



Cultivating Positive Ethnic Identity in Southern California's Youth Through 4-H Day Camps

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Abstract

One approach to cultivating positive ethnic identity is aiming to foster pride in cultural heritage through helping youth learn about their ethnic groups' histories and providing opportunities to participate in cultural forms such as music, theater, dance, and other artistic expression (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2014). During the summer of 2017, 4-H staff and academics partnered with the Mexican Consulate in San Bernardino, CA and designed and delivered a four-week day camp targeting youth ages five to eleven. The objective of the camp was to provide a space for the youth to explore Mexican history from the pre-Hispanic times through the Independence Era, as well as some customs and traditions of modern Mexico. All the activities were designed following the hands-on 4-H model, where the youth had the opportunity to learn-reflect-apply. Conducted in English and Spanish by community volunteers and college students with the support of 4-H staff, the program included a variety of activities to keep the youth interested and active, as art, games, crafts, movies, and even science activities framed around weekly cultural themes. The program was evaluated and its success was determined by a) community participation/response; b) partners' satisfaction; and c) ability to replicate the program in coming years. This article provides an overview of the program design and implementation, as well as lessons learned.

Keywords:

Latino, youth, Mexican, cultural identity, day camp, youth development

Introduction

The Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario metro area in California is home to 4.53 million people. Over half of these residents (50.5%) identify as Hispanic/Latino, and it is estimated that 80% of them are of Mexican origin. As a result, the most common foreign language in the area is Spanish, which is spoken by 1.36 M residents (Data USA, 2018).

Despite Hispanics/Latinos being the majority population in the region, in 2013-2014 the 4-H Youth Development Program membership in these counties included only 20% Hispanic/Latino youth in Riverside county and 39.1% in San Bernardino. The 4-H Youth Development Program engages youth in reaching their fullest potential while supporting and encouraging them to live a healthy and happy life. With more than 100 years of experience, 4-H could make the difference in Hispanic/Latino youth in the area. However, engaging Hispanic/Latino youth in 4-H required targeting programming (Vega, Brody & Cummins, 2016). The Riverside and San Bernardino 4-H team, in an effort to increase Hispanic participation in 4-H programs, reached out to local organizations serving or interested in serving youth to design, implement, and evaluate a free summer enrichment opportunity for youth of Mexican origin (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2014). The objective of this effort was to develop and offer a culturally relevant summer program in the Mexican Consulate in San Bernardino by bicultural and bilingual California 4-H academics, staff, and volunteers.

Background

To develop and deliver this program, the designers used a literature review conducted by Erbstein and Fabionar (2014), who drew from 114 articles and suggested five program qualities that support U.S.-based Latin@ youth participation and well-being. Specifically, successful programs: (1) incorporate extended/emerging understandings of positive youth development that reflect Latina/o and immigrant youth experience; (2) contend with physiological and social effects of discrimination; (3) support positive ethnic identity development; (4) respond to economic poverty; and (5) tailor efforts to the specific experience, resources, needs and interests of local and regional youth. The 4-H staff also desired to incorporate eleven key components for Latino Outreach identified by Vega et al. (2016). These elements were: bilingual and bicultural personnel; caring and trustworthy staff; trust and

relationship building; culturally-appropriate programming; family center; valuing relationship cooperation; commitment and availability; community partnerships; connecting with families; research and program evaluation; and cultural competence.

Applying these principles, the specific objective of the 4-H team was to provide a space for the youth in Riverside and San Bernardino County to explore their cultural identity through the lenses of the Mexican history from the pre-Hispanic times through the Independence Era, as well as some customs and traditions of modern Mexico.

Program Development

To implement the program, 4-H staff contacted the Department of Community Affairs (Departamento de Asuntos Comunitarios) at the Consulate of Mexico in San Bernardino. This department coordinates various mandatory programs of the Mexican government. These programs must be delivered by all the Mexican Consulates in the United States to meet the needs of Mexicans living abroad in the areas of education, health, financial education, culture, sports, and community organization. Therefore, Consulates have built trust and familiarity among the Mexican population living in the region. After meeting with the Mexican Consulate personnel, the 4-H team determined that this organization was the best program partner as they met the five program qualities identified by Erbstein and Fabionar (2014).

The program targeted youth ages five to eleven and was delivered in a day-camp format during the summer of 2017. The program contents were designed using a collection of "Libros de Texto Gratuitos" that the Mexican government provided to ensure that the information disseminated was accurate and reflected the cultural background of the majority of the youth that would be participating in the day camp.

The program was designed to be delivered in four weeks. Week one focused on pre-Hispanic cultures and helped youth understand the history of the foundation of Mexico City using the legend of "Mexico-Tenochtitlan." During this week youth learned about agriculture, recreation and science from the eyes of different cultures such as the Aztecs and Mayas. During week two, youth learned about the history of Mexican Independence from the Spanish Kingdom and used art, crafts, and performances to

create a sense of connection to their or their family's country of origin. The Heroes of Mexican Independence were portrayed in each of the activities, and youth learned about the key moments of the fight for independence and the establishment of Mexico as a republic. Weeks three and four focused on modern Mexico and some mainstream customs and traditions that are connected to either pre-Hispanic cultures or to the time that Mexico was a colony of the Spanish Kingdom. Specific food, songs, crafts, and dances were taught to the youth as a way to spark conversation with their family members.

The program was offered free to participants at the Mexican Consulate, and food was provided in response to the economic poverty that affects nearly 20% of youth in the region. Funding for the program came from the Consulate of Mexico community partners' donations. The 4-H team tailored their efforts to youth of Mexican origin and included parent's feedback in the modern traditions they practice in the US. (e.g., el Día de los Muertos and Posadas) so the program mirrored family customs. The program required significant staff time for the planning and recruitment of volunteers. The 4-H staff used the UC 4-H Youth Development Framework to ensure program quality and fidelity.

Program Outcomes: Recruitment, Satisfaction, and Replication

Program success was determined by three factors: 1) community participation/response; 2) partners' satisfaction; and 3) ability to replicate the program in coming years.

The program was promoted using a text message service coordinated by Saber es Poder (Knowledge is Power), a venture-backed Spanish language multimedia company most well-known for its presence inside U.S.-based Consulates. Saber es Poder's mission is to connect people with experts who can answer questions about finances, health, higher education, scholarships and more. This organization has gained significant trust among Mexicans living in the US for its ability to deliver quality information via text message. Our program capacity was 60 children per week ages 5 to 13 and all spots were filled in one day. The community response was both impressive and reflected the high need of free programs in the area served. All participants were from Mexican descent and used Spanish as their primary language at home. Ages ranged from 5 to 13 years old so youth were assigned

to teams that balanced the age and skill difference. A college student intern led each group. Community volunteers assisted all teams.

All program partners were highly satisfied with both program design and the level of engagement of youth participants. More importantly, during daily drop off and pick up, as well as more formally during the closing ceremony, parents expressed gratitude to all program partners for offering a format that was accessible to them and related youth in the U.S. with their cultural heritage. We believe program activities could be replicated in similar settings and are being compiled and edited in a resource book that will be available on the Riverside and San Bernardino 4-H Program websites.

By including the history of Mexico from the pre-Hispanic times through the Independence Era, as well as some customs and traditions of modern Mexico, the program helped youth understand and connect the history of migration and how it affects civilization. In order to contend with physiological and social effects of discrimination related to language, the program was conducted in English, Spanish, and Spanglish, motivating all participants to feel comfortable using both languages and to embrace Spanish for those who have it as a first language. Finally, support for ethnic identity development was fostered throughout the program by having camp counselors that shared similar backgrounds with the youth participants and that felt a sense of pride from their cultural heritage (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2014).

Other factors that supported program success were 4-H staff commitment to incorporate literature recommendations for Latino Outreach (Vega, et al, 2016). Some of these factor are: (a) The 4-H team showed respect for the culture, built trust with the community, and demonstrated care for the participants; (b) The program fostered cultural identity among participants and families; (c) The 4-H team understood the importance of involving the families; (d) The Mexican Consulate was a good partner, as they have adequate facilities (large conference room, kitchen, restroom, etc.) and the participants felt safe attending the summer program; and (e) The program was developed, delivered, and evaluated by staff who had participated in a variety of personal and professional development opportunities addressing cultural competence.

Conclusion

This case study of the creation of a summer program that successfully reached youth of Mexican origin and cultivated positive ethnic identity, highlights the value of partnering with a trusted organization that understands the target audience and that is open to supporting youth and families in a non-traditional way. Beyond food, shelter, and clothing, Latinos in the U.S. have the need to cultivate pride in their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and few organizations have the knowledge and capacity to help them do that. Lessons that might inform practitioners trying to reach Latino audiences include the need to recruit youth through trusted sources; hosting programs in a space that is safe and accessible for community members; tailoring activities to the specific needs and interest of local youth; and finally, the power of combining efforts with other organizations.

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