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Toward Guiding Principles for Engaging Latinx Youth in Youth Development Programs: Practitioner Briefs

1. Overview of Guiding Principles for Engaging Latinx Youth

Introduction

The Latinx¹ population is the second-fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States, after Asians, and it is also the youngest. California has the largest Latinx population under 18 years of age of all the states in the United States (Pew Research Center 2014), and 54% of California K-12 students enrolled in public schools are Latinx (California Department of Education 2018). These facts suggest the importance of understanding how to engage Latinx youth well and of developing strategies to support Latinx youth and community development.

A review of the literature on effective practices of Latinx youth development organizations to serve Latinx youth well by Erbstein and Fabionar (2019) addressed two questions: (1) What positive youth development program qualities lead to high and sustained participation rates for Latinx youth in the United States? (2) Are there specific attributes of positive youth development programs that lead to positive outcomes for Latinx youth in the United States? The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) identified four dimensions of youth development organizations: conceptual framework, organizational infrastructure, program elements, and program and community relationship. Erbstein and Fabionar (2019) used this framework to organize the findings from the literature review and identified five cross-cutting guiding principles that were salient in all four dimensions (fig. 1):

¹ Latinx: A person who lives in the United States who comes from, or whose parents, grandparents, or earlier ancestors came from, Latin America; may be mono-, bi-, or multilingual in Spanish, English, Brazilian Portuguese, or an indigenous language (e.g., Mixtec). This term dismantles the default masculine of romance languages; it's a gender-inclusive and gender-neutral term.

Our findings confirm the importance of the literature review synthesis and offer a nuanced perspective grounded in practitioner and youth narratives.



Fig. 1. Guiding principles of Latinx youth–serving organizations.

- Integrate extended understandings of youth development
- Support positive ethnic identity development
- Contend with physiological and social effects of discrimination
- Respond to economic poverty
- Act upon the diversity of local and regional Latinx experience

Using the results of this review, we designed empirical research to identify organizational practices associated with Latinx youth engagement in various communities in California. This practitioner brief offers an overview of the findings and recommendations that emerged from a 2-year qualitative study that draws on observations of thirteen organizations in California serving Latinx youth and the perspectives of seventeen youth development professionals and fifty-three Latinx and diverse youth (Moncloa et al. 2019).

Findings Overview

Our findings confirm the importance of the literature review synthesis and offer a nuanced perspective grounded in practitioner and youth narratives. In this brief, we offer some key guiding principles related to each of the four dimensions of youth development organizations: conceptual framework, organizational infrastructure, program elements, and program and community relationship. These findings are further discussed in the other four briefs in this series, each brief focusing on one of the organizational dimensions.

Youth's connection with their cultural wealth supports their development and helps them contend with discrimination and negative messaging.

1. Conceptual framework

An organization's conceptual framework incorporates its foundational values, shaping approaches that are embedded in programs, practices, and policies. Key tenets that emerged beyond widely cited guidance to youth development programs focused on:

- *Equitable access.* All interested young people are able to participate fully and easily in any programming.
- *Cultural and ethnic identity development.* Healthy development requires having safe spaces to explore what it means to belong to an ethnic or cultural group, and learning about the cultural wealth of one's own and others' ethnic groups. Cultural wealth encompasses assets, or personal resources, and *conocimientos*, a concept described by Gloria Anzaldúa as knowledge or awareness that evolves through life experiences (Lara 2005). Yosso (2005, p. 77) defines community cultural wealth as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist micro and macro forms of oppression." Youth's connection with their cultural wealth supports their development and helps them contend with discrimination and negative messaging.
- *Caring relationships with youth and their families.* Youth flourish when embedded in a web of caring and respectful relationships that include extended family.

2. Organizational infrastructure

An organization's infrastructure includes its policies, human resources, professional development, space, funds, etc. Some examples of emergent principles related to organizational infrastructure include:

- *Leadership intentionally focuses on Latinx youth.* Directors of youth organizations focus on cultivating the strengths and addressing the needs of Latinx youth by prioritizing staff's shared experiences with youth in the hiring process. Organizational leaders procure and distribute resources in an equitable manner to overcome participation barriers. For example, programs are free, transportation is offered to youth to attend programs, and youth are offered stipends to support time in leadership roles.
- *Staff speak other languages besides English (Spanish, Spanglish, Mixtec).* Organizations support youth's bilingualism and encourage mutual learning. Staff facilitate dialogue among youth by speaking multiple languages.

3. Program elements

Program elements include safe learning environments, relationship building, youth leadership, social norms, and topically focused activities. Key practices include:

- *Programs are inclusive and culturally relevant.* Staff engage youth and/or families in designing, implementing, and evaluating programs. For example, storytelling, a cultural tradition in Mexico and Latin America, is used to accommodate varying literacy levels and embrace cultural values.
- *Programs cultivate ethnic identity development and healing.* Programs offer a safe space for Latinx youth to talk about challenging issues they face in their communities, such as immigration, racism, poverty, and discrimination. Guided by caring adults, Latinx youth learn to recognize and tap their cultural roots for the strength they can offer to better navigate these challenges.
- *Programs emphasize community contribution.* Latinx youth strengthen community relationships and address inequities in their own community. In some organizations, giving back to the community means older youth lead and mentor younger youth. In other organizations, youth are expected to come back as young adults to contribute to and strengthen their community.

4. Program and community relationship

Latinx-serving organizations actively cultivate community relationships. Key guiding principles include:

- *Staff build trust with Latinx youth and families.* Staff learn about local histories of immigration, countries of origin, languages spoken, and cultural traditions. In the process of learning about youth and families, staff engage in conversations and participate in cultural events to build trust.
- *Leadership cultivates partnerships with Latinx alumni, networks, businesses, and media.* Organizational leadership develops partnerships in informal settings, such as meetings or cultural events. Partnerships among organizations strengthen cultural events and activities. In the absence of cultural events in the community, some organizations collaborate with local Latinx youth and networks to organize them. These events strengthen the organization's local reputation, which in turn builds trust with the community and fosters youth and family involvement.

Recommendations

We suggest youth development organizations consider these findings as key guiding principles to implement in their programs while paying attention to local and regional contexts. Providing equitable programs and accessible locations are imperative elements to consider. It is equally important to employ staff at all levels of the organization who reflect the demographics and shared experiences of youth served, create culturally relevant learning environments that are informed by the local context and lived experiences of youth and families, and support young people to navigate discrimination and negative messaging. It is essential to employ staff who are bilingual or multilingual, since they are better positioned to foster youth's ethnic identity by speaking in youth's native language. Finally, trust building with the Latinx community, youth, and families is essential.

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