

Increasing Latinx Youth Engagement Across Different Types of After-School Organizations

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Abstract

This article explores how Latinx youth engagement practices vary across different types of out-of-school organizations that successfully sustain Latinx youth participation. Data are drawn from a qualitative study of 13 California organizations that each emphasize one of 3 missions: social justice youth development, "one-stop" wrap-around services, or academic enrichment. While all organizations are found to adhere to a core set of Latinx youth development guiding principles, there are nuanced differences in how they are operationalized in practice across varied organization types, reflecting variation in terms of discourse, scale, and scope. These findings highlight the need for youth development practitioners and collaborating researchers to understand the context of youth-serving organizations when identifying and implementing promising practices and extension programs.

Key words: Latinx youth development, out-of-school organizations

Introduction

The Latinx population is the second-fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States after Asian Americans; it is also the youngest ethnic group. California has the largest Latinx population under 18 years of age among all states in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2014). Historically, Latinx youth faced structural inadequacies of policies and public institutions which did not address the unique needs of Latinx youth and their families (Gandara &

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Contreras, 2009; Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). This context suggests the importance of understanding how youth development organizations engage Latinx youth well and develop strategies to support Latinx youth and community development. In response, this study is grounded in the imperative that academic researchers partner with youth-serving institutions that *successfully* reach and sustain the participation of our most underserved populations to articulate and disseminate nuanced understandings of “what works” to inform praxes. In this article we explore how Latinx youth engagement practices vary across different types of out-of-school organizations that sustain Latinx youth participation (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019). We examine organizations that emphasize one of three missions: social justice youth development, “one-stop” wrap-around services, and academic enrichment.

Review of the Literature

Erbstein and Fabionar (2019) conducted a review of Latinx youth development scholarship and practice-based literature from the fields of ethnic studies, sociology, anthropology, youth studies, and human development, which revealed five consistent themes that exist in successful Latinx youth serving organization. These themes, presented as guiding principles suggested organizations (a) contend with effects of discrimination, (b) respond to poverty, (c) address local youth needs, (d) provide support for ethnic or other identity, and (e) have an integrated understanding of youth development. They have implications for all four domains of youth development organizations: conceptual framework, organizational infrastructure, program elements, and program and community relationships (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). This line of inquiry provides little guidance on the types of youth development organizations that engage and support Latinx youth well.

Few scholars describe the types of youth-serving organizations that engage vulnerable youth. For example, Wheeler (2000) examined similar national youth-serving organizations to identify their salient characteristics and McLaughlin et al., (2009) examined community-based urban organizations that advocate for youth or organizations helping community members engage in advocacy themselves. To our knowledge, the literature does not currently describe the different types of youth development organizations, nor does it include how these types of youth development organizations sustain Latinx youth participation.

Most scholars describe the characteristics of youth development program types (Catalano et al., 2002; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Futch Ehrlich et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2009). We rely on the following youth development program descriptions during out-of-school time to inform our study:

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- After-school enrichment programs offer experiential learning activities on a regular basis throughout the school year and are supervised by adults with opportunities of peer mentoring. Youth have choices from a variety of group activities and engage in peer interaction (Mahoney et al., 2006). Summer camps are similarly organized and offer day or overnight activities.
- Civic engagement programs address organizational or community change on a regular basis and may be youth-led or led by a youth–adult partnership (Zeldin et al., 2014). Activities include youth advisory boards (Hohenemser & Marshal, 2002), youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kirshner et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2010), or social justice youth development (SJYD) (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). SJYD programs build marginalized youth’s critical consciousness (Horton & Freire, 1990); increase youth’s understanding of inequitable systems; and strengthen their capacity to transform these systems through collective action (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007) to “convince, pressure, or coerce external decision-makers to modify or stop certain activities” (Staples, 2004, p.9). SJYD programs focus on youth’s identity development and embrace youth culture (Erbstein, 2013).
- Comprehensive family support organizations (one-stop) provide youth- and family-focused services for prevention or crisis intervention. Organizations engage marginalized youth and family members to address current and emerging multidimensional issues of families and communities (Trask et al., 2006; Settapani et al., 2019).

Building on Erbstein and Fabionar’s (2019) strategies for Latinx youth engagement in quality out-of-school time programs, an empirical study of 13 California organizations that successfully sustain Latinx youth participation confirmed the importance of these principles, identified similarities among organizations, and described practices from practitioners and youth perspectives that operationalized them (Moncloa et al. 2019). These Latinx youth organizations illustrated the importance of including equitable access in organizations’ conceptual framework, providing equitable programs and accessible locations as imperative elements to consider, employing staff at all organizational levels who reflect the demographics and shared experiences of youth served, creating culturally relevant learning environments informed by local context and lived experiences of youth and families, and supporting young people to navigate discrimination and negative messaging. However, among these organizations there were differences in how they framed their conceptual frameworks, missions, and programs. Effective Latinx youth development organizations use a guiding philosophy that builds on mainstream positive youth development research and practice (Gambone & Connell, 2004; Lerner et al., 2011) and include an emphasis on extended understandings of Latinx youth

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development (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019; Moncloa et al., 2019). In this article, we explore whether there is substantive variation in how different youth development organization types operationalize these guiding principles.

Methods

Sample

This 2-year qualitative study was conducted from 2016-2018 and draws upon interviews with 18 youth-serving professionals representing 13 Latinx youth development organizations in three California counties (Moncloa et al., 2019). Organizations were selected through a process of mapping the ecosystem of Latinx youth supports in each county, organizational research, and key informant interviews (Erbstein et al., 2017). These organizations had engaged Latinx youth for at least 1 year, sustained most Latinx youth participation, and were broadly known to have a positive reputation among Latinx youth, families, and communities in their regions.

Procedures

Data collection included organizational documents reflecting their missions, activities, and in-person semi-structured interviews with organizational leaders and staff members who worked with youth. We include interviewees' country or region of origin to reflect how people self-identified in Table 1. The University of California Davis Institutional Review Board approved data collection protocols.

Table 1. Staff Interviewee Demographics

Demographic	Characteristics
Ethnicity	Latinx from Mexico (15) Mixteco (1) Latinx-Asian (1) Latinx from Guatemala (1)
Gender	Female (9) Male (9)
Age range	Early 20s to late 30s

Interviews elicited practitioners' perspectives on their backgrounds, and their strategies to recruit and sustain Latinx youth participation in youth development organizations and programs. The protocol included open-ended questions regarding organizations' goals, missions, history, and stories about successes and challenges. All interviews were conducted in English, although

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participants often employed some Spanish. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim in both languages.

Analysis

To identify variations among three organization types, data was grouped together as cases as described in Table 2, where the unit of analysis is the organization type (Yin, 2009).

Table 2. Organization Location, Type, and Staffing and Participant Data

County	Organization name (Pseudonym)	No. of staff	Annual youth participants	Organization type
Merced	Just Media	5	45 teens/college aged	Social justice/Advocacy
Santa Clara	Social Justice Advocates	5	20 teens	Social justice/Advocacy
Riverside	Wellness in Community	1	200 teens	Social justice/Advocacy
Riverside	Design Your City	2	20 teens	Social justice/Advocacy
Riverside	Building Cultural Identity	15 volunteers	60 teens	Social justice/Advocacy
Santa Clara	Comprehensive Support	8	200 children and teens	Social justice and One-stop
Santa Clara	Urban Art Promotion	4	15 teens	Enrichment
Santa Clara	Youth and Family Community Center	6 staff & 4 volunteers	200 children	Enrichment
Santa Clara	Youth Afterschool	29	8,500 children	Enrichment
Riverside	Mentoring Youth of Color	1	250 children	Enrichment
Riverside	Expanded Learning for All	364 staff & 1,700 volunteers	36,000 children	Enrichment
Merced	Pueblos Indigenas	2	20 teens	Enrichment and One-stop
Merced	United for Youth	8	20 teens	Enrichment and One-stop

We used grounded analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and NVIVO 11 to conduct queries of previously coded interviews to identify how the guiding principles varied across organization types. Queries revealed salient practices in three organization types and identified quantity and quality of practices with respect to organizations' (a) conceptual frameworks, (b) organization infrastructure, (c) program elements, and (d) community relationships (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Quantity refers to the number of times interviewees mentioned a certain

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concept or approach, while quality indicates variations in the operationalization of the approach. Guiding principles and practices that were operationalized in varied ways across organizational categories were further considered to assess the nature of these differences and potential explanatory factors. Table 3 describes in detail the data analysis process.

Table 3. Data Analysis Process

Data analysis process	Description
Queries: Variations among organizations	Explored previously coded interviews using queries in NVIVO 11 to examine variations in practices by organization type. Focused on adult perspectives.
Coding refinement	Pursued a grounded analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006) to refine coding based on whether and how organization types varied across the guiding principles: (a) support ethnic and other identity development; (b) tailor efforts to individual and family needs; (c) contend with discrimination; (d) address poverty; (e) had an integrated approach to youth development. Integrated this analysis with respect to organizations' (a) conceptual frameworks, (b) organization infrastructure, (c) program elements, and (d) community relationships.
Potential variation identification	Identified potential variations on key practices based on the magnitude of nodes (number of organization types where a practice featured), as well as prominence of the concept (how much it was described or articulated).
Key practices confirmation	In the description of organization types, we do not attribute specific counts of the number of interviewees who mentioned a particular theme. Identified practices pursued by at least three organizations were identified as themes. Reviewed original transcripts and field notes to check findings. Each practice was discussed and agreed upon by full team. Analytical memos were coded and analyzed.
Salient quote identification	Salient quotes were placed in an Excel sheet to identify variations among organization types and to facilitate the constant comparative analysis.

Positionality

Field researchers resided in regions where they conducted interviews. All except one, of White European descent, were Latinx native Spanish speakers. Two authors are Latinx or Indian immigrants, and one author is of White European descent; the former are researchers and youth development practitioners, and the latter, while formerly a youth development practitioner, is now based in academia.

Findings

Data analysis revealed differences with respect to conceptual frameworks and program elements, which were associated with organization type. Conceptual frameworks include organizations' missions and philosophy that inform practice. Program elements include safe learning environment, positive relationships, social norms, skill building, youth leadership, and topical emphasis (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Social Justice Youth Development and Advocacy Organizations

Social Justice Youth Development and Advocacy organizations' (SJYD) missions aim to facilitate healthy development of young people—especially those marginalized based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics—to develop an understanding of systems that produced inequitable structures of opportunity and outcomes, as well as the capacity to change them. Their missions include helping youth develop critical consciousness and language to articulate structural and cultural barriers experienced by their communities, along with the agency to begin contesting these by tapping community strengths. A staff member from Building Cultural Identity shares:

A lot of our students now . . . are able to understand our conditions in our community from a very critical lens. They can understand it from race, class, gender . . . they built their skill sets to be able to understand our community as more than just . . . the east side is poor because that's how you lived, right? They have the understanding that we live in communities that are a result of these systems.

In these organizations, staff reported Latinx youth learned to express themselves against injustice in their communities, work on art installations to highlight their culture, and facilitated activities to promote community building.

In all organizations, staff members share similar cultural backgrounds, language(s), and lived experiences with participating youth (Moncloa et al., 2019). In SJYD organizations staff draw on

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their personal journeys to help youth transcend and transform daily microaggressions and structural barriers. Staff support youth's ethnic identity development as a foundation for social transformation efforts. Staff from Building Cultural Identity state:

We talk about just different issues: what it means to be a woman of color here in the valley, here in this country, what are some of the things that we face, and how do we deal with those things. How do we put ourselves in situations where we—in spaces where we feel we don't belong. For example, you know, college, university, certain classes, certain jobs, certain environments and, you know, we cannot just feed off of each other. And what are the different things that we—the micro-aggressions that we face every day, and sort of putting a name to something that we've always felt.

In SJYD, few organizations used curriculum. A staff member from Wellness in Community states:

I make sure that their opinions are input, and their work is actually what moves whatever we're doing forward. Rather than I'm moving it forward and I'm trying to drag them along. I really make sure that every day we emphasize every time we meet that we're gonna go as far as the whole group wants us to go. And it's gonna look the way the group wants it to look like.

Staff develop relationships with youth that often extend beyond program participation. A staff member from Just Media revealed how program scope extends beyond regular work hours:

When youth get triggered and are encountering racism in the community, like it's not during your regular office hours. These are experiences that you share all times. Like we are in our homes, we experience sexism or misogyny, all these things.

SJYD engage with youth beyond youth's participation in organizations. A staff member describes a longer time horizon to support youth to achieve change:

After Just Media they will try to go out there and achieve it because they know Just Media is always going to be here. And no matter what, we'll always be here to back each other up. And when something goes wrong, we're always here to help. So, it's like no matter what, we're always going to be a family.

One-Stop Organizations

One-stop organizations' missions centered on providing services and programs with and for youth, families, and communities. Within our sample, these organizations in some cases also

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embodied goals similar to SJYD or enrichment. For example, Comprehensive Support sought to alleviate effects of poverty via service provision and their primary practices include an out-of-school program for pre-K through eighth-grade youth, parent education classes, free food and clothing, and legal services. Their staff describe supporting family engagement in community advocacy with respect to immigrant rights. A staff member from Comprehensive Support states their policy and organizing team support immigrant families and “continue that work around immigration. And really right now, we’re just focusing on, know-your-rights campaigns.”

In all organizations, staff build trust and familiarity with families and youth they aim to engage (Moncloa et al., 2019). One-stop organizations with a SJYD focus engage their families in decision making and were adept at providing a variety of resources based on family needs. For example, Comprehensive Support helps families with house rents, weatherization, or facilitating garden plot access. This intentional family engagement set them apart from academic enrichment and SJYD organizations.

Similar to SJYD, staff at one-stop organizations cultivate young people’s healthy ethnic identity development. However, one-stop organizations whose mission includes enrichment programs focus on establishing a connection between youth and their culture to build knowledge and pride, rather than tapping identity as a foundation for social transformation efforts. A staff member from Pueblos Indigenas states:

Working with these young people for the last six years, where [there is] one workshop where they learn about what is it to be Mixteco, what is the background of Mixteco, and how was our civilization before. They continue coming back because that’s the work that we do. And every time that we conduct a workshop or even young people interested in the folkloric dances, that really focuses on that, a place where we [are] coming from, participating in the yearly event, cultural event that we have where the best food of our community, dances, and music come all together once a year.

Enrichment Organizations

Enrichment organizations’ mission is to provide a range of educational activities—including arts, science, homework tutoring, and college and career access—to improve competencies and academics of youth in Grades K-8. In most organizations staff select activities for children in elementary and middle school grades. In Urban Art Promotion, an organization that engaged adolescents, youth selected their activities.

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Staff in all enrichment organizations are familiar with the local community and make efforts to get to know participating youth (Moncloa et al., 2019). Staff describe building relationships with youth and families over the span of 1 year during program implementation. Relationships extended into additional years when youth returned to the program as participants or teen mentors. Staff in one-stop and enrichment organizations describe opportunities for youth and family members to give back to younger children and their communities over time. A staff member from Youth and Community services described that parents and youth helped design holiday decorations throughout the year. Similarly, a staff member from Youth Afterschool shared that parents brought food to end-of-semester celebrations.

Further, staff describe supporting positive Latinx identity development by speaking in Spanish and organizing cultural events such as Day of the Dead and Children's Day. A staff member from Youth Afterschool shared, "We'll speak in Spanish to them and let them know that's very okay and that it shouldn't be something they hide. It's who they are . . . So, they know they're safe here."

Most enrichment organizations partnered with school districts to help students set and achieve goals and overcome academic hurdles, attending to their academic skills and their social and emotional needs. A staff member from Youth Afterschool shared:

So, giving them that power that you choose who you're going to be. It's not who your teachers say or who your parents say you are . . . because I've had conversations with students like, "Well, that's what mom says I am," or "Well, that's what the teacher says I am. I'm somebody that doesn't listen. I have to throw a fit. I'm always in a bad mood. That's just who I am." So, they grow to believe that and act that. So, I feel like our job is to let them know that you're not just that and show them kind of their strengths and give them time to show their strengths so they can see that they're more than that and give them that empowerment of being able to change.

These organizations also bridge families and schools to help families navigate educational systems. A staff member at Expanded Learning for All shared, "We offer study groups. . . . We help them apply for scholarships, help them apply for colleges."

In summary, despite shared guiding principles (Moncloa et al., 2019), important variations exist among these three organization types. All organizations sustain Latinx youth participation over time, and differences in their missions and program elements did not reduce their ability to maintain Latinx youth engagement.

Discussion

We discuss subtle variations by organization type that reflect mission-related discursive practices, and related orientations to scale and scope. Discursive practices describe how organization types position Latinx youth, and therefore their institutional praxes, in varying ways. Our consideration of scale explores relative emphases on individuals, families, or communities. Differences in scope reflect varied temporal orientations of programming. Table 4 describes organization types and the variations in discourse, scale, and scope.

Table 4. Variations in Discourse, Scale, and Scope of Organization Types

	SJYD	One-stop	Enrichment
Key activities	Programming supports youth to address inequities in their school or community	Comprehensive services for families and youth development programs	Homework tutoring, activities
Scale	Youth and community	Youth and families	Youth in the context of families
Scope	Immediate support for youth, long-term for youth and community	Immediate for enrichment needs of youth, long term for family services	Immediate

Discursive Variations

Each organization type positioned quite differently Latinx youth, their roles vis a vis them, participation, and therefore their practices.

Staff in enrichment organizations describe helping youth navigate an education system that does not necessarily serve them well considering their ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status and associated family challenges, or immigration status (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). Staff offer youth tools and skills to increase their success within existing school systems through homework and tutoring and activities or provide venues outside school in which to learn and have fun (Eccles et al., 2003). Staff also offered children opportunities to develop pride in their heritage, and identity(s), rather than aiming to facilitate systemic change.

Staff in SJYD and one-stop organizations view Latinx youth and family well-being as being under-supported by multiple systems: education, health, legal, transportation, social services,

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etc. Staff offer support for navigating these systems based on their experience, and for building resilience in the context of trauma and stress associated with discrimination, economic poverty, and family separation.

Enrichment programs aimed at younger children and managed by one-stop organizations did not give student choices for activities, whereas organizations that engaged adolescents incorporated student choice in activities. However, SJYD programming was fully informed by youth. Most SJYD did not use a set curriculum; youth defined the work by their passions and where they wanted to see change through their actions. One-stop organizations with an advocacy mission also engaged families in decision-making capacity. Youth participation and agency is determined by the context, nature of the relationship between youth and adults, and the organizations' mission.

Beyond recognizing multiple systems that challenge and support Latinx youth and family well-being, SJYD ground their activity in analyses that suggest the importance in fostering youth development by building young people's understanding of social disparities associated with race/ethnicity, among other factors, their identities, and capacities as change agents. In this context, SJYD help Latinx youth examine why these challenging conditions exist; consider why they are inequitably distributed across populations and places; and develop knowledge, skills, and networks to build more just and healthy systems and pursue transformative community engagement (Ginwright et al., 2006).

Variations in Scale

Analyses of scale view varied potential units of attention (e.g., individuals, sub-populations, schools, families, communities, states, nations, and places that link them) as intersecting and non-linear, reflecting organizations' recognition to consider their Latinx participants in relationship to multiple contexts at the same time.

Nonetheless, organization types reflect particular emphases. For example, enrichment organizations oriented themselves around promoting expanded competencies of individuals and their abilities to navigate their school systems. One-stop organizations also focused on individual needs and acted upon the important role of families in the lives of their youth participants. These organizations supported families' abilities to navigate local institutions and contribute to organizational and community needs. In some cases, one-stop organizations' activities intersected with national dynamics, as they sought to support families navigating the U.S. immigration system.

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SJYD practices attended to individual youth participants and, to a lesser extent, their families. However, their sphere of attention and engagement tended to focus heavily on broader community, institutional, societal, and transnational contexts—helping young people both to explore and articulate how those contexts shape their own, their family’s, and their community’s daily experience, and how to be change agents with respect to them.

Variations in Scope

Academic enrichment and one-stop organizations reflected a tendency to focus on addressing immediate needs—for example, providing academic support in response to underperformance or responding to immediate family crisis situations using a problem-solving approach. Staff built relationships with youth and families over the span of 1 year and did not necessarily aim to sustain relationships with them beyond program participation. Nonetheless, one-stop and enrichment organizations created opportunities for youth participants and family members to give back to younger children and their communities over time.

In light of their objectives to transform people and places to promote more equitable opportunity and outcomes, SJYD viewed their activity on a longer time horizon. They were intentional about fostering sustained youth engagement, continually expanding networks, and creating ladders of opportunity to build upon young people’s expanding skills and interest.

Study Limitations

Limitations of this study include a focus on California, and on interviewees who were predominantly of Mexican descent. Hence, the narratives discussed here may not reflect those of youth professionals from other Latinx subgroups in the United States. This study suggests various youth development organization types and their respective programs sustain Latinx youth participation, and it reveals differences in how these principles are operationalized in practice within each organization type. These practices appear to be consistent within organizational types across varied localities and populations. However, while we collected demographic data on each organization’s youth participants, we cannot assess whether there are substantial differences in their backgrounds to suggest a particular “fit” between Latinx youth/families with certain experiences and specific organization types.

Implications

Several studies pointed to the mediating functions of youth development organizations for families and communities (Gambone & Connell, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005; Lerner et al., 2011). However, only a few studies bring in contextual understanding of local conditions and how

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these organizations play an important role (Gonzalez, 2010; Hobbs & Sawer, 2009; Raffaelli et al., 2005). We believe the importance of both context and an organization's guiding philosophies contributes to this scholarship and offers a nuanced understanding of the way different organization types approach and engage with Latinx youth, families, and communities.

In this study, missions and philosophies of organizations shaped the nuanced and varied application of guiding principles for sustaining Latinx youth participation in practice (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019). This study suggests organizational context and missions should be part of an ecological understanding of youth development. However, not all youth development organizations have mission-driven strategies. We recommend organizations develop missions to address the needs of the diverse youth and families they serve and align them to their programmatic efforts.

Youth development practitioners would benefit from an understanding of how

- youth-serving organizations can expand their scope by learning from each other,
- to seek out partnerships between youth organizations with limitations and organizations that engage Latinx youth well,
- organizations' overarching conceptual frameworks shape their practices and focus on optimizing these to engage and sustain Latinx youth and families.

For policy makers with a planning perspective, it is useful to think about different organizations meeting different needs while serving the diversity within the Latinx community. For instance, if a community has one type of organization, such as enrichment, it is likely certain needs within the Latinx community—such as empowering older youth to come to terms with and heal from injustices, or basic needs to serve families—might not be met. This presents an opportunity for addressing these needs with Latinx youth, families, and communities.

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