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Psychology and the educational psychologist in private schools: An approach from social representations

A Psicologia e o psicólogo educacional em escolas privadas: uma aproximação a partir das representações sociais

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Abstract

Objective

This study aimed to describe the social representations constructed by the educational community about educational psychology and the educational psychologist in the school context.

Method

We used a qualitative methodology with a hermeneutical approach, with a total of 34 participants (principals, teachers, psychologists, students, and parents) from eight private schools in the city of Ibagué, Colombia. Data were collected through focus groups and semistructured interviews.

Results

Thematic network analysis was used to analyze the data, resulting in three global themes that illustrate the main social representations. The results indicate that differentiation from clinical psychology and school counseling are points of reference for identifying educational psychology as an applied discipline and understanding the role of the educational psychologist in schools.

Conclusion

It is argued that representations and practices related to traditional roles are being transformed towards institutional and contextual practices.

Keywords: Education; Educators; Role of the psychologist; School psychology.

Resumo

Objetivo

Este estudo teve como objetivo descrever as representações sociais construídas pela comunidade educacional sobre a psicologia educacional e o psicólogo educacional no contexto escolar.

Método

Utilizamos uma metodologia qualitativa com abordagem hermenêutica, com a participação de 34 pessoas (reitores, professores, psicólogos, estudantes e pais) de oito escolas privadas na cidade de Ibagué, Colômbia. Os dados foram coletados por meio de grupos focais e entrevistas semiestruturadas.

Resultados

A técnica de redes temáticas para a análise dos dados foi utilizada, resultando em três temas globais que ilustram as principais representações sociais. Os resultados indicam que a diferenciação entre a psicologia clínica e a orientação escolar são referências para identificar a psicologia educacional como disciplina aplicada e o papel do psicólogo educacional na escola.

Conclusão

Argumentamos que as representações e práticas relacionadas a papéis tradicionais estão sendo transformados em práticas institucionais e contextuais.

Palavras-chave: Educação; Educadores; Papel do psicólogo; Psicologia escolar.

Educational psychology is one of the professional fields with a relatively early origin in scientific psychology. Although there are many precedents, its origin is often traced back to 1892 with the founding of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the formal establishment of its fifteenth division, named educational psychology (Beltrán & Sánchez, 2011).

However, despite its early appearance and the belief that education can be improved through the application of psychological knowledge (Coll, 2017; Rodríguez, 2018), its identity has been questioned, primarily due to the existence of a tradition that reduces its purpose to the extrapolation of psychological knowledge into educational practice. As a result, ambiguity in its object of study, lack of theoretical and practical contributions (Coll, 2001), a lack of evidence-based interventions (Gomes-Koban et al., 2019), and confusion in defining professional roles (Carrasco et al., 2019) have been pointed out.

The idea of assuming educational psychology, recognizing its double epistemological status as a psychological discipline and as a profession that is practiced in different contexts and educational practices, has gained strength (Berliner, 2003; Rodríguez, 2018). Educational psychology is described as a bridge discipline between psychology and education, generating knowledge about its object of study and drawing upon the knowledge of both psychology and education. Additionally, it is an applied discipline that develops intervention procedures and practices related to its object of study (Coll, 2001, 2017).

Sánchez and Martin (2017, p. 6) when referring to the object of educational psychology state that it “studies the changes that occur in our mind, thanks to the help provided by other minds” and these changes occur in educational contexts, whether in schools or non-school settings such as family or business. The traditional definition of the object of study, as proposed by Coll (2001), also emphasizes the change processes induced by educational situations, although it should be clarified that the latter refers to behavior rather than the mind. In general, there is agreement that the object of study encompasses changes in psychological processes that arise from participation in educational processes and practices (Hernández, 2007).

The school context continues to be the one with the greatest recognition in the professional dimension of educational psychologists and it is also where most studies are conducted (Silva et al., 2019). As Hernández (2007) states, in the school context, the field of action is the formal institution of the school, and the psychologist directs their comprehensive action and intervention towards the educational community as a whole, focusing on the interaction between them and the construction of disciplinary content such as sex education, citizenship education, or vocational guidance, among others.

The need to rethink the role of the educational psychologist in the school, to specify their professional functions and roles, has been urged by different authors, since there is great heterogeneity in the activities they carry out and there remains some confusion regarding professional identity (Carrasco et al., 2019; Pérez & García-Ros, 2017; Sánchez & Martín, 2017).

Even for the Colombian case, Hernández (2012) has pointed out the need to question the professional role of the psychologist in school and to inquire about what is expected of a professional in educational psychology, about their daily practices, and “what are the demands that other agents in the school – teachers, principals, parents, students – make of these professionals?” (Hernández, 2012, p. 32).

Research on the topic is scarce, and it has been documented that representations of psychologists in all contexts, including the school setting, are linked to the field of health and specifically to clinical psychology. There have even been findings of attributions of health roles in schoolwork or exclusion of the school as a professional domain (Aisenson et al., 2005; Covarrubias, 2009; Lopes & Silva, 2018; Orellana et al., 2008; Petroni & Souza, 2017; Salas, 2013).

In line with what was previously stated and framed within the theory of social representations (Abric, 2004; Moscovici, 2011), this research aims to describe the social representations built by the educational community of teachers, psychologists, principals, students, and parents about educational psychology and the educational psychologist in the school context of eight private schools in the city of Ibagué.

The concept of social representations is considered useful for studying the phenomenon, as it accounts not only for social knowledge about the subject but also for the transformations of that knowledge and its orientation towards people’s expectations and behavior.

Method

The study was conducted in the city of Ibagué, which is the capital of the Tolima department in Colombia, located 192 kilometers away from Bogotá. Eight private schools in this city were selected for the study, all of which had an educational psychologist employed. Institutions that only had the position of a school counselor, not performed by a psychologist, were excluded from the study.

A qualitative research with a hermeneutic and phenomenological approach was conducted, aiming to describe the meaning of the experiences lived by various individuals regarding a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). The data collection strategy employed focus group discussions with psychologists, teachers, parents, and students, while semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted individually with the principals.

Participants

In order to explore different perspectives that could account for the complexity of the observed phenomenon, a maximum variation sampling technique was employed. This approach included diverse members of the educational community from different institutions, who were considered key informants and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study, ensuring data triangulation for increased reliability (Creswell, 2017).

A total of 34 individuals participated in the study, including 11 women and 23 men from eight private schools in Ibagué. Four focus groups were conducted: one with psychologists, one with teachers, one with parents, and one with eighth, ninth, and tenth-grade students. Each group consisted of one representative from each school, resulting in eight participants per group, totaling 32 participants. Additionally, two individual interviews were conducted with school principals who agreed to be part of the study.

Procedures

Invitations were extended to the institutions and participants, who willingly agreed to take part in the study and signed informed consent forms. In the case of students, informed consent was signed by their parents or legal guardians, considering that they were minors. Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Psychology Faculty of the *Universidad de La Sabana* under protocol number 153. Prior to conducting the focus groups and semi-structured interviews, guide protocols were designed to facilitate dialogue, focusing on three main inquiry topics: the concept of educational psychology, the role of educational psychologists, and the contributions of educational psychology to education. A pilot focus group and semi-structured interview were conducted to test the protocols, which allowed for modifications and adjustments to be made before conducting the formal group and individual sessions. These sessions were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis.

The information obtained was analyzed using the thematic network approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Initially, a line-by-line reading of the transcribed data was performed, applying initial coding to identify basic themes derived from the narratives. The basic themes were then compared within significance groups, leading to the identification of organizing themes. These organizing themes were further contrasted and grouped together to form global themes that describe the participants' representations. The analysis was conducted first for each group of participants and then with all the interviewed groups, allowing for the identification of shared representations.

Results

Three global themes were identified, namely: Educational Psychology, Roles of the Educational Psychologist, and Redefinition of the Role of the Educational Psychologist. Each of these global themes reflects the figurative core of the social representation circulating among the study participants.

Figurative Core No. 1: Representation of Educational Psychology

The representation of what Educational Psychology is constructed based on three organizing themes: identification of an object of study, its applied nature, and differentiation from other professional fields, specifically clinical psychology and school counseling. Table 1 shows the configuration of this thematic network and some related narratives.

The following are descriptions of the three organizing themes within the first figurative core.

Study Object

Psychologists, teachers, and principals agreed in identifying behavior as the specific object of study in Educational Psychology. Psychologists and teachers also consider that learning processes are part of the study object of Educational Psychology, while parents and students fail to recognize this dimension of the discipline. Thus, Educational Psychology addresses questions about behavior and learning primarily in students (although teachers also include their own behavior as part of the object of study) and how these processes influence academic performance and school adjustment from a perspective of individual differences.

Applied Nature

All participating groups acknowledge that Educational Psychology has a broad range of applications in the educational field and contributes to the improvement of educational practices. Two basic themes are included, one identified in the narratives of psychologists, teachers, and principals, indicating that Educational Psychology encompasses educational processes from a contextual perspective, integrating all educational agents and the contexts closest to the school, particularly the family. The second basic theme is identified in the narratives of all participants and implies the contribution of Educational Psychology to the improvement of overall educational quality and institutional or classroom processes. Students, on their part, recognize this dimension in terms of assistance with their personal processes.

Differentiation from other Professional Fields

Educational Psychology is recognized based on the differentiation from Clinical Psychology and School Counseling. Psychologists, teachers, and parents assume that Clinical Psychology addresses pathologies or issues that require a specific diagnosis, while Educational Psychology focuses on educational and developmental processes. This differentiation highlights the limits and scope of the profession of an educational psychologist, excluding the treatment of mental health problems.

Regarding the differentiation from School Counseling, this appears in the narratives of principals, teachers, and parents, who refer to the broader scope of action of a psychologist compared to a counselor, as well as the perceived higher level of preparation and professional training. Parents recognize that counselors are professionals distinct from psychologists, and that the position of a counselor is characteristic of public education, while psychologists are part of private educational institutions. Table 1 shows the configuration of this figurative core.

Table 1
Thematic Network Global Theme 1, "Representation of Educational Psychology"

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Narratives
Study object	Human Behavior	"The psychologist is responsible for understanding everything about behavior and is the one who can guide all these processes" (Interview with Principal 1) "Human behavior in general, including that of teachers" (Focus Group with Teachers)
	Learning processes	"I would think that, umm, in how learning occurs, like how each child learns because every child is different, so one doesn't learn like the other" (Focus Group with Teachers) "Learning styles...seeking learning strategies in different classrooms within the institution" (Focus Group with Psychologists)
Applied nature	Understanding Educational Processes	"Through psychologists focused on education, we are reaching a better understanding of the classroom environment for both students and teachers" (Interview with Principal 2) "Such as the educational institution itself, because it is also important to consider the surroundings of the educational institution, to look at the situation, the context in which the school is located, and how this context can affect or reinforce behaviors in students" (Focus Group with Psychologists)
	Improving Educational Processes	"As a tool that aims to improve the quality of education, that would be it for me" (Interview with Principal 1) "I think they are already generating a positive impact in education, honestly, with their proposals regarding learning, when they show us that children learn when they are happy and when they focus on emotions. I believe that education is already changing because of that. That's why if I were to remove my child from this school, I would enroll them in another school that has a psychologist" (Focus Group with Parents)
Differentiation from other Professional Fields	Differentiation from Clinical Psychology	"On the other hand, a psychologist working in a hospital is more focused on mentally ill individuals" (Focus Group with Teachers) "I think a clinical psychologist, since they work in a hospital, should primarily deal with individuals who already have a diagnosis or are about to be diagnosed. They should be attentive because it could be depression or something similar. On the other hand, an educational psychologist deals with academic, disciplinary, and family matters" (Focus Group with Parents)
	Differentiation from Educational Guidance	"Nowadays, I believe that the appointment of an educational counselor within institutions is not being handled properly because usually, that role is assigned to a teacher...in my opinion, that role should be performed by a psychologist, and they are the ones who can do it best" (Interview with Principal 2) "The psychologist can diagnose, and the diagnosis can lead to other interventions such as psychiatry, for example, or a medical psychologist, a clinical psychologist, which is different from an educational counselor, an educational counselor is an advisor" (Focus Group with Teachers)

Figurative Core No. 2: Roles of the Educational Psychologist

Despite the significant variety of roles attributed to school psychologists, three organizing themes were identified that encompass the representations of the interviewed groups. These themes are: support for educational agents, management of problematic cases; and inclusive education. The three organizing themes are described below.

Support for Educational Agents

This organizing theme constitutes one of the strongest representations regarding the role played by psychologists in the school context and refers to the support that psychologists provide to students, teachers, and parents. Three basic themes were identified: Addressing student-related issues, supporting teachers and coordinators, and assisting parents. The first basic theme refers to the recognition that psychologists undertake various professional actions aimed at promoting students' academic success, fostering their development, and addressing individual or social issues. All interviewed groups share this idea, although principals tend to prioritize addressing problematic behaviors. In the second basic theme, all participants, except for students, acknowledge that psychologists provide support to teachers and coordinators to improve academic and behavioral aspects within the classroom, such as promoting a positive classroom climate and fostering school coexistence. Regarding support for parents, it is recognized that psychologists work with parents on different fronts, including family education, parental practices, handling situations related to child development, and integrating with the school's educational processes.

Problem Case Management

It consists in the fact that the psychologist plays an important role in solving specific cases that are considered problematic for different educational agents. For principals, parents, and students, these cases are mainly related to behavioral or interpersonal issues among students. However, for psychologists and teachers, the issues can be diverse and include aspects related to academic adjustment, improvement of educational processes, or even problems related to the psychosocial adjustment of students. The psychologist's contribution lies in contextualizing problematic situations, whether behavioral or academic, and involving different agents to guide their resolution. It is also important to note that, from the perspective of principals, the intervention of psychologists in difficult cases is part of a disciplinary process that should be carried out with the collaboration of school administrators.

Inclusive Education

The role of the psychologist in the inclusion of students with disabilities is a clear focus for principals, teachers, and psychologists. Two basic themes were identified: the first one refers to specific support in designing curricular adaptations and reasonable adjustments that are worked on together with teachers, and the second one refers to raising awareness for inclusion and monitoring each student to ensure the success of the process. Table 2 shows the configuration of this thematic network.

Table 2
Thematic Network Global Theme 2, "Role of the Educational Psychologist"

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Narratives
Support for educational agents	Attention to student-related issues	"It has a lot to do with the behavior of children and the needs that children have that neither the teacher nor I can solve" (Focus group with parents) "I know that the psychologist at my school helps the children, the children with more problems go to her and she helps them" (Focus group with students)
	Support for teachers and coordinators	"I think it's a great support for teachers, coordinators, and even more so for parents and children" (Interview with principal 1) "Psychologists are the ones who will intervene in those situations and provide us with strategies, they support us in the strategies we can use in the classroom" (Focus group with teachers)
	Support for parents	"We have also provided support to parents to try to have an excellent family and school environment within the institution" (Interview with principal 2) "They also teach children and parents about public interest topics, such as sexuality, things that sometimes we don't know how to talk about with our children" (Focus group with parents)
Management of problem cases	Management of behavioral problems	"I believe that educational psychology is responsible for solving problems because, for me, misbehavior is a problem" (Focus group with parents) "They always call me on the carpet because I misbehave" (Focus group with students)
	Contextualization of issues	"Today we have to look at the causes of behavior, what has led them to act in this way or to be unable to learn in this way" (Focus group with teachers) "To identify the problem situation from which the problem is emerging, excuse the redundancy, the situation in which the students find themselves, to not isolating them academically but also, as my colleague mentioned, to consider the social aspect and other ones" (Focus group with psychologists)
Inclusive Education	Curricular adaptations	"As for adapting the curriculum, the educational psychologist may not directly intervene in the curriculum, but they guide us on how to do it" (Interview with principal) "They approach it from an inclusive perspective, so the curriculum is adapted to support that" (Focus group with teachers)
	Sensitization and follow-up	"I think it has changed our mindset a bit, why? Because we used to think that when we have a child with Down syndrome, we thought they wouldn't learn, but it turns out that these children can learn to read, write, and do many things, it's just that they develop different skills" (Focus group with teachers) "I think it's not just about planning, I would say it's about taking the teachers and explaining that inclusion is this, how it connects to other aspects, and depending on each situation, it is approached in a certain way" (Focus group with psychologists)

Figurative Core No. 3: Redefinition of the Role of the Educational Psychologist

Although all participant groups consider the role played by educational psychologists to have a positive impact on education, principals, teachers, and psychologists share the representation of the need for educational psychologists to have a greater impact at the educational level. Two organizing themes were identified: professional status and impact of professional action. Table 3 shows the configuration of this thematic network. The two organizing themes are described below.

Professional Status

Psychologists and teachers agree that educational psychology, and therefore the educational psychologist, should have a clearer, more differentiated and prominent position within the educational institution and education in general. Two basic themes were distinguished: Recognition of educational psychology and stereotypes about educational psychology, which restrict and reduce the psychologist's role to more traditional or less impactful tasks.

In fact, psychologists see it as one of their functions to promote the role of the psychologist in education. An interesting fact is that the directives highlight the importance of the psychologist in improving institutional educational processes. However, teachers and psychologists believe that school administrators do not give enough importance to psychology. "I would think that institutions have a long way to go; they should give the importance that educational psychology deserves." (Focus group with Teachers)

Impact of Professional Action

This organizing theme describes the participants' representation of how the actions of educational psychologists could have a greater impact in the educational institution. The basic theme called "conventional expectations of the psychologist's actions" was shared by principals and parents, and it refers to the psychologist increasing the training they provide to different educational agents on topics that fall within their domain but are also of interest to the different populations. These actions are already being carried out in schools, but they believe they can be further enhanced. On the other hand, in the basic theme "the need for an institutional perspective," teachers and psychologists highlight the importance of psychologists engaging in cross-cutting and institutional projects that give an identity to educational psychology. Table 3 describes this global issue.

Discussion

The representations of educational psychology reveal, first of all, that psychologists, teachers, and principals identify the disciplinary and professional dimension that characterizes this field (Coll, 2017), while parents and students only include the professional dimension in their representation. This difference may be due to the fact that the former are education professionals, while the latter only know it from practice. This is consistent with the finding of Agudelo et al. (2011), who reported that school students tend to ignore the disciplinary knowledge of educational psychologists.

The centrality of the representation for all participants revolves around the value of educational psychology in improving school educational processes that involve all educational agents and have an impact on academic processes. This is in line with the reports of other researchers (Coll, 2001; Hernández, 2012; Petroni & Souza, 2017).

Table 3*Thematic Network Global Theme 3, "Redefinition of the Role of the Educational Psychologist"*

Organizing Themes	Basic Themes	Narratives
Professional status	Recognition of Educational Psychology	<p>"That's why I think educational psychology needs to have more importance in the field, more significance... just like we say, systems that allow me to do this and that, or well, management, coordination, the same should be fundamental in the organization, psychology should have an important role in the organization with support, assistance, and everything that is needed... so that everyone recognizes the importance of what is needed within psychology." (Focus group with teachers)</p> <p>"It's about the importance of educational psychology and its significance not only for students but for all school agents because often they don't have a psychologist, and it won't matter to them. It's about implementing strong foundations of educational psychology in schools so that it does matter." (Focus group with psychologists)</p>
	Educational psychologist stereotype	<p>"In an organization, it shouldn't be a small room where everyone who can't adapt to a situation is sent; it should be a central pillar within the organization." (Focus group with teachers)</p> <p>"We need to work a lot on the psychologists' role and the perception people have, for me, of psychologists. What is a psychologist? What is their purpose? If you think about medicine, everyone knows what a cardiologist, a neurologist is for, but for psychology, no. Only people who suffer and are crazy go to psychologists." (Focus group with psychologists)</p>
Impact of professional action	Conventional expectations of the psychologist's role	<p>"Although some actions have been conducted within the institution, I would like more, perhaps more training because we would like to know more about the different situations children experience." (Interview with principal)</p> <p>"Perhaps they could help create a subject focused on self-awareness, strengthening self-esteem, and making decisions about one's life project. That would be great." (Focus group with parents)</p>
	Need for an institutional perspective	<p>"I believe it would be more beneficial to have a theme or something that truly makes a difference in psychology, something that makes us say, 'We really need a psychologist in schools, in educational institutions...' That would be something! A word that allows psychology to innovate in society." (Focus group with teachers)</p> <p>"Preparation and importance are also necessary. Institutionally and at the level of the Department of Education, interdisciplinary projects must be carried out. The psychologist should be very clear about that." (Focus group with psychologists)</p>

However, this representation is also shaped by the differentiation from clinical psychology, which is a strongly rooted professional field in the representation of psychology (Lopes & Silva, 2018; Petroni & Souza, 2017). Thus, the exclusion of mental health problems from practice, the prioritization of promoting learning and development, and the conviction that education can improve through knowledge of educational psychology become what Abric (2004) calls the central core determining the meaning and organization of the representation.

The finding that educational guidance is seen as a function of educational psychologists by teachers, principals, and parents is interesting, considering that the position of school counselor in public education exists in Colombia, although some private schools have also adopted this role. School counselors have diverse professional backgrounds (psychology, social work, speech therapy, educational psychology, among others), which may explain, according to Hernández (2020), the multiplicity of meanings it holds. The observation by Peña (2019) that educational guidance has not yet been consolidated as a line of educational work and lacks theoretical and practical foundations may also explain this representation. Here, the hypothesis is generated that in the participants' representation, the educational psychologist in the school context is a factor of social advantage that benefits students in private schools who can have the support of this professional, while students in public schools do not. Undoubtedly, this is a topic that requires further research.

Regarding the role of the educational psychologist, although the representation that addressing behavioral problems and coexistence as part of the professional practice persists, other

aspects related to the promotion of educational and learning processes, as well as the consultancy and collaborative work between psychologists, teachers, school administrators, families, and students, have been integrated. These show more critical and innovative forms of professional practice that go beyond the clinical model (Bulhões, 2018; De Rose et al., 2016; Petroni & Souza, 2017). This contradicts what Hernández (2012) stated regarding the prevalence of the medical model in psychoeducational practice and may indicate a change in the dominant representation of the clinical approach, which would become a peripheral element in the representation and therefore more susceptible to modification.

The importance attributed to the role of the educational psychologist in inclusive education aligns with the emerging roles described in recent decades (Kranz & Campos, 2020; Nkoma & Hay, 2018) and is consistent with advances in Colombian legislation in this field (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2013, 2017). The representation of the role at this level focuses more on educational and pedagogical support rather than solely on the attention of students with disabilities, thus coinciding with the evidence of the transformation of the traditional role of the psychologist in schools mentioned earlier.

The final overarching theme reflected the participants' need to redefine the professional practices of the educational psychologist in schools, in line with Feitosa and Araujo (2018) and Titon and Zanella (2018), seeking to move away from an individualizing perspective focused on addressing problem situations and towards promoting development within the academic community.

According to Abric (2004), transformations in a representation first occur as changes in peripheral elements, which involve new interpretations, changes in weighting, or even contradictory elements, as seen among principals and parents who have traditional expectations, while psychologists and teachers hold more innovative and critical expectations. This may indicate the need for psychologists to take action to promote changes in managerial practices (Dugnani & Souza, 2016). It can be concluded that we are witnessing a process of changing representations of psychology and the school psychologist that is permeating professional praxis.

Final Considerations

The social representation of psychology and the school psychologist is undergoing a transition process. There is recognition of the applied nature of the discipline and appreciation from various educational agents regarding educational psychology and its capacity to contribute to the improvement of educational quality through distinct professional actions separate from clinical psychology and school counseling.

Representations regarding the roles of school psychologists highlight the importance of working with all members of the educational community, breaking away from isolated work, contextualizing individual issues within the institutional context and in extracurricular social systems, and promoting development as the objective of professional actions. These emerging representations are not homogeneous, and there are divergences among the different participants, which can be explained by their different positions and the cognitive polyphasia characteristic of social representations.

The fact that the need to redefine the role of the educational psychologist in schools was a shared representation among all participants is a strong indicator of the reflection process taking place within the educational community regarding it and the emerging transformation of conceptions and practices.

There are still many tasks to be accomplished in order to transform the professional practices of psychologists in schools. This should include undergraduate and postgraduate training and empowering professionals to negotiate their roles and functions with institutional leaders and even legislators to weaken traditional representations and promote innovative ones.

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Contributors

Both authors participated in the review of the literature and previous research, as well as in the methodological design of the study. D. E. RODRIGUEZ-CARDENAS supervised, reviewed, and edited the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final version of the article.