

“¿Coche o Carro?”: Evaluating Student Perceptions of Teacher Bias in Language Education

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ABSTRACT

The majority of U.S. Spanish speakers are Latin American, not Spanish. However, Peninsular Spanish (from Spain) is often treated as the standard in U.S. Spanish language education, despite Spain's population making up only about 10% of world Spanish speakers. Spanish heritage language learners in the U.S. often report corrections based on their accent or dialect, instead of their grammar or comprehension. Sociolinguistic research is generally conducted with adult participants, and does not surround student experiences, especially not student experiences in language education. With specific reference to Latino/Hispanic students, judgements can be attributed to a multitude of biases, with racial and linguistic prejudices being the most dominant factors. This study ($n = 105$) surveyed former and current Spanish students. Questions involved student perceptions of teachers' treatment of students, corrections based on accent/dialect, and support for teachers' implicit bias training. There was a significant difference in student treatment ($p = 0.04$) and accent correction ($p < 0.01$) of Hispanic/Latino students compared to White students. Furthermore, it was found that 68% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that teachers would benefit from implicit bias training, meaning that in general, students believe that teacher behaviors and thus student experiences could be positively impacted with targeted training or related topics. More research is necessary, especially in adolescents, to understand how to identify and address how Spanish Language teacher bias is impacting language acquisition experiences and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

There is a common preconceived notion that biases only exist among particular communities outside of an oppressed group, and that they are not widespread. However, biases exist in every group, including those marginalized by others. Believing that biases don't exist among marginalized groups only worsens the issue. Despite this misconception, nearly half (48%) of Hispanic adults say they have often or sometimes heard a Hispanic friend or family member make comments or jokes about *other Hispanic* people that might be considered racist or racially insensitive (Noe-Bustamante, 2021). Hence, when in a survey, 57% of Latino participants said skin color shapes their daily life experiences a lot or some, with about half saying discrimination based on race or skin color is a “very big problem” in the U.S. today (Noe-Bustamante, 2021), they may be experiencing judgement from both people inside and outside of

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their social group. It is also important to understand that this is a cross-cultural phenomenon, and that many world cultures still have hierarchical views within their own social group. Judgment can come from outside or inside any given marginalized group, so it is important to understand these blind spots of prejudice; we assume that biases don't exist in certain groups (Poret, 2025). For example, groups such as teachers are often overlooked as a possible source of bias, due to teachers being viewed as valuable, fundamental and inherently moral (Fauziah et al., 2021). In fact, they are equally likely to exhibit biases. This phenomenon is especially relevant to language teachers, in which dialectal differences can challenge teachers' implicit biases as to which dialect is 'correct'. These biases have a particularly strong application in education due to the strong correlation between perceived ethnic bias and academic success (Peterson et al., 2016).

To understand the state of practice around teacher bias in Spanish language education, and its specific impact on students from Latin American descent, a literature review was conducted. The literature review revealed three main gaps: many studies of bias have operated under the assumption that the bias is coming from outside of the cultural group, biases in language education are understudied, and research rarely surveys adolescents, who are often subject to the misconception that implicit and explicit biases aren't developed in younger people (Meltzoff et al., 2024).

The literature review was followed by a survey in which participants completed a demographics questionnaire before completing the survey regarding students' perceptions of teachers' biases. This research aimed to fill these gaps in knowledge and explore the prevalence of sociolinguistic and raciolinguistic biases to Spanish language teaching with specific focus on student-teacher correspondence. The results could help further the scientific understanding of socio/raciolinguistics in an academic context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unconscious Bias

Unconscious biases are mental shortcuts that are a part of our brain's normal function, and can serve as a useful way of processing information quickly, but can also lead to prejudice and skewed judgement. For example, when you see someone with glasses you may assume they are smart, when realistically glasses are a far more reliable indicator of poor eyesight than of intelligence. This example is far more innocuous, however, as often, implicit biases involve a person seeing a person of a different social group and having their brain jump to the idea of a stereotype of that social group.

Overcoming Biases

To understand biases it is important to understand that every person has bias in some regard or another. While it is possible, however, to obtain a score of zero on an IAT (implicit association task), indicating that your underlying associations lean to neither side of the tested variables (ex. For a Gender IAT, favoring men vs. women) per Greenwald et al., 1998, it is so statistically improbable for a person to receive this result in all areas, that being entirely "unbiased" is effectively impossible. So, it is important

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that people can acknowledge that people must have some type of unconscious bias to some degree or another. To understand and possibly ‘counter-act’ biases, one must understand that when a person is in an autocratic mindset (one in which we are viewing ourselves as hierarchically above another person) as opposed to a democratic mindset, they are making decisions and forming conclusions despite having gaps in knowledge or experience (Emberton, 2021). It is far easier to notice biases in others than it is to notice one’s own bias. It is generally believed that the awareness of one’s own biases is the first and most important step to lessening the impact it has on our behavior.

Intercultural and Extracultural Biases

Affinity bias is a very common type of implicit cognitive bias in which a person favors a person or thing that they perceive to be similar to themselves. This is largely understood as one of the most common biases, and most easily understood as it is human nature to prefer an option that you relate to most. For example, someone born in northern France preferring the sound of Parisian French to Québécois French. It is simply more familiar to them, which impacts their preference. However, in several sociolinguistic studies, the opposite has occurred. In Carter et al. (2018) and Callesano et al. (2019), participants rated Peninsular Spanish (the dialect from Spain) higher than Cuban Spanish in terms of competence traits (intelligence, self-confidence, trustworthiness). Despite both studies done in Miami-Dade County, where there is a high population percentage of Cuban immigrants, findings showed consistently more negative ratings of the Cuban dialect. Essentially, while it is often assumed that affinity bias is the most predominant factor, intercultural biases have a major impact in research. For example, in the Latinx community in particular, the concept of a “no sabo” (a person of Hispanic/Latino origin who doesn’t speak Spanish, or speaks it imperfectly) affects the cultural identity of many American Latino people. The concept of a “no sabo” itself is an example of an intercultural bias, and can often be seen in heritage language learners who were taught Spanish in the classroom, but not at home, and thus don’t speak the language like a native speaker (Ayala-Saracay, 2025).

Additionally, intercultural biases (in this case it applies to having a community within a classroom) may affect the classroom simply because hiring more diverse teachers won’t undo the existence of biases in students. This begs the question, would students favor a teacher whose dialect represents their culture, or not? Past research suggests that they might not. While diversity is very important in education and students should have a diverse group of teachers, it should still be understood that any teacher, regardless of their ethnicity can teach biases and Latino teachers shouldn’t be treated as the sole catalyst for eliminating prejudices in the classroom.

DIALECTICAL BIAS IN SPANISH EDUCATION

Biases in Education

Despite the generally prevailing belief that teachers are morally superior, they are equally capable in comparison to the rest of society to absorb, or have previously learned, biases. Because of the crucial role that teachers can play in the development of student bias and understanding of bias, it is important for

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teachers to understand the effect they have on their students, aside from solely educating them. In a study comparing perceived teachers’ bias among enrolled and dropout students, students who dropped out perceived ethnic bias from teachers much more than enrolled students (Wayman, 2002). Furthermore, recent research has identified that teachers asked more simple questions – ones that did not challenge the students – and called on students from marginalized groups less frequently (Turetsky et al., 2021). In a 2014 ethnographic study, the researcher found that teachers, in addition to non-Latino students, contributed to the oppression and alienation of Latino students (Carter, 2014).

Spanish Dialect Perceptions

The Spanish language consists of many different dialects spoken across the world; however, Romance language research often exclusively includes dialects from Spain. In linguistic research, the Romance language family is consistently rated positively in terms of warmth traits, but the dialect of Spanish included in such studies is most often from Spain (Kogan et al., 2021; Reiterer et al., 2020). This means that Latin American and Central American Spanish dialects are underrepresented in research, despite making up the majority of the Spanish speaking population. Research in Miami-Dade county has revealed that in studies of different Spanish dialects, people have a tendency to prefer the sound of the most European-sounding dialect (Carter et al., 2018, Callesano et al, 2019). When comparing Peninsular Spanish (the dialect from Spain, most recognizable by its use of a voiceless “th” θ sound for letters c, z, and s) to Columbian and Cuban Spanish, participants preferred the sound of the Peninsular speaker. Furthermore, participants even had a more positive perception of the speaker in terms of competence traits (intelligence, trustworthiness, likeliness to hold a white-collar job).

Spanish varies heavily based on geographical location, age, culture and numerous other factors, and it is important to understand how easily recognizable these differences are, and how those differences can be understood and used by Spanish speakers to ostracize certain other Spanish speakers (Leeman, 2012). For American English speakers, the use of words like “boot”, “trainers” or “lift” instead of “trunk”, “sneakers/tennis shoes/running shoes”, or “elevator”, respectively, would be an immediate indicator that the speaker is British, and the use of one of these words in any given single instant cues the brain to perceive someone as a linguistic ‘other’. This, paired with the broad /a:/ (as in “father”) as opposed to the short /æ/ (as in “cat”) in words like “grass” or “bath” (to follow the example of British English vs. American English) allows one to instantly understand your differences as the most immediate, recognizable impression. The same exists in Spanish: using the form “vosotros” instead of “ustedes” (both mean “you” plural), or vocabulary differences like using “móvil” or “coche” instead of “celular” or “carro/auto” would instantly hint that a speaker is from Spain. Furthermore, the Spanish pronunciation of c, z, and s with a “th” sound is one of the most noticeable phonetic differences from the Latin American pronunciation of c, z, and s with an “s” sound. Based on these established differences, though “¿Queréis una pajita?” and “¿Quiieren una bombilla?” both mean the same thing (“Would you (plural) want a straw?”), their distinct differences are aligned with different countries and regions. However, while it is incredibly rare to be corrected to use British English in the United States, it is not uncommon at all to be corrected to use Peninsular Spanish in the United States.

Biases in Spanish Ed.

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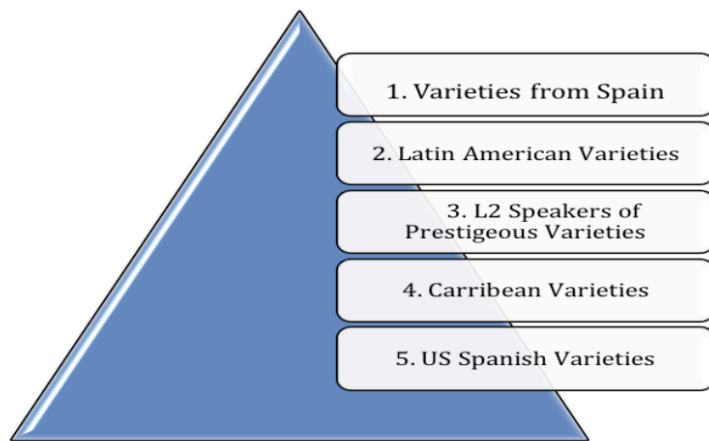


Figure 1: Dialect Hierarchy Chart (McEvoy 2017)

One aspect of the variation in the treatment of Hispanic/Latino students from the treatment of Non-Hispanic/Latino students lies in a phenomenon known as elite bilingualism — bilinguals who learn a L2 by choice (often through education, travel or professional opportunities) are perceived more favorably than those who are bilingual by necessity. Furthermore, for white bilinguals it will be seen as impressive that they speak Spanish, and inherent that they speak good English whereas for U.S Latino bilinguals it will be seen as inherent that they do not speak good English and/or, as Americans, assumed that they don't speak good/'proper' Spanish. This results in U.S. heritage Spanish speakers often being viewed as lacking proficiency in both English and Spanish, referred to as languagelessness (Rosa, 2019). Being Latino and being *hispanohablante* (Spanish-speaking) are not inextricably linked, despite the common assumption that Latino people must be *hispanohablante* and *hispanohablantes* must be Latino.

In the classroom, being a U.S Latino is somewhat of a double-edged sword in that to Non-Hispanic people, they may be perceived as an “other” (linguistically and racially) while to non-American Hispanic/Latino people they may be perceived as too distant from *latinidad* (linguistically and culturally) (McEvoy, 2017). U.S. Spanish speakers may struggle within a linguistic academic context due to U.S. Spanish varieties being seen as inferior to others (see figure 1). There are two simultaneous struggles: being an American Latino Spanish-speaker compared to Non-latino spanish speakers and being subject to greater expectations in terms of language acquisition and familiarity, and also being an American Latino-Spanish Speaker compared to a non-American Spanish speaker and being seen as automatically less skilled and less fluent (McEvoy, 2017). So, in a Spanish classroom, teachers may adopt two simultaneous mindsets: that U.S. Spanish varieties (ex. Nuyoriqueño/Loisaida Spanish) are inferior to Latin American Spanish and Peninsular Spanish, but also that as Latino students they *should* speak Spanish. These biases affect teacher treatment of students in general, and particularly with reference to accent and dialect-based correction.

METHODS

Instrument Design

Age, gender, ethnicity, country/countries reflecting participants' cultural identity, parents' country/countries of origin, and participants' Spanish education history were asked to get the best understanding of their cultural identity within the context of their linguistic education.

Modified Student Perception of Teacher Bias Survey (Wayman, 2002)

This survey was edited and used with permission from Wayman 2002. The original was modified to refer to Latino and Hispanic students instead of specifically Mexican students, which was relevant to the population studied by Wayman. The survey asked how much students perceived teachers to like students who were White as compared to students who were Hispanic/Latino at different times in their education. When answering the questions, the students were asked to think of their experience in Spanish classes in general, not their current teacher in particular. When considering how much teachers "liked" students, they were asked to consider: being selected more often to volunteer, allowed to leave the room to use the bathroom/get a drink, had choice of assignments, preferential seating/grouping, received higher grades, received compliments/encouragement, spoken with in a kinder tone of voice, higher expectations.

IRB

This study received high school IRB approval before any data was collected. All participants were minors and therefore required both parental consent and participant assent. This study is a cross-sectional observational study. Participants were recruited from Sleepy Hollow High School by advertising in Spanish language classes. The student researcher presented a short explanation of the research in each Spanish class. Participants reached out to the student researcher expressing an interest to participate and shared their email addresses. The student researcher emailed the necessary Google Form which included the informed consent, demographics survey and Modified Student Perception of Teacher Bias survey (Wayman, 2002) to the participants. Collected data was stored on Google Sheets and uploaded to Data Classroom for analysis. Participants' information was deidentified.

Data Analysis

Data was organized in Google Sheets and analyzed in Data Classroom. A Kruskal Wallis Test was used for the analysis of implicit bias support by racial demographic group, accent/dialect correction and Spanish education level, and for perception of groups teachers liked by racial demographic group by time period, and a chi-square Test of Independence was used for analyzing correlation between being corrected based on accent by student group.

RESULTS

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Participant Demographics

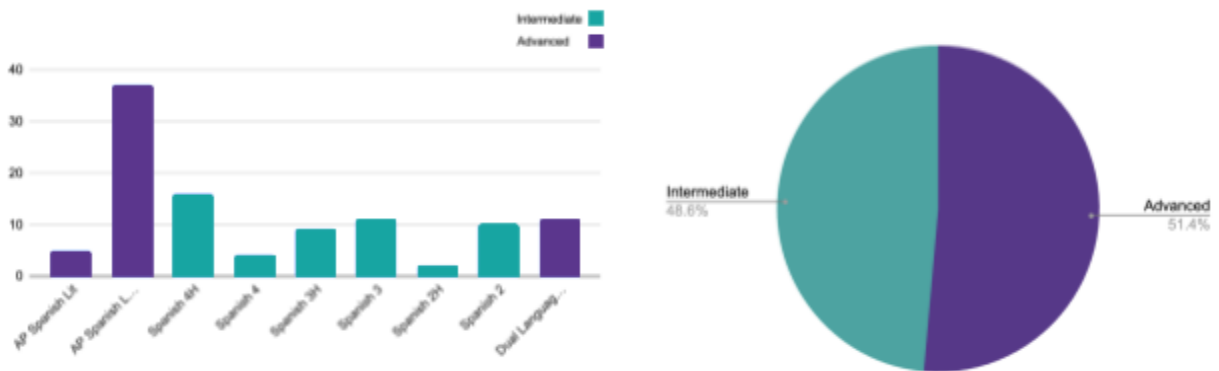


Figure 2 & 3: Spanish education level based on class history and category.

This evaluation of student perceptions of teacher biases focused on the experience of students in several different areas: correction based on accent/dialect, student support for teacher implicit bias training, and teachers’ liking of students.

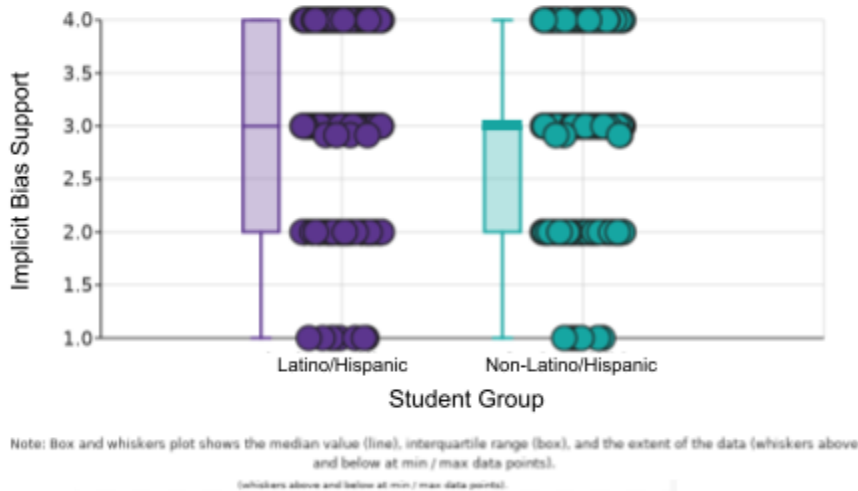


Figure 4: Graph of support for teacher implicit bias training based on agreement by student racial group.

Participants (n = 105) were all students from the same diverse community with ~45% selecting Hispanic/Latino among the categories that best describe them (see table 1, compared to figure 1). Participants were all former or current Spanish students, having taken classes ranging from a K-6 Dual Language program to AP Spanish Literature. The participants were categorized by the level of their Spanish education, so students who grew up in the Dual Language program and/or took Advanced

Placement level classes were considered advanced, whereas students who took standard or honors level courses were considered intermediate (see figure 2 and figure 3).

Implicit Bias Training Support

Students were provided with an explanation of implicit bias and of implicit bias training before answering the question regarding implicit bias training support. The following was the explanation of what skills implicit bias training aims to teach a person: replace stereotypical responses with non-stereotypical responses and reflect on why the stereotypical response occurred, imagine counterstereotypic individuals, obtain specific individual information about members of groups to prevent stereotypic inferences, etc. After reading the explanation, students were surveyed about how much they agree or disagree with the following statement: “*Teachers would benefit from completing implicit bias training.*”

There was a statistically significant difference between the responses from Hispanic/Latino participants and Non-Latino/Hispanic participants ($p = 0.02$) in that Hispanic/Latino participants agreed significantly more with the statement than Non-Latino/Hispanic participants (see figure 4). One possible explanation for this finding is that among a marginalized social group, in this case Latino/Hispanic students, there is more of a perceived need for teachers to complete implicit bias training. Non-Latino/Hispanic students, by not experiencing the same treatment, did not show support of implicit bias training for teachers to the same degree.

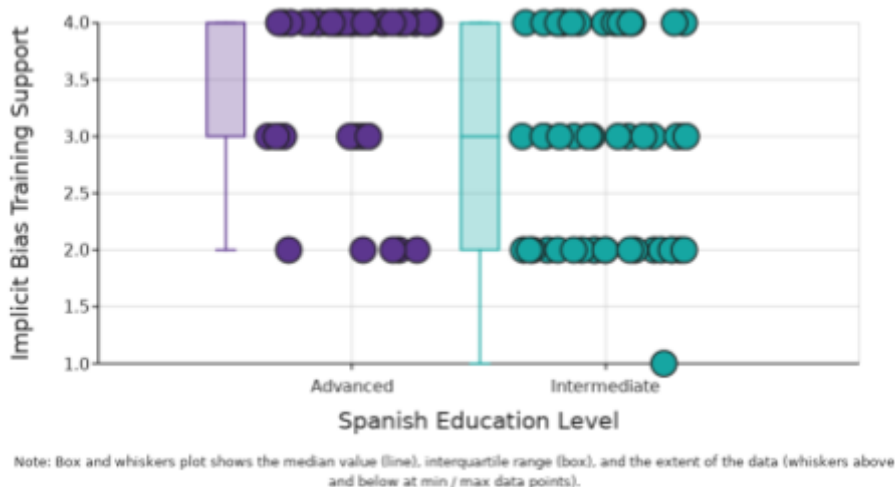


Figure 5: Graph of support for teacher implicit bias training based on agreement by Spanish education level.

Advanced students expressed significantly more support than intermediate students did ($p < 0.01$) for implicit bias training (see figure 5). Advanced students were a combination of the students who had spent the most time in Spanish education, whereas Intermediate level students had only taken Spanish through their middle school careers. Considering the fact that the education level is a direct indicator for experience in Spanish education and experience with Spanish teachers, this shows that the more time

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spent in Spanish classes, the more students felt that teachers could benefit from skill offered by implicit bias training.

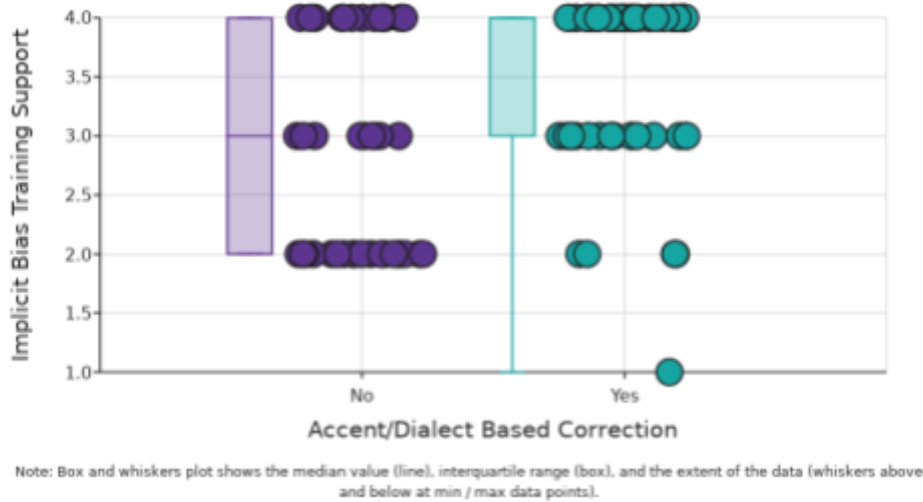


Figure 6: Graph of support for teacher implicit bias training by accent correction.

When analysing the relationship between accent/dialect based correction and implicit bias support, there was significantly ($p < 0.01$) more support for implicit bias training for teachers from students who had been corrected (see figure 6). This finding is consistent with the mentee’s hypothesis, that students who felt they were corrected for their accent and not because of a technical mistake, may perceive more of a need for training than students who hadn’t.

Teachers’ Treatment of Students

When participants were asked how much teachers "liked" White and Latino/Hispanic students, they were asked to consider: being selected more often to volunteer, allowed to leave the room to use the bathroom/get a drink, had choice of assignments, etc. Previous research showed that as time progressed in students’ education, they perceived more of a difference in treatment between White students and Hispanic/Latino students (Wayman, 2002).

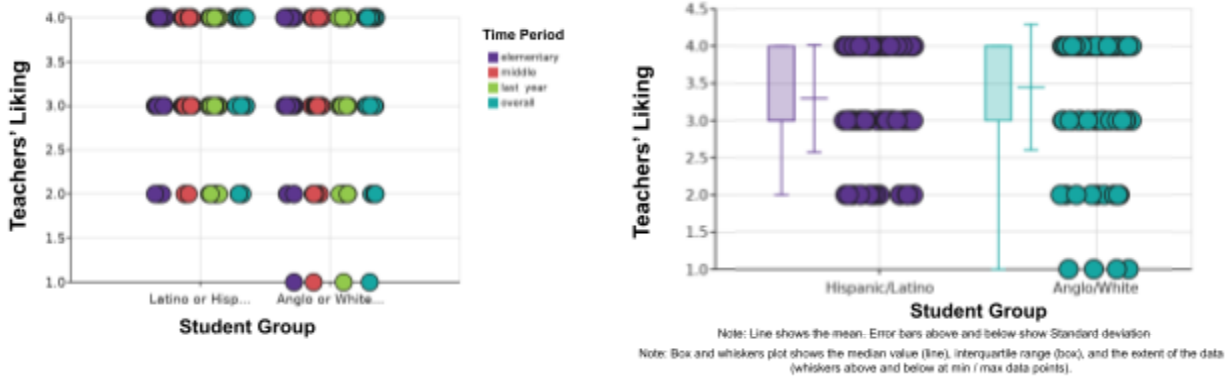


Figure 7 & 8: Graph of teachers’ liking of students based on racial group overall and across time.

Time period (referring to the students’ experience in elementary school, middle school, their last year of school and their overall experience), the variable introduced in Wayman (2002), had no statistically significant effect on student participants’ perceptions of how much teachers liked the different student groups in this study (see figure 7). When the time variable was removed, the data showed a significant difference between the perceived treatment of students ($p = 0.04$), with students reporting that teachers treated Anglo/White students better than Hispanic/Latino students (see figure 8). There could be several possible reasons for the contradictory answers, one being that students didn’t remember their earlier years in education as well and simply wrote the same answer for each time period. Regardless of the difference between results across demographic groups and across time, 68% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that teachers would benefit from implicit bias training, meaning that in general, students do perceive there to be a need for implicit bias training.

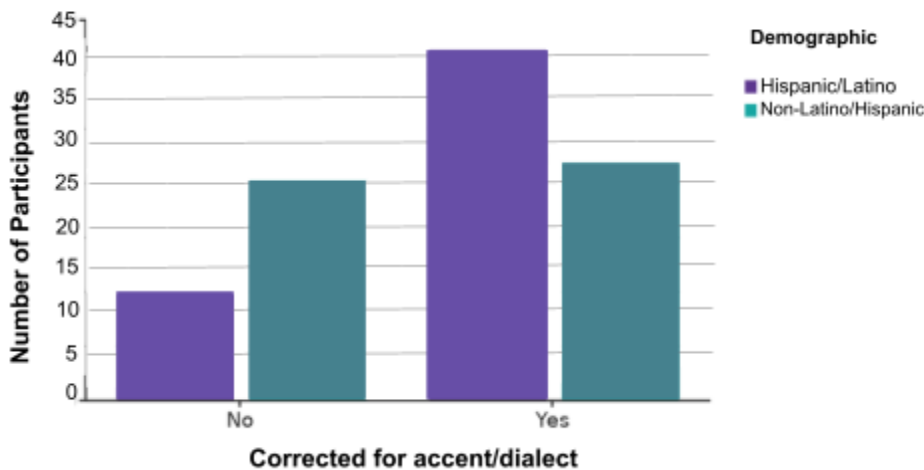


Figure 9: Graph of student accent/dialect based correction by racial group.

When surveying Latino/Hispanic and Non-Latino/Hispanic students, significantly more Latino/Hispanic students reported being corrected for their accent than Non-Latino/Hispanic students ($p < 0.01$) (see figure 9). In the process of coding short answer responses into their proper categories, some written responses (e.g. “not by a teacher” → No) were categorized to No or Yes for the sake of accuracy during data analysis. This result supports the hypothesis that Latino/Spanish students would report being corrected more than Non-Latino/Hispanic students, as often in educational settings elite bilingualism – in this setting the idea that more positive traits are attributed to Non-Latino/Hispanic Spanish speakers than heritage language speakers – plays a major role in the treatment of students, or at least the students’ perceptions of their treatment.

CONCLUSION

The findings from both the literature review and the survey indicate that students are very aware of biases in the classroom and the implications of teachers’ treatment of them. Furthermore, adolescents can clearly understand the existence of prejudices and stereotypes prevalent in the media and the world around them, and they can exhibit their own biases (Poret, 2025). Overall, there is further research that needs to be done to bridge the gap in knowledge between these biases, their applications across society, and their specific application in education. Perceptions of bias among students have not been well studied with relation to interdialectal biases. How perceptions of bias manifest in diverse neighborhoods among adolescents is not yet clear, and understanding the experiences of heritage language learners in education is an important part of understanding how these biases affect people. Languages, Spanish in particular, can have a much stronger societal connection to race and ethnicity than is often assumed, so it is important to research linguistic biases as they are a part of systemic racism. Teachers may innocuously try to teach Peninsular Spanish as the correct dialect due to their own education (ex. Teachers who traveled abroad in Spain or studied old Spanish literature, two applications where Peninsular Spanish would be more valuable), yet are unintentionally enforcing a eurocentric perspective and contributing to systemic racism on a lower level. The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions of implicit biases and perceptions of student treatment in teachers related to language by surveying students from a diverse neighborhood. Despite the general discernment of teachers as morally superior, unprejudiced individuals, teachers can still have their own biases and be seen by students as biased individuals and groups. Students both exhibit their own biases, and perceive there to be biases in their teachers, showing that, despite a common misconception that biases develop later in life and can only be seen in adults, adolescents are fully conscious of the existence of bias and biases exist in people regardless of age. The effect of external values on the self-esteem, self-concept and cultural views of children has been studied since the 1940s Doll Experiment used in *Brown v. Board of Ed. Clark & Clark, 1940*), but the impact of teachers’ treatment of students on their cultural views and self-concept has not been studied to the same extent. This research showed that students perceive a need for implicit bias training for teachers, and that there is a demonstrated reason for this perception because of teachers’ disproportionate correction of Latino/Hispanic students. Student support for teacher implicit bias training was used as an indicator for perceptions of teacher bias. Though measured implicit bias in teachers is important, the student experience and belief that teachers would benefit from bias training was seen as the most reliable indicator of an issue in an educational context.

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LIMITATIONS

This study was originally intended to measure both students' perceptions of teacher implicit bias, and measure teacher implicit bias using an IAT. Unfortunately, due to difficulties with scheduling and grants this study had to be done independently, changing the extent to which the questions were applicable to the situation. Sample size was a limiting factor as well.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The research following this study, which is currently in progress, will be using the IAT (implicit association test) to evaluate implicit biases in both a general population and in teachers. This test (Greenwald et al., 1998) is one of the most studied and well documented research methods of analysing implicit bias, and has great potential to be used for the analysis of raciolinguistics, particularly in culturally and linguistically diverse communities where this pattern of intercultural bias has been seen.

APPLICATION AND IMPORTANCE

Implicit bias is the “gut reaction” that people have based on attitudes and beliefs formed in an unconscious mental process. One example, per the National Education Association, is that if you think peanut butter, you think jelly. Your mind may link two things or concepts together in a sort of shortcut; you go from Point A to Point B without ever stopping to evaluate why. Although the given examples ring of much less pressing issues, these biases can be the root of violence and discrimination. Especially in adolescents, more research is necessary to get to the root of the issue. Are these issues a matter of cultural osmosis or do teachers play a major role in student bias development?

One of the most fundamental concepts of psychology is nature vs. nurture. While humans are naturally afraid of the unknown and unfamiliar, we are not predisposed in any way to be biased against specific social groups, that is a matter of upbringing and exposure. We only exhibit the prejudices that we observe in daily life or what is directly taught to us. Thus, implicit bias is an inherently educational issue. This study's findings would suggest that teachers play a big role in students' understanding of bias and its existence in their age demographic. Ergo, it is imperative that teachers make a concerted effort to treat all of their students equally, and address whatever may be holding them back from doing so.

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