelings of worthlessness to such an extent as to interfere with normal peer and classroom activities.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Is physically aggressive with other students or adults (hits, bites, chokes, or throws things).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Damages others' property (academic materials, damages personal possessions).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Demonstrates obsessive-compulsive behaviors. (Student can't get his/her mind off certain thoughts or obsessions.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Reports having nightmares or significant sleep disturbances.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Engages in inappropriate sexual behaviors (masturbation, exposes self).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Is self-abusive (biting, cutting or bruising self, head banging).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Attempts to **seriously** physically injure another using weapons or objects.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Suddenly cries or displays highly inappropriate affect in normal situations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Complains of **severe** headaches or other somatic complaints such as stomach aches, nausea, dizziness, or vomiting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Talks of killing himself/herself. Reports having suicidal thoughts or being preoccupied with death.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Exhibits thought disorders or gets lost in own thoughts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Ignores teacher warnings or reprimands.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 21. Makes lewd or obscene gestures.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 22. Shows evidence of physical abuse.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 23. Shows evidence of drug use.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 24. Reports being sexually abused.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 25. Uses obscene language or swears.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 26. Exhibits cruelty to animals.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 27. Is teased, neglected and/or avoided by peers.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 28. Has severely restricted activity levels.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 29. Is enuretic (inadequate bladder control or bed wetting).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 30. Is encopretic (inadequate bowel control).
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 31. Sexually molests other children.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 32. Has auditory or visual hallucinations.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ 33. Has severe lack of interest in activities which were previously of interest.
- Please specify any serious behavior not appearing on this list.

\_\_\_\_\_ 35. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ 36. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ TOTAL CRITICAL EVENTS

## SYSTEMATIC SCREENING FOR BEHAVIOR DISORDERS (SSBD)

**Combined Frequency Index  
For Adaptive and Maladaptive Behavior**

**Instructions:** The numbers 1 through 5 are a continuous scale and are used to indicate your estimate of the frequency with which each item occurs for a given student. Circle a number between 1 and 5 to represent the frequency of a given item. Complete the scale in relation to your observations of the student during the **past 30 days**.

**ADAPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR**

Never Sometimes Frequently

- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (1) Follows established classroom rules.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (2) Is considerate of the feelings of others.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (3) Produces work of acceptable quality given her/his skill level.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (4) Gains peers' attention in an appropriate manner.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (5) Expresses anger appropriately, e.g., reacts to situation without being violent or destructive.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (6) Cooperates with peers in group activities or situations.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (7) Makes assistance needs known in an appropriate manner, e.g., asks to go to the bathroom, raises hand when finished work, asks for help with work, etc.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (8) Is socially perceptive, e.g., "reads" social situations accurately.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (9) Does seat-work assignments as directed.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (10) Compliments peers regarding their behavior or personal attributes, e.g., appearance, special skills, etc.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (11) Complies with teacher requests and commands.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 (12) Initiates positive social interactions with peers.

**Total Adaptive Behavior Score**

**MALADAPTIVE STUDENT BEHAVIOR**

Never Sometimes Frequently

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(1) Requires punishment (or threat of same) before s/he will terminate an inappropriate activity or behavior.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(2) Refuses to participate in games and activities with other children at recess.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(3) Behaves inappropriately in class when corrected, e.g., shouts back, defies the teacher, etc.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(4) Responds inappropriately when other children try to interact socially with her/him.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(5) Child tests or challenges teacher-imposed limits, e.g., classroom rules.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(6) Uses coercive tactics to force the submission of peers; manipulates, threatens, etc.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(7) Creates a disturbance during class activities, e.g., is excessively noisy, bothers other students, out of seat, etc.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(8) Manipulates other children and/or situations to get his/her own way.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(9) Is overly affectionate with others (peers and adults), e.g., touching, hugging, kissing, hanging on, etc.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(10) Is excessively demanding, e.g., requires or demands too much individual attention.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5

(11) Pouts or sulks.

**Total Maladaptive Behavior Score**



## Appendix C: Interview Questions

### Icebreaker questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- What do you like to do?
  - Tell me about a time when you did that.
  - What do you like to do with your friends?
- What would your friends say you're good at?
  - What do you think you're good at?
- What do people do to make you feel important/special?
  - How do you like people to treat you?
- Who is one of your heroes?
  - How are you similar/different from him/her?
- What's your favorite TV show?
- Who is your favorite athlete?
- Who helps you the most?
  - What does that person say/do to help you?
- What is your favorite/least favorite class?
- What is school like for you?

### Questions to ask Identified Latino Students

- What is school like for you?
- What do you like most/least about school?
- Where do you feel most safe/comfortable at school? Tell me about that.
  - What time of day is best for you at school?
  - Where do you have the most fun?
- If I waved a magic wand and things were like you wanted, how would school be different?
  - If I waved a magic wand, how would your teachers be different?
  - What would be different at school if you were in charge for a day?
- What do people do to make you feel important/special?
  - Can you tell me about some people that do that/that don't do that?
- What do teachers do to show that they care?
  - Can you tell me about a teacher who did/didn't do that?
- Why do you think that you were identified to be in this class?
- What happens when you do (describe SSBD behavior criteria for which teacher identified the student as at-risk)?
  - Describe how your teacher(s) respond to that? Tell me about that teacher.
- Tell me about a teacher that you like. Why do you like that teacher?
- Tell me about a teacher who likes you.
  - What are some things that teacher does to show you that he or she likes you?