



Research Article

Fostering Latino Cultural Self-Identity among Mexican American Adolescents

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Abstract

The goal of El Renacimiento is to increase Latino cultural self-identity among Mexican American adolescents in order to reduce the negative effects of acculturative stress. The curriculum, El Renacimiento, was implemented after school hours in predominantly Mexican American middle and high schools in a U.S.-Mexico border community. Two-hundred and seventeen (217) Mexican American males and females ages 12-21 participated in the curriculum. The evaluation of the curriculum uses a pre-test post-test design to assess positive changes in Latino cultural self-identity. Self-administered pre-curriculum measures included acculturation level, acculturative stress, and Latino cultural self-identity. Measures were available in English and Spanish depending on the preference of the participant. One month post-curriculum participants' repeated the Latino cultural self-identity measure. The primary outcome measure was change in Latino cultural self-identity among Mexican American males and females who participated in El Renacimiento. Prior to the curriculum, students' acculturation level was negatively correlated with acculturative stress ($r = -.228$, $p < .005$). Mexican American females reported a more "Mexican-Bicultural" cultural orientation than Mexican American males, though not significantly so ($p < .10$). Those adolescents 14 years of age and younger reported a "Very Mexican" cultural orientation compared to those adolescents 15-17 and 18 and older who tended to report a more "Mexican-Bicultural" cultural orientation ($p < .05$). At Post-curriculum, Mexican American adolescents showed a statistically significant increase in Latino cultural self-identity ($p < .01$). Fostering Latino cultural self-identification among Mexican American adolescents is an important social and cognitive process that has the potential of decreasing acculturative stress and its negative health consequences.

Keywords: Ethnic identity; Acculturation; Acculturative stress; Adolescents; Mexican Americans; Latinos

Introduction

Negative perceptions, opinions and discriminatory practices toward immigrant and non-immigrant Latinos have long been part of the socio-historical reality in the American Southwest [1]. Historical documents and research findings convincingly demonstrate the insidious nature of discrimination and prejudice experienced by Mexican Americans over the past 170 years [2,3].

When do Latino adolescents begin to experience and

internalize racist attitudes and discriminatory practices from others? Bernal and colleagues [4] have shown that beginning early in a Mexican American child's life, feelings of difference and inferiority are transmitted by the dominant non-Latino society via social institutions like schools or government organizations, and policies like those enacted by Arizona to suppress Latino historical and cultural knowledge [5]. Likewise, during the Trump administration, anti-Mexican sentiment resulted in immigrant child removal and detention, sometimes including American citizens [6]. Mexican and Mexican American adolescents thus internalize negative perceptions about their ethnicity from the dominant society, which can lead to negative health and mental

health outcomes. Several studies have documented the effects of family separation and/or detention in Mexican American families and neighborhoods, and are considered Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) [7-10].

Ethnic and Cultural Identity among Latino Adolescents

Research literature cites both positive and negative psychological effects of ethnic and cultural identity [4,11]. Ethnic identity can have a positive impact on the effects of acculturative stress and symptoms of depression. Lower levels of ethnic identity or negative perceptions of one's own ethnic identity are found to be associated with higher levels of anxiety, higher rates of depression, and higher rates of acculturative stress [12]. Alternatively, high levels of ethnic identity are found to increase acculturative stress as proposed by Berry [13] and others. Findings of a "buffering effect" of ethnic or cultural identity, moderating the effects of acculturative stress on negative psychological and physical health outcomes are documented in the literature as well [14,15].

Studies have found that a positive self-concept is negatively associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety as reported among Latino adolescents [16]. Further, having positive self-esteem is negatively associated with initiation and continuation of substance abuse and HIV risk behaviors [17,18]. Other studies demonstrate that positive self-esteem is positively correlated with measures of resiliency [12]. Resiliency is a positive psychological trait that enhances a person's ability to cope in stressful situations [19]. Increasing resiliency and reducing the effects of acculturative stress among Latino adolescents are important in order to build self-esteem and other protective factors and to reduce risk factors for a number of health-associated risks [20].

Acculturation and Acculturative Stress among Latino Adolescents

Acculturation theory is based on the hypothesis that people from cultures outside of the U.S. adapt or "acculturate" to U.S. mainstream societal values, norms, beliefs and ways of behaving or interacting with others [13,21]. The process of acculturation involves interactions with familial, social and cultural institutions that either facilitate or hinder adoption of mainstream cultural values, beliefs and behaviors. It is well documented that acculturation varies with age, length of time in the U.S., generation status, and immigration status. Acculturation to mainstream values, beliefs and behaviors occurs faster among youth than for adults, generating intergenerational conflict in Latino families [22]. Additionally, Latinos who have resided in the U.S. for two or more generations tend to be more acculturated than newly arrived immigrants [13]. The acculturation process itself, though not necessarily stressful, has been viewed as stressful in some situations and has been linked to negative psychological and

physical health outcomes among Latinos [23].

Acculturative stress, the negative stress reactions of Mexicans when acculturating to the U.S. mainstream culture, has been the focus of many studies on Mexican Americans and other Latino subgroups [24,25]. Acculturative stress among Mexican American adolescents is associated with engaging in a number of risk behaviors including initiation of substance abuse, early sexual behavior, HIV risk behaviors, and psychological symptoms of depression and anxiety [26].

The linkage between ethnic or cultural identity, acculturation, and acculturative stress is explicit. Models of Latino youth development include appraisals of discrimination, racism and ethnic identity that lead to perceptions of acculturative stress. Several acculturative stress models are documented in the literature Caplan [27]. Caplan (p.96) provides a useful framework for conceptualizing the inter-dimensionality of acculturative stress that includes instrumental/environmental (e.g., language barriers, unsafe neighborhoods), social/interpersonal (e.g., loss of familial and friendship networks, intergenerational conflicts) and societal (e.g., discrimination, racism, historical trauma). Taken together, these dimensions shape the context of experiencing acculturative stress.

Even though there are over two-dozen documented acculturation measures [28], there are fewer valid and reliable measures of acculturative stress with Mexican American adults and adolescents in the research literature [29]. Acculturative stress measures often include items related to perceptions of discrimination and racism experienced by Latinos. Acculturative stress measures have also been adapted and utilized among Latino adolescents [29,30].

Few studies have reported interventions designed to overcome the effects of acculturative stress among Mexican American adolescents through an intervention or curricula designed to strengthen cultural resiliency [31]. Cultural resiliency is the positive identification with cultural strengths such as values, beliefs, and traditional ways of knowing that have a positive influence on a person's ethnic self-identify and self-esteem [12,14,32].

The Current Study

This study is a preliminary evaluation of a community-based Latino-focused cultural curriculum designed to enhance Latino cultural resiliency and reduce acculturative stress among Mexican American adolescents in a southwestern border community.

Amistades, Inc., a Latino non-profit community-based organization, developed and implemented El Renacimiento (the Renaissance) curricula. Amistades, Inc. developed the curricula to include the concept of cultural healing in addressing the

heightened levels of cultural trauma experienced by Mexican American adolescents and transition age youth in US-Mexico border communities, resulting in unhealthy assimilation as opposed to healthy acculturation. The goal of the curriculum is to empower Latino youth through a positive connection to their cultural and historical roots. To accomplish this goal, the eleven (11) week Renacimiento curriculum introduces the importance of heritage, history, and identity for Mexican American adolescents and transition age youth ages 12 to 21. The examination of indigenous (Indio-Latino) concepts, language and current issues that youth may find relevant to their lives and situations, allows for an openness to exploring one's own identity, awakening thoughts through empowerment, and encouraging voice. Guided by a trained instructor, Mexican American participants explore their heritage and create a positive Latino cultural self-identity by perceiving themselves within a socio-historical context and from an indigenous (Mestizo) perspective. The instructor uses storytelling to discuss current issues relevant to the lives and situations of participants. The instructor address participant's cultural conflicts, health and wellness, self-sufficiency issues, and educational readiness skills, all within the positive context of their rich culture (please contact the authors for a complete description of the curriculum).

Methods

The study recruited Mexican American adolescents from several public and charter middle and high schools in a predominantly Mexican American community in the American southwest. Recruitment began in August 2019 and continued through April 2020, when schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Two-hundred and seventeen (217) Mexican American adolescents participated in the eleven-week El Renacimiento curriculum. Before the curriculum participants completed the Hispanic Stress Inventory for Youth [29], the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican American Youth [33] and a Latino Cultural Self-Assessment developed by Amistades, Inc. One-month post-curriculum, participants completed the Latino Cultural Self-

Identify assessment again. One-hundred eighty-two (182) of the 217 participants completed both pre and post-curriculum assessments. All instruments were self-administered and available in English or Spanish depending on the preference of the participant.

Statistics

The data analysis plan consisted of performing cross tabulations for categorical coded variables, one-way analysis of variance for categorical independent variables with a continuous dependent variable, and correlations among variables. Chi-Square analyses, with Bonferroni Post-Hoc Tests, was used to assess statistical analysis at $p < .05$. All data analyses were performed using SPSS Version 26. As noted previously, the present study used several cultural measures to assess acculturative stress, cultural self-identity and acculturation level among Latino adolescents. All measures have high levels of internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's Alpha.

- The Hispanic Stress Inventory for Youth – Modified [30] measured acculturative stress with higher scores indicating more acculturative stress ($\alpha = .843$).
- The Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican American Youth – Modified [33] measured acculturation, with higher scores indicating higher acculturation to the Anglo dominant culture ($\alpha = .875$).
- A Latino Cultural Self-Identity assessment for Latino Youth measured cultural self-identity with higher scores indicating a more positive Latino cultural identification. (α Pre = .929, Post = .943)

Results

Sample Characteristics

The age range for the sample of Latino adolescents was 10-21 years ($M = 15.00$, $SD = 2.64$). About forty-six percent of youth were 14 and younger, about one-third (32.7 percent) were between the ages of 15-17, and slightly over one-fifth (22 percent) were 18 and older. The majority of the sample was male (78 percent).

Measures	N	# of Items	M	SD	Range	Cronbach's Alpha
Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican American Youth	217	20	2.437	.654	1.0-4.2	.875
Hispanic Stress Inventory for Youth	136	13	16.45	8.26	0-41	.843
Latino Cultural Self-Assessment Scale (PRE)	259	9	11.94	6.16	0-28	.929
Latino Cultural Self-Assessment Scale (POST)	182	9	11.64	6.465	0-28	.943

Table 1: Latino Cultural Measures Used in the Current Study.

As originally developed, the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican American Youth assesses the “type” of acculturation level by taking the total score on the acculturation scale and dividing it by the number of scale items [34]. The ratings are comprised of five (5) types: “Very Mexican,” “Mexican-Oriented Bicultural,” “True Bicultural,” “Anglo-Oriented Bicultural,” and “Very Anglicized.” In the present study, we categorized all participants using these five acculturation types. As seen in Table 2, the majority of the sample are “Very Mexican” and “Mexican-Oriented Bicultural”. About one-fifth are “True Bicultural”, and 12.5 percent are “Anglo-Oriented Bicultural” or “Very Anglicized.” However, due to only one participant falling into the “Very Anglicized” orientation category, the final acculturation rating scale had four types – “Very Mexican,” “Mexican-Oriented Bicultural,” “True Bicultural,” and “Anglo-Oriented/Very anglicized.”

Sample Characteristics	N (217)	Percent
Age Range: 10-21 Years; Mean Age = 15 years; S.D. = 2.64 years		
Age Cohort		
• 14 and Younger	99	45.6
• 15-17 years	71	32.7
• 18 years and Older	47	21.7
Gender		
• Male	169	77.9
• Female	48	22.1
Acculturation Rating Type		
• Type 1 – Very Mexican	59	27.2
• Type 2 – Mexican-Oriented Bicultural	87	40.1
• Type 3 – True Bicultural	44	20.3
• Type 4 – Anglo-Oriented Bicultural	26	12.0
• Type 5 – Very Anglicized	1	0.5

Table 2: Sample Characteristics of Study Population.

Gender differences showed that a higher percentage of Latino females than Latino males had a “Very Mexican” cultural orientation, though not significantly so ($p < .10$). A significantly higher percentage of Latino adolescents 15-17 years of age had a “Very Mexican” orientation than those Latino adolescents 14 years and younger ($p < .05$). Alternatively, a higher percentage of Latino adolescents 14 and younger, and 18 and older had a “Mexican-Bicultural” orientation. Controlling for age, we found that younger Latino males held a more “Mexican” orientation than Latino females did.

Demographic Characteristics	Very Mexican Percent (n)	Mexican-Oriented Bicultural Percent (n)	Bicultural Percent (n)	Anglo-Oriented Bicultural and Very Anglicized Percent (n)
Gender*				
• Male	23.1 (39)	42.0 (71)	20.7 (35)	14.2 (24)
• Female	41.7 (20)	33.3 (16)	18.8 (9)	6.3 (3)
Age Group**				
• 14 and Younger	19.2 (19)	46.5 (46)	20.2 (20)	14.1 (14)
• 15-17	40.8 (29)	25.4 (18)	21.1 (15)	12.7 (9)
• 18 and Older	23.4 (11)	48.9 (23)	19.1 (9)	8.5 (4)

Note: Pearson Chi-Square = 7.424, df = 3, *p<.10; Pearson Chi-Square = 14.085, df = 6, **p<.05

Table 3: Sample Demographic Characteristics by Acculturation Rating Scale Type.

Pearson moment correlation coefficients among the variables of interest are shown in Table 4. Latina females were significantly more likely to be older in age than Latino males ($r=-.232$, $p<.001$), and were more likely to have a more “Mexican” cultural orientation than Latino males ($r=.165$, $p<.05$). Acculturation level was negatively correlated with the acculturative stress ($r=-.228$, $p<.01$), indicating that those Mexican American adolescents who had a more “Mexican” cultural orientation reported higher levels of acculturative stress.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age of Student	1.00					
2. Gender of Student	-.232**	1.00				
3. Acculturation Level - Pre	.098*	.165**	1.00			
4. Hispanic Stress Inventory - Pre	.147*	-.138*	-.228**	1.00		
5. Latino Cultural Self-Identity - Pre	-.054	.010	-.048	-.008	1.00	
6. Latino Cultural Self-Identity - Post	-.039	.010	.072	-.077	.272**	1.00

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

Table 4: Pearson Product Moment Correlations for Pre-Test Variables and Post-Latino Cultural Self-Identity.

Pre-Curriculum Results

The study used a one-group, pretest-posttest research design to evaluate differences in Latino Cultural Self-Identity before and after participating in El Renacimiento curriculum. One-tailed Paired T-Tests were used to examine pre-post curriculum differences on the Latino cultural self-identity assessment, with $p<.05$ set as the apriori significance criterion.

The results showed that Latino adolescents who had a more “Mexican” cultural orientation were more likely to report higher acculturative stress levels as measured by the Hispanic Stress Inventory. The Acculturation Rating Scale was negatively correlated with the Hispanic Stress Inventory ($r=-.258$, $p<.005$), indicating that Mexican American adolescents who had a “Mexican” cultural orientation reported experiencing significantly more acculturative stress than other cultural typologies. The Hispanic Stress Inventory was not statistically associated with the Latino Cultural Self-identification measure at pre-curriculum. Statistically significant differences were found between acculturation level and age and gender of Latino adolescents, with older adolescents having higher acculturation levels, and Mexican American females having a more “Mexican” orientation than males ($p<.05$).

Post-Curriculum Results

Using one sample t-tests, a statistically significant finding emerged for improvement in the Latino Cultural Self-Identity assessment post curriculum ($p < .001$), with a mean increase of 2.1 points or a 15.3 percent increase in positive Latino cultural self-identification. The results showed that Latino adolescents who participated in El Renacimiento curriculum were significantly more likely to report a more positive Latino cultural self-identification of themselves post-curriculum. Overall, El Renacimiento curriculum had a positive impact on Latino adolescents' cultural self-identification. Post-curriculum results did not show significant mean pre-post differences between Latino females and males.

Discussion

Multiple generations of Mexican Americans have experienced anti-Mexican sentiment through prejudice, discrimination and institutional violence [1,2]. Interrupting this cycle of psychosocial stress among Mexican American adolescents may be the first step in fostering cultural resiliency and reducing the negative effects of acculturative stress. A focus on enhancing multiple protective factors while also reducing multiple risk factors is the hallmark of much of the substance abuse prevention research targeting Latino youth and other groups [34]. Our results show that the enhancement of ethnic identity and cultural self-identification among Mexican American adolescents could potentially prevent or buffer the negative psychological and physiological effects of acculturative stress.

There are limitations of the present study, however, that we hope to resolve in future research. Participation in El Renacimiento was non-random. The majority of Latino adolescents either were referred by school personnel or were self-selected into the curriculum. Another limitation is that the sample of Latino adolescents in our study was comprised primarily of "Mexican-Oriented" or "Mexican-Oriented Bicultural" acculturation orientations. Given that the study was in the US-Mexico border region this finding may not be too surprising. The study also did not administer the Hispanic Stress Inventory post-curriculum, which would have assisted in understanding the effects of the curriculum in reducing acculturative stress. In addition, the study obtained limited sociodemographic information from participants (gender and age). A major limitation of the study is that the research design did not include a comparison group. One-sample pretest-posttest interventions without control or comparison groups calls into question the internal validity and reliability of the findings and their generalizability to other Latino subgroups [35].

Nevertheless, few published studies document the positive effects of Latino cultural curricula in enhancing Latino cultural strengths, including ethnic identity [15]. Findings from the

present study, although preliminary, provides some evidence that strengthening Latino cultural identification through an immersive, Latino focused cultural curriculum may prove useful in fostering a positive cultural self-identification. In addition, our findings corroborate other findings in the literature on acculturation level and acculturative stress wherein lower acculturation levels are correlated with higher levels of acculturative stress, and vice-versa [12]. Further, we believe that the use of the categorical acculturation typology conveys more information on participants' cultural orientation rather than simply "lower" or "higher" acculturation does. With this in mind, our approach suggests that research using more standard acculturation measures may not convey a more nuanced approach.

Taking the prevention of acculturative stress and intergenerational trauma one-step further, the current study documents an approach that increases Latino cultural self-identification among Mexican American adolescents as a potential buffer against the negative effects of acculturative stress. Statistically significant findings post-curriculum with Latino cultural self-identification is another strength of the study and adds to the literature regarding evidence-based cultural curricula leading to positive changes in Latino adolescents' cultural identification.

The increase in positive Latino cultural identification among Latino adolescents participating in El Renacimiento curriculum are encouraging. El Renacimiento has had a positive impact on increasing Mexican American males and females Latino cultural self-identity. After the curriculum, Latino adolescents were significantly more likely to have a more positive Latino cultural self-identity than before going through the curriculum.

Increasing cultural self-identification among Latino adolescents is an important social and cognitive process that has the potential of decreasing acculturative stress and its negative health consequences. More prevention and intervention programs are necessary that facilitates Latino adolescents' reconnection to their culture and history. It is unfortunate that curricular policies in several southwestern states have essentially banned the teaching of Mexican American or Chicano Studies in K-12 education that otherwise could have a positive impact on Latino youths' self-esteem and self-identity, and in turn reduce the effects of acculturative stress. El Renacimiento curriculum will continue its efforts in reducing the negative effects of acculturative stress and increase a positive sense of cultural pride, self-worth, and empowerment among Latino adolescents.

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