

# Predicting achievement, distress, and retention among lower-income Latino youth

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## Abstract

This study used structural equation modeling to evaluate whether a combination of social cognitive and self-determination theories [Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall; Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1987). The support of autonomy and the control of behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 1024–1037] would effectively predict high school students' distress, achievement, and retention. Participants were 427 predominately Latino youth from an inner-city low-income high school. Results indicated that students who reported feeling connected to teachers and their school reported higher levels of autonomous motivation for attending school. Students reporting higher levels of autonomous motivation for attending school reported more confidence (i.e., self-efficacy) in their academic ability, and performed better academically. In addition, students who reported higher self-efficacy beliefs reported less physical and psychological distress and reported higher levels of achievement. Retention in school was predicted by a combination of achievement and the absence of physical/psychological distress. Implications for practice and further research on urban high school students' academic development are described.

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## 1. Introduction

Identifying psychological factors that impact academic outcomes is especially critical for low-income and ethnically diverse youth who face a myriad of social and economic barriers (Lerner, 1995; McLoyd, 1998). Recent statistics indicate that students living in low-income families are four times more likely to drop out of high school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Further, dropout levels are particularly problematic for Latino youth. In 2003, the dropout rate for Latino youth was 24% compared to 10% for all high school students in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). The financial

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disparity between those with and without a high school diploma is striking. Today, in the United States, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts is twice the rate of high school graduates and the median income for high school dropouts remains at poverty level (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). This gap only continues to drastically widen when examining the incomes of high school dropouts as compared to college graduates. Adults with a 4-year college degree earn a median income of \$41,800, while those who do not graduate from high school earn a median income of \$18,300 (U.S. Census Bureau., 2005).

This study investigated the degree to which three critical student outcomes—academic achievement, psychological/physical distress, and retention could be predicted from constructs derived from two theoretical perspectives—self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1989, 1997). According to self-determination theory, autonomous motivation will be associated with positive academic outcomes and well-being, while controlled motivation will be associated with less academic engagement and distress (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomous motivation occurs when one freely chooses to engage in a behavior and fully endorses this choice either out of interest or personal importance. Controlled motivation occurs when a person engages in a behavior because of coercive forces, such as guilt or external pressure. Autonomous motivation has been associated with higher levels of perceived competence, higher academic achievement, and positive affective states (Black & Deci, 2000; Hadre & Reeve, 2003; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Walls & Little, 2005). Alternatively, controlled motivation has been linked to lower academic performance and negative affect (Black & Deci, 2000; Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997; Walls & Little, 2005).

Relatedness is a central variable that has been proposed to facilitate students' development of autonomous versus controlled motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Relatedness encompasses the quality of the interpersonal relationship that exists between the teacher and the student, and it refers to the student's sense of belongingness and support. According to self-determination theory, when students feel connected to and involved with teachers, they are less likely to feel controlled and are more likely to display autonomous reasons for engaging in academic activities. While, few studies have examined this proposition, Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch (1994) found that youth who felt connected to and cared for by their teachers were more likely to report autonomous reasons for engaging in positive school-related behaviors.

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986, 1989, 1997), positive academic outcomes result in large part by the student's level of academic self-efficacy. Defined as one's confidence to successfully execute or perform a specific school-related activities, research has consistently found that higher levels of self-efficacy are associated with higher levels of achievement (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Torres & Solberg, 2001). Furthermore, students reporting higher levels of academic self-efficacy also report lower levels of psychological/physical distress (Bandura, Pastorelli, Barbaranelli, & Caprara, 1999; Miserandino, 1996; Quimby & O'Brien, 2004).

This study extends upon previous literature in a number of ways. First, there has been relatively little effort to examine whether it is possible to integrate constructs derived from self-determination and social cognitive theory into a model predicting successful academic transitions. In a recent study, Solberg, Carlstrom, Howard, and Jones (2007) found that meaningful at-risk clusters could be established using a combination of variables derived from self-determination and social cognitive theories and that different levels of risk were associated with different health and academic outcomes. Second, this study also extends previous research by including two additional variables (relatedness and distress) which have not been included in any previous high school transition models. Including relatedness has important implications for classroom intervention, while the inclusion of distress allows for examining this important construct in relation to both achievement and retention. And finally, while previous research has relied upon self-report indicators of achievement and retention, this model includes actual grades received at the end of the semester and attendance rates as an indicator of achievement. Retention was defined as whether the student received an end of semester grade report.

Fig. 1 presents the proposed model. The proposed model posits that, consistent with self-determination theory, relatedness is expected to directly influence both autonomous motivation and controlled motivation, with relatedness being positively correlated with autonomous motivation and negatively correlated with controlled motivation (Ryan & Powelson, 1991; Ryan, Stiller, et al., 1994). Second, it is proposed that both autonomous motivation and controlled motivation will directly influence levels of self-efficacy, achievement, and distress. Specifically, autonomous motivation will be positively correlated with self-efficacy and achievement and

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