Supporting Latinx Youth Participation Out-of-School Time Programs

A Research Synthesis

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Scholars in many fields have documented that the sharp population increase among Latinx people in the U.S. has been accompanied by myriad social challenges (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Both established populations and new arrivals struggle to obtain quality education, adequate healthcare, and employment that pays a living wage; they also deal with various forms of discrimination. Analyses repeatedly indicate that these and other issues often shape the daily lives and developmental trajectories of Latinx youth. These social issues also undermine Latinx participation in out-of-school time (OST) programs, which hold potential to promote youth well-being (Guzman-Rocha, McLeod, & Bohnert, 2017). Increasingly, leaders of youth-serving organizations voice concern about low Latinx participation (Borden et al., 2006), often recognizing that poor participation reflects a need to develop new capacities and inclusive practices (Perkins et al., 2007).

As youth development practitioners and researchers, we are often asked to support community efforts to improve inclusion and equity. Recently we were asked to summarize the scholarship on Latinx participation in youth development programs and recommend ways to promote meaningful and sustained participation. This article presents key elements of this research synthesis. Our goal is to help OST programs develop concrete, research-based, context-responsive approaches to improving Latinx participation. First, we elaborate on the importance of Latinx youth participation in OST activities and present the framework that guided our analysis of the literature. After outlining our methodology, we then summarize the key themes in the literature and articulate strategies for developing high-quality OST programs with sustained high Latinx participation. The conclusion poses questions for OST

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practitioners to facilitate critical reflection and thoughtful planning for inclusion of Latinx youth.

Why Latinx Participation in OST Matters

Latinx youth development is an emerging area of study. Most of the earliest empirical works we uncovered were published after 2004. Since that time, scholars have pleaded for greater attention to the needs of Latinx youth (Williams, Tolan, Durkee, Francois, & Anderson, 2012). They insist on a critical need for better engagement strategies to address not only Latinx population increases but also the structural inadequacies of public institutions to address the unique needs of Latinx youth and their families. Analyses of census data portray a generation of Latinx youth whose developmental needs are largely going unmet (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Of specific concern are underresourced schools, poorly developed or nonexistent youth support infrastructures, and high incarceration rates (Borden et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005).

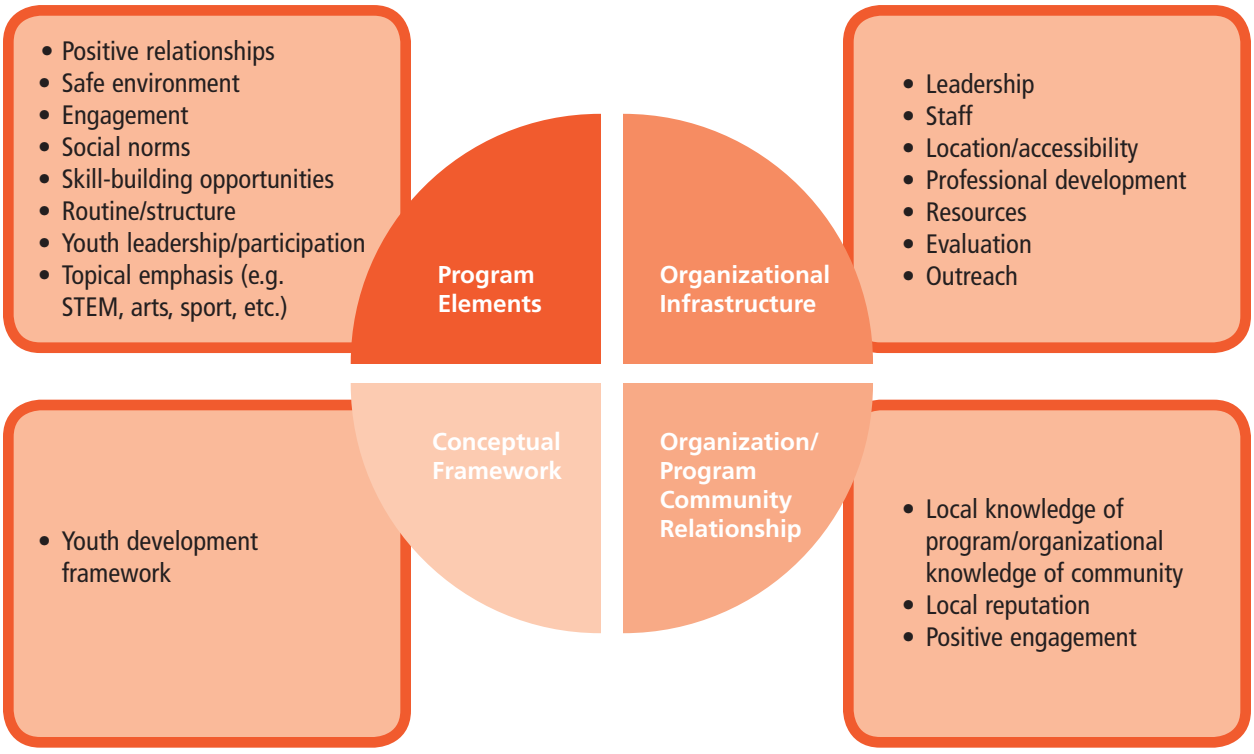
Adding to these concerns, reports on Latinx youth repeatedly show low participation in OST programs at a time when evidence links participation to positive developmental outcomes (Little & Harris, 2003). Programs aiming to connect with Latinx youth face many obstacles. In some communities, a large proportion of Latinx youth are growing up with a single parent, and a significant number of families are experiencing severe poverty (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). Latinx people are settling in areas with no established Latinx communities, raising new social challenges (Fry, 2008). Low academic achievement among one of the country's largest youth populations limits the opportunity to tap the considerable linguistic and cultural capital of these youth (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009).

Research Questions and Methods

To speak to these issues, we brought together a multidisciplinary body of scholarship and practice-based literature from the fields of ethnic studies, sociology, anthropology, youth studies, and human development (Erbstein & Fabionar, 2014). This effort was sponsored by the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, which coordinates California's 4-H Youth Development Program, one of the state's largest OST providers. Two questions grounded our thinking:

- What OST program qualities lead to high and sustained participation rates for Latinx youth in the U.S.?
- What specific attributes of OST programs lead to positive outcomes for Latinx youth in the U.S.?

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Note. Adapted from National Research Council & Institute of Medicine (2002)

We anchored our analysis of the literature in an understanding of high-quality OST programs centered on the four intersecting elements shown in Figure 1: the underlying conceptual framework; core program elements; organizational and programmatic infrastructure; and the relationships between the program and the communities, families, and youth it serves.

To find relevant research, we conducted an exhaustive review of the literature generated by searches for the terms *youth development, program,* and *Latino* or *Hispanic*. Materials included peer-reviewed empirical studies and conceptual articles found through ProQuest Dissertation and Theses, Social Science Citation Index, and Scopus. In addition, we sought policy and research reports in practitioner-oriented research and evaluation repositories. We narrowed the list of sources to 114 by selecting only pieces that focused on positive youth development programs that successfully serve Latinx youth.

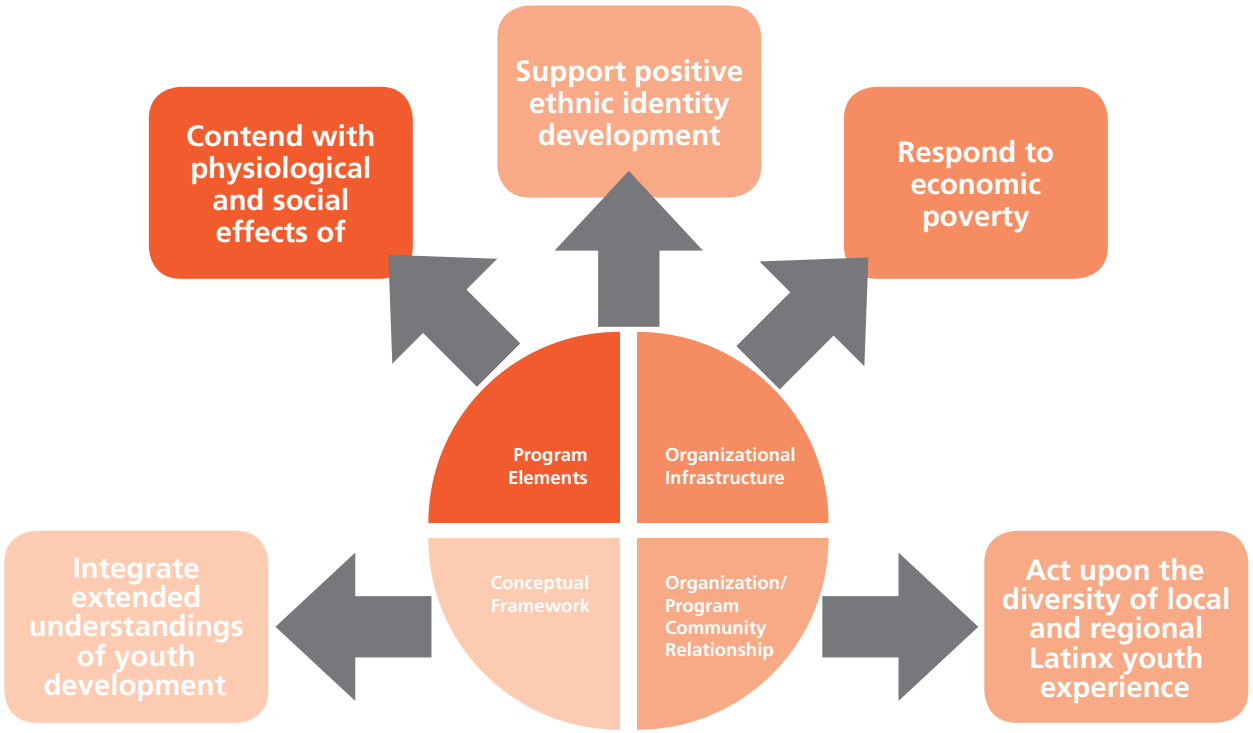
Key Findings in the Literature

We identified five intersecting themes in the literature that are directly relevant to the four dimensions as illustrated in Figure 2.

Extended Understandings of Youth Development

Scholars argue that the structural and cultural challenges Latinx youth often face are not adequately addressed in widely used models of youth development (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). These challenges include cultural dimensions of immigration, immigration status, language, discrimination, and poverty; Latinx youth also often must navigate new social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Dorner, Orellana, & Jiménez, 2008; Easter & Refki, 2004; Valladares & Ramos, 2011). Scholars argue that positive youth development research should attend to racial and ethnic identity as a central element of adolescent development (Williams et al, 2012). Studies of Latinx adolescents focus on the effects of structural factors; underscore variation in experiences depending on whether Latinx youth were born in the U.S. or arrived recently; and highlight the ways in which relationships among family, extended family, and ethnic community often shape development in ways that differ from those of the dominant culture (Borden et al., 2006; Dorner et al., 2008; Schofield et al., 2012). Youth development policies, programs, and practices that effectively serve Latinx youth attend to the specifics of the young people's experience; programs that assume dominant cultural norms can produce inadequate and unsupportive environments (Borden et al., 2006).

Figure 2. Strategies for Latinx Participation



Physiological and Social Effects of Discrimination

Latinx youth, it is repeatedly argued, face individual, organizational, and societal forms of discrimination based on race, language and culture, national or indigenous group background, immigration status, and economic poverty (Edwards & Romero, 2008). Building on early work on the experiences of Black youth and more recent work with Latinx populations, researchers emphasize addressing the effects of discrimination (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Lee & Ahn, 2012). Some also draw attention to experiences of intra-ethnic discrimination within Latinx communities based on race, nationality, or indigenous group (Oaxacalifornian Reporting Team, 2013).

Studies on Latinx youth and discrimination focus on such issues as young people's experiences of discrimination, the relationship between discrimination and stress, the relationship between discrimination and educational and physical and mental health outcomes, and protective factors (Córdova & Cervantes, 2010; Edwards & Romero, 2008). Scholars also draw attention to intersecting aspects of identity in relationship to discrimination. For example, LGBT youth of color are especially vulnerable to discrimination, which leads to high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse and suicide attempts (Russell, Driscoll, & Troung, 2002). Together, these studies highlight the need for youth development programming to directly support eliminating individual and structural discrimination while enabling young people to contend with its effects.

Positive Ethnic Identity Development

Though scholars have long studied adolescent identity development, they have more recently turned their attention to the role of racial and ethnic identity in healthy youth development and positive youth development programs (Swanson et al., 2003; Williams, Tolan, Aiyer, & Durkee, 2013). They argue that positive racial and ethnic identity is an important protective factor (Acevedo-Polakovich, Chavez-Corell, & Umaña-Taylor, 2014; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2012) that should be cultivated.

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Scholars of Latinx youth development discuss various approaches to fostering positive ethnic identity but share a strong critique of "colorblind" orientations. Some focus on having pride in one's heritage (Eater & Refki, 2004), learning racial and ethnic group histories, and participating in cultural activities. Others recognize the power of ethnic traditions and deep-rooted connections to ancestors as a foundation for healing and growth (National Latino Fatherhood and Families Institute, 2012). Another strand seeks opportunities to redress social inequality. This approach helps youth to analyze critically how Latinx people are situated in society by bringing together historical and political knowledge and local advocacy to foster individual and collective agency (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). All of these strategies help Latinx young people learn not only about themselves but also about others in order to facilitate development of relationships across racial and ethnic lines; evidence suggests that such relationships are another important protective factor (Graham, Munniksma, & Juvonen, 2014).

Economic Poverty

Much of the research we reviewed expresses concern about the effects of economic poverty on Latinx youth development and program participation. In California, for instance, over 25 percent of Latinx youth ages 12–17 are growing up in families with annual earnings below the federal poverty line (Erbstein, Greenfield, & Geraghty, 2013). Three interrelated factors in economic poverty are immigration, labor, and community opportunity.

Immigration

Some U.S. Latinx families were never immigrants, particularly those in the portion of the Southwest that was once Mexico. Furthermore, the majority of Latinx children were born in the U.S. (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). Still, immigration patterns remain an important factor in Latinx poverty. Among Latinx youth, 33.8 percent are immigrants, 36.9 percent are U.S.-born children of immigrants, and 29.3 percent are at least third generation (Kochhar, 2009). Much of this immigration is tied to global market conditions. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2009) observe that rapid economic expansion in the 1990s brought an influx of newcomers. Some immigrants leave their home countries to escape violence with roots in the U.S. and global drug market. Many are poor and have little or no formal education (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009).

Labor

Many Latinx people work in low-paying, low-skilled positions in agriculture, service industries, and building trades (Duncan, Hotz, & Trejo, 2006). Such low-paying, unstable jobs can significantly affect families. Members may be separated for weeks or months at a time. Young people may be left with extended families or friends, or they may be uprooted periodically as their parents seek new work. Additionally, 51 percent of Latinx youth are growing up in single-parent households (Lopez & Velasco, 2011), where they are likely to have little supervision. Some young people work to support their families or take on household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and elders (Dorner et al., 2008).

Community Opportunity

Latinx families are found in virtually every type of community: rural, urban, and suburban. Increasingly they live in areas that have not historically had large Latinx populations. However, many Latinx children and youth grow up in violence-prone low-income areas with limited access to public services and youth development programs. Where youth programs do exist, lack of discretionary funds, transportation difficulties, intensive and unpredictable parent work schedules, responsibilities to help out at home, and the stigma of economic poverty can all constrain participation by Latinx youth.

Diversity of Latinx Youth Experiences

Latinx youth are a highly diverse population. In any given place, the Latinx population may include people from substantially different economic, national, and ethnic backgrounds. The sizes of Latinx populations vary, as do the extent to which Latinx people comprise the full population or are one of several ethnic groups. Latinx people may be long-term residents who are fully incorporated into the community, or they may be at the periphery of dominant social, civic, and economic networks. In other places, they are in motion: moving in to seek opportunity or moving out because of gentrification. In one locality, different Latinx subpopulations can occupy varying social, spatial, economic, and political niches.

How Latinx youth understand their identities, the challenges they face, and the resources they have must therefore be understood in relation to specific local and regional Latinx communities is necessary to create responsive youth development programs (Erbstein, 2013; Hobbs & Sawer, 2009).

Strategies for Latinx Participation in High-Quality OST Programs

These five themes have important implications for OST program practices. Most of the practices cited in scholarship on Latinx youth development emerge in programs that focus on improving the social and political situation of local Latinx people. Youth organizing, youth-led participatory action research, community health advocacy, and media- and arts-based empowerment strategies aim to build on young people's assets and amplify their voices so they can improve community conditions. Youth are often positioned as leaders, researchers, and partners with adults; they are tasked with helping to develop and facilitate activities, guide organizations, and represent their communities.

Integrating Extended Understanding of Youth Development

Mainstream youth development frameworks tend to reflect White, middle-class norms (Dorner et al., 2008; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012). These frameworks may ignore or underplay the role of culture and ethnicity in development (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004). They do not differentiate, for instance, between the unique developmental experiences of low socioeconomic status Latinx youth and middle-class White youth.

Building culturally nuanced programs requires understanding the experiences of Latinx youth within their structural contexts. Immigrant and low-income youth, for example, are often situated in institutions and systems differently from middle-class young people. Immigrant youth are also more likely to focus on figuring out how to be bicultural[1] than on differentiating themselves from their family (Dorner et al., 2008).

This intersection of structural conditions, cultural characteristics, and youth development reveals a critical need for program leaders and staff to investigate their own views about youth development and youth and family engagement. They must explore their own assumptions about these processes, identify the personal experiences and cultural contexts that shape these views, and reflect on how these ideas influence practice in ways that might or might not serve Latinx youth and families. These steps can

1 Scholars tend to use the terms *bicultural* and *bilingual* to signify the cultural and linguistic realities of Latinx youth, even though the social contexts of Latinx youth are often multicultural and multilingual.

broaden the prevailing models of development, humanize Latinx young people, and support practices that affirm and build on the young people's experiences.

Many OST settings center their work in the developmental experiences of Latinx youth. Often they are located in organizations that strategically integrate Latinx youth, families, and community leaders into program design, implementation, and evaluation (Borden et al., 2006). Bellanova's (2008) ethnography of RISEN, a faith-based community program, describes how community members and youth help to design and implement TeenSpace, a youth center to serve the community's predominantly Latinx population. Positioning Latinx youth and adults as leaders not only taps the resources these stakeholders bring to the table but also helps organization leaders learn how the development of local Latinx youth differs from that of middle-class White youth.

Contending with Physiological and Social Effects of Discrimination

The fiscal realities of many Latinx families limit access to supports that are often assumed to be available to all youth, such as food, clothing, transportation, internet access, discretionary funds, and enrichment opportunities. Furthermore, continuous exposure to stressful demands about one's ethnicity, race, language, and physical appearance hinder the establishment of a healthy sense of self, culture, and community (Córdova & Cervantes, 2010). At minimum, effective youth development programs avoid exacerbating stress based on young people's ethnic and economic backgrounds. At best, they build the capacity of Latinx youth to navigate and alleviate these stresses.

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One program that provided this kind of social support was a participatory action research project facilitated by the Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California (2013) at the University of California Santa Cruz. The project involved young people in the California Central Valley whose families came from Oaxaca, Mexico, to provide migrant labor. In supportive youth-adult partnerships, participants explored how young adults in this community become involved in civic life. Central to the investigation were questions about the unique cultural and linguistic situation of Oaxacan youth, who navigate indigenous Oaxacan, Mexican, Mexican-American, and other American cultures. Many of these young people are bilingual or trilingual, speaking an indigenous language at home, Spanish with friends, and English in school (Oaxacalifornian Reporting Team, 2013). Programs like this one provide a safe space where youth can develop their identity and understand challenges—including discrimination and complex ethnic dynamics—that impede civic participation and social mobility.

Supporting Positive Ethnic Identity Development

Recent scholarship argues that racial and ethnic identity is a central aspect of healthy youth development rather than a "special topic" (Williams et al., 2012). Growing evidence suggests that positive racial and ethnic identity is a protective factor (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014) associated with a wide range of healthy youth outcomes, including general physical and mental health (Ai, Aisenberg, Weiss, & Salazar, 2014), avoidance of substance use (Unger, 2014), school persistence (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999), resilience in the face of race-related (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Umaña-Taylor, Wong, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2012) and other (Williams et al., 2013) stresses, and other developmental assets (Acevedo-Polakovich et al., 2014; Williams, Anderson, Francois, Hussain, & Tolan, 2014).

Adolescence is an important period in which young people make meaning of their ethnic and racial group membership (Rew, Arheart, Johnson, & Spoden, 2015; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Latinx youth benefit from settings that understand and support their unique cultural and linguistic heritage and help them deal with the challenges and opportunities of navigating more than one language and culture (Hobbs & Sawer, 2009). Researchers encourage youth workers to move away from approaches that emphasize assimilation and toward practices that support *acculturation*, or awareness of ongoing negotiation among cultures and languages (Dorner et al., 2008). Programs for youth from multiple ethnic and cultural backgrounds can promote cultural sharing, build relationships around common challenges, and offer advocacy for resisting anti-immigrant attitudes (Easter & Refki, 2004).

These approaches engage Latinx youth by reflecting the complex processes that shape their developmental realities.

Many Latinx young people, particularly immigrants and children of immigrants, face the challenges of bridging their home culture and language with the dominant culture and language. This work is often a source of tension for children who are navigating cultural terrain that is unfamiliar to their parents (Dorner et al., 2008). Youth development staff who are bicultural and bilingual can help bridge generational gaps between youth and their parents. When bicultural staff are not available, program leaders should ensure that staff members value bilingualism and biculturalism and have experience working with youth in ways that reflect these dimensions of who they are.

Programs that cultivate positive ethnic identity generally involve one or more of four approaches: fostering cultural pride by sharing the ethnic group's histories and participating in cultural artistic expressions such as music, dance, and theater (Flores-González, Rodríguez, & Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2006); developing positive identity through civic participation and social justice activism (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007); providing opportunities that support bicultural and bilingual identity (Hobbs & Sawer, 2009); and engaging youth in activities to support healthy relationships within and outside their own ethnic and racial groups. Vyas, Landry, Schnider, Rojas, and Wood (2012) promote a combination of these strategies, urging programs to tap into Latinx youths' language skills and knowledge of text messaging and social media to bring important messages to community members. This approach positions Latinx youth as advocates because of their language and technology skills and their connection to, concern for, and cultural knowledge of their communities.

These scholars typically do not argue for separate or segregated youth programs. Instead, they make the case that a strong local infrastructure for healthy Latinx youth development provides a variety of options, including not only activities related to specific racial and ethnic groups but also activities that engage youth from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. Regardless of their topical focus, organizations that celebrate and reinforce Latinx youths' cultural and linguistic heritage are more likely to make those youth feel welcome.

For example, Watkins, Larson, and Sullivan (2007) provide a case study of a youth organizing program in which participants developed relationships with individuals who did not share such characteristics as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, and sexual orientation. This experience altered attitudes and behaviors among the primarily Latinx and African American members. Participants developed an understanding of and appreciation for peers of different backgrounds in three stages. The first stage involved building relationships with people from groups outside their own by working together on community organizing projects. The second stage was learning both from informal peer interactions that helped participants overcome media stereotypes and from structured activities facilitated by program staff about injustices experienced by other groups. In the third stage, members began to incorporate the insights of the first two stages into their behavior by showing increased sensitivity to diversity and a commitment to social justice and social action (Watkins et al., 2007).

Responding to Economic Poverty

The stigma associated with poverty and the disproportional distribution of poverty among racial and ethnic groups mean that poverty, social status, and race and ethnicity are closely intertwined. Social stratification based on race or ethnicity and class is reinforced by discrimination that may be overt or covert and individual, organizational, or institutional. Latinx youth may contend with discrimination not only from non-Latinx people but also from Latinx people who differ from them by immigration status, race, nation, or indigenous origin. Concern about potential and actual unfair treatment, as well as acculturation and immigration, cause stress (American Psychological Association, 2016; Dillon, De La Rosa, & Ibañez, 2013; Yoshikawa, Suárez-Orozco, & Gonzalez, 2017). Scholars of Latinx youth development therefore investigate how discrimination and stress affect youth development. They emphasize taking a critical perspective on the historical forces and mechanisms that produce social inequality based on wealth, status, culture, and race and ethnicity (Fisher et al., 2000; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007).

One of many examples of OST programs that offer full access to all young people regardless of socioeconomic status is Batey Urbano, a youth-led cultural space in a predominantly low-income Puerto Rican area of Chicago. The program builds on young people's identities, concern for social equality, and interest in and knowledge of hip-hop (Flores-González et al., 2006). Hip-hop art forms engage youth in critical dialogue about their personal challenges and about the global economic and political forces that shape their struggles and those of other groups. Building on work by Ginwright and Cammarota (2007), the Batey Urbano researchers posit that healthy transformation stems in part from recognizing the role of power and privilege in societies, including the conditions that shape poverty among minority groups (Flores-González et al., 2006).

Acting on the Diversity of the Latinx Youth Experience

Cultivating partnerships and networks in the Latinx community is critical to tapping the unique assets of Latinx youth (Gonzales, 2010; Hampton, 2010; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Developing trusting relationships with families and community leaders is a primary strategy for building these connections. Program staff and leaders can begin to build trust by demonstrating interest in and understanding of local Latinx diversity, particularly the histories of various subgroups and the circumstances that shape their patterns of social interaction. Taking stock of the local community includes gathering facts about residents' countries of origin, educational levels, languages, immigration status, livelihoods, and formal and informal institutions and networks (Gonzalez, 2010; Hobbs & Sawer, 2009; Raffaelli, Carlo, Carranza, & Gonzalez-Kruger, 2005; Román, 1997). This context provides insight into how ethnicity shapes youth development locally and into ways to tailor programs to address demographic differences and promote engagement among stakeholders (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004).

Tara Yosso (2005) argues that a history of resistance to oppressive conditions is an important source of energy, inspiration, and insight for racial and ethnic minority communities.

Developmental frameworks must account for ethnic diversity and experience in order to engender practices that facilitate youth resilience. Culture, with its ability to evolve and adapt, offers a powerful source of strength and knowledge. In addition, youth who grow up in challenging environments develop skills and knowledge that are often overlooked by youth workers. Tara Yosso (2005) argues that a history of resistance to oppressive conditions is an important source of energy, inspiration, and insight for racial and ethnic minority communities. Programs that validate and build on these capacities are well positioned to attract, tap, and serve Latinx youth and their communities.

Ricardo Stanton-Salazar and Stephanie Spina (2003) explored the networking patterns of Mexican-origin adolescents in San Diego, California, to distill methods for accessing opportunity in the face of poverty, racial segregation, and lack of funding for youth-serving institutions. The scholars posit that youth who "make it" often do so because of assistance from nonfamilial adult mentors who support positive racial and ethnic identity development. Based on subsequent analysis, Stanton-Salazar (2011) concludes that such empowerment agents with strong cultural capacities must be positioned as mentors and leaders to transform youth outcomes.

Guiding Principles and Key Questions for Organizations

Given the diversity of Latinx communities, there is no single formula for engaging Latinx youth. However, the analyses and strategies we found in our literature review suggest a set of guiding principles for youth-serving organizations. Each principle has relevance to each component of OST programs in our conceptual framework: program elements, organizational structure, youth development frameworks, and community relations. To provide high-quality programming that engages Latinx youth, program leaders should:

- Cultivate intentionality toward serving Latinx youth and a foundation of care
- Learn about local and regional Latinx communities
- Ensure that their programs reflect local Latinx youth and family experiences, interests, and resources
- Support positive racial and ethnic identity development
- Address the effects of both outside and within-group discrimination
- Tailor outreach and programs to regional economic, language, and immigration patterns
- Engage Latinx community members in designing, implementing, and assessing programs

Leaders must evaluate their engagement strategies in the context of their community and region. The following questions, distilled from our research synthesis, can assist leaders to tailor their policies and practice to the unique needs of the Latinx youth in their area.

- **What is the history of the local Latinx populations?** History provides context for social and cultural dynamics that affect OST participation. How long, for instance, have Latinx people lived here? Have there been waves of newcomers and, if so, from where and why have they come?
- **What resources exist in the Latinx community?** Community assets can support strong ties to Latinx youth. What leaders, formal and informal networks, places of social and cultural significance, and sites of

political engagement can help OST program leaders tailor youth supports?

- **What is the regional economic landscape, and how are Latinx people positioned in it?** An understanding of the work Latinx people are doing helps program leaders understand when and how parents and caretakers can contribute to OST programming. These conditions also affect the extent to which families support their children's participation.
- **What is the social climate of the region and community?** The degree of racial and ethnic diversity, the national and regional origins of the Latinx population, and the tensions within and among racial and ethnic groups can all affect youth engagement. What are the patterns of distribution of power and resources? How do these realities affect where people feel safe and unsafe?
- **How are organization and program staff connected to or disconnected from the Latinx community?** Organizations need to build trusting relationships with Latinx youth, families, and community leaders. Hiring and training culturally competent staff is one step; developing local partnerships is another. To what extent does the program build on the interests, needs, and resources of local Latinx youth and families?

Asking these questions and following these guiding principles will take time, commitment, patience tempered by a sense of urgency, resources, and, above all, openness to input from diverse local Latinx community members. The payoff for this hard work is high-quality OST programming that fully engages Latinx youth.

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