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Conceptual Framework of Effective Organizations Serving Latinx Youth

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

2. Conceptual Framework of Effective Organizations Serving Latinx Youth

Introduction

The conceptual framework, or philosophy, of an organization constitutes the distinctive and long-lasting principles and values that guide leaders, staff members, and their work. Effective Latinx¹ youth development organizations use a guiding philosophy that builds on mainstream positive youth development research and practice and includes an emphasis on extended understandings of Latinx youth development. Examples of positive youth development include promoting youth's strengths and assets, fostering a sense of belonging and community connection, and building youth-adult partnerships (Gambone and Connell 2004; Lerner et al. 2011). Programs are based on youth's interests, cultivate opportunities for engagement with staff, offer a broad system of supports for youth and families, and support skill development and academic success. Most organizations foster civic engagement and leadership development activities.

Key Latinx Conceptual Framework

The guiding philosophy of effective organizations serving Latinx youth appears to be influenced by widespread Latinx cultural values, historical and current societal trends facing Latinx youth and communities, and economic conditions experienced by many Latinx youth and families. This conceptual framework includes extended

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.

Latinx youth–serving organizations foster Latinx youth’s intrinsic responsibility to contribute to the community to make a positive change in the present and future.

understanding of Latinx youth development, supporting youth to contend with physiological and social effects of discrimination, supporting cultural and ethnic identity development, responding to economic poverty, and acting upon the diversity of local and regional Latinx youth (Erbstein and Fabionar 2019).

This practitioner brief offers key conceptual framework recommendations from a 2-year study based on observations of thirteen organizations in California and the perspectives of seventeen youth-serving professionals and fifty-three Latinx and diverse youth (Moncloa et al. 2019).

Staff share lived experiences

Effective organizations serving Latinx youth include significant numbers of staff who share the lived experiences of the Latinx youth they serve—experiences of immigration, discrimination, poverty, community reciprocity—and share cultural values and language, as well as aspirations for higher education and career success. The important emphasis on cultural values includes viewing youth in relationship to their families and extended families, as well as staff. It means that organizations welcome families to participate by offering either specific programs for parents/caregivers, like English as a Second Language, or programs and activities where the entire family participates.

Effective organizations build on *familismo* as a cultural value to cultivate and sustain interdependent relationships among youth, parents, and staff that are based on trust and mutual respect. These relationships tend to be informal, and more value is placed on deepening the relationships than on performing tasks. Effective Latinx youth–serving organizations build on and foster a familiar context to provide a space where relationships among youth and staff are key. A high commitment toward strengthening families is extended toward the greater community as well. Latinx youth–serving organizations foster Latinx youth’s intrinsic responsibility to contribute to the community to make a positive change in the present and future. A staff member from one Latinx organization shared:

I think that that’s one of the unique things we see out of our space, that our students have really learned...they really take on that responsibility, like “I have to come back to the community and give back to the community,” right? Whether that means 4 years from now or 10, you know, later in life. They need to give back and develop more spaces, support and mentor, empower other people.

Effective Latinx youth organizations prioritize hiring staff who focus on creating spaces that support youth Latinx ethnic identity development as an important dimension of personal identity development.

Support to navigate discrimination

Historically, Latinxs have experienced discrimination in the United States, and they continue to be treated unfairly due to their ethnicity or race (Krogstad and Lopez 2016). Effective Latinx youth-serving organizations and their staff share a collective history or an understanding of current situations of discrimination and the negative impact of discrimination on identity development and academic success (Moncloa et al. 2019; Erbstein and Fabionar 2019). This understanding contributes to Latinx organizations' guiding philosophy to support youth to deal with and address frequent microaggressions in schools, the community, and beyond, as well as institutional racism. Some organizations create healing spaces where youth learn how to navigate these stressful conditions through dialogue and self-reflection. Other organizations foster youth agency to address the root causes and conditions of discrimination.

Fostering cultural and ethnic identity development

Effective Latinx youth organizations prioritize hiring staff who focus on creating spaces that support youth Latinx ethnic identity development as an important dimension of personal identity development. In some organizations, ethnic identity development helps to address the effects of discrimination by fostering cultural pride in youth's ethnic roots, language, and cultural values and supporting youth in reaching their goals. The importance of Latinx ethnic identity as a source of strength to support Latinx youth's self-esteem is illustrated by a staff member from a Latinx indigenous youth-serving organization:

It comes to a point where even young people want to stay away with who they are. They don't want to learn anything about their culture, anything about their language [due to historical and current discrimination].

And a young person from the same organization shares the importance of Latinx ethnic identity development to support self-esteem and participation in programs:

Once you own your culture, nobody can stop you. You're like, "Oh, yeah, I'm Mexican and I am going to be here. I'm going to take this role," or something. But if you're confused about who you are and where you come from, you don't have that self-esteem any more to join or participate in much.

Ensuring equitable access

Latinx youth–serving organizations exemplify a public pledge to ensure full and equitable access to programs regardless of socio-economic status. This promise is illustrated in the removal of economic and transportation barriers to participation, by offering free or reduced programs and providing rides or bus passes to youth. Equity is exemplified in a Latinx youth organization’s nimble and flexible policies and practices to quickly respond to Latinx youth and families’ unmet basic needs.

Responding to the diversity of Latinx youth

Latinx youth in this study reflect primarily foreign-born and U.S.-born children of Mexican descent. Youth and their families came from multiple states in Mexico, or from various immigrant families. Effective Latinx youth–serving organizations respond to the diversity of Latinx youth and families by embodying cultural responsiveness in their organization and programs. For example, organizations place emphasis on mutual learning among youth and among youth and adults, speaking youth’s language (Spanish, Spanglish, Mixtec, or English), and addressing multiple literacy levels. Some organizations foster Latinx cultural values by promoting community building through art and cultural festivities.

Changing an Organization’s Conceptual Framework

We encourage youth organizations that wish to engage and sustain the participation of Latinx youth and families in their programs to integrate these findings into their guiding philosophy. However, this is easier said than done. Changing a youth-serving organization’s philosophy may entail changing a deeply rooted organizational culture and infrastructure. Learning organizations are better prepared to engage in this task. Senge (1990, p. 3) defines learning organizations as places “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free.” Senge states people who “are continually learning how to learn together are better prepared to embark on this process.” Learning youth-serving organizations that embrace a conceptual foundation that welcomes and sustains the participation of diverse youth can have a tremendous impact on the lives of youth, families, and communities.

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