Rural Hispanic Youths' Perceptions of Positive Youth Development Experiences

Abstract

An exploratory study examined rural Latino youths' perceptions regarding positive youth development (PYD), particularly related to aspects such as the definition of PYD, potential benefits of PYD, and motivations for participating in PYD activities. A total of 28 self-identified Hispanic youths participated in focus groups. Findings suggest that participants identified key components of PYD (e.g., skills gained through participation) that are generally consistent with broader research on the topic. Youths' motivations for participating in PYD programs included familial encouragement, availability of the programs, and the engaging/enjoyable nature of the programs. Potential implications for Extension professionals are discussed.

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Introduction

In light of the dramatic shifts in the ethnic composition of the United States in recent decades, there has been increased interest in the experiences and factors that affect the well-being of ethnic minority youth. Nonetheless, there is a lack of information on issues specifically around positive aspects of Hispanic youth development beyond absence of risk, and much of the current research has tended to focus on factors that challenge their well-being (de Guzman & Carlo, 2004).

The purpose of the study discussed in this article was to explore rural Latino youths' perceptions about what constitutes positive youth development (PYD), motivations for participating in PYD programs, and their beliefs about the benefits of their involvement.

Education and PYD

The term *positive youth development* refers to desired outcomes for youth that encompass various personal and interpersonal assets, capacity for productivity, thriving, and health and well-being beyond absence of risk (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). According to Roth et al. (1998), PYD represents such essential outcomes and characteristics in youth that it "encompasses all our hopes

and aspirations for a nation of healthy, happy, and productive individuals" (p. 423). Participation in programs that emphasize PYD has been linked to a host of positive outcomes, such as a commitment to learning, positive values, social skills, positive identity, academic skills, and vocational skill (Roth et al., 1998). These desired outcomes are embedded in PYD as a means for youth to become "competent, engaged, and responsible adults" (Roth et al., 1998, p. 423). Participation in PYD also has been linked specifically to educational outcomes, such as improved attendance and higher academic achievement (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002).

PYD and Hispanic Youth

Substantial evidence suggests that PYD programs provide opportunities for building positive social norms, specific skills, and change needed to participate in supportive relationships (Astroth, 2014). However, much of the associated research has been conducted with European Americans (Perkins & Butterfield, 1999). Little is known about the PYD experiences and perceptions of Hispanic youth, particularly those in rural areas where the Hispanic youth population continues to rapidly increase and where there may be fewer opportunities for participation in such programs (Riggs, Bohnert, Guzman, & Davidson, 2010).

Some youth development professionals have already begun to specifically target and increase the involvement of Hispanic youths in their existing programs. Hobbs (2004) provides several suggestions on how to do so within Extension and 4-H, such as by conducting programming that reflects Latino values, beliefs and traditions; using Spanish language; and applying other associated practices. Research and guidance specifically related to rural Latino youths in PYD programs, however, is still lacking.

Purpose and Objectives

Involving qualitative methodology, the study reported here was intended to explore how rural Hispanic youths in a northeastern Nebraska community define and view PYD activities, programs, and experiences. Given the paucity of research on rural Latino youth's interface with PYD programs (e.g., access, impact), the study was exploratory and aimed to provide some initial information regarding how they understand PYD, their beliefs around benefits of PYD programs, and factors that might encourage their participation. Another goal was to understand the Hispanic youths' self-perceptions of their academic achievement as a result of their involvement in PYD activities, programs, and experiences.

Participants were 28 self-identified Hispanic youths (12 boys, 16 girls), with a median age of 12 years, living in a rural northeastern Nebraska community. Participants were recruited through recommendations of teachers, school administration, adult leaders of PYD organizations, and peers. Participants were not required to be currently involved in a PYD activity or program, and only 25% of participants reported being involved in formal PYD programs, such as Girl Scouts and 4-H. Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the demographic data of the participants.

Table 1.

Demographic Summary of Participants

	Participants	
Ethnicity	**Number**	**Percentage**
South American	1	3.6%
Mexican/Mexican American	23	82.1%

Multiracial	1	3.6%
Other	1	3.6%
Declined to report	2	7.1%
Total	**28**	**100%**

Table 2.

Age Summary of Participants

Participants

Age	Number	Percentage
11	6	21.4%
12	12	42.9%
13	6	21.4%
14	3	10.7%
15	1	3.6%
Total	**28**	**100%**

Procedures

Procedures involved the focus group method, which was chosen for the study because it has the potential to be a synergistic setting in which participants can provide their own individual responses but also build on one another's reactions (de Guzman, Brown, Carlo, & Knight, 2012; Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gilmore, & Wilson, 1995). This scenario can result in emergent insights from the group beyond individual ideas and thoughts. Also, because the aim of the study was to explore participants' perceptions regarding PYD, the focus group format was especially apt as it allows for a "common language" and generally agreed on definitions to emerge (de Guzman et al., 2012; Hollander, 2004).

The first author conducted a total of six focus group discussions, with each group ranging in size from six to 10 participants. Discussions lasted from 45 to 90 min and were guided by a set of questions intended to explore participants' perceptions about the definition of PYD and the link between PYD and academic outcomes.

A complete list of the focus group questions can be found in the appendix. Consistent with the goals of the study, the questions were broad and centered on participants' general beliefs about PYD. Although no formal validation procedures were involved, feedback was sought from several scholars who have substantial expertise in conducting research and programming with ethnic minority audiences and conducting focus group discussions with rural, Latino, and youth audiences. Discussions were conducted in English, audio-recorded, and transcribed. All focus group sessions took place in a public school setting.

Data Analysis

Using qualitative analysis software, NVivo, interview transcripts were analyzed using a two-tier analytic approach. First, an open coding process was conducted to identify relevant words and phrases across the transcripts. Second, categorical descriptors and overarching subcategories were created from the individual codes, such as

"meaning of PYD experiences," "opportunities for PYD experiences," "influence of PYD experiences on school performance," and "parents' support." These subcategories were further collapsed into emergent themes around PYD experiences, familial influence, important life skills, and school success.

Findings

Four main themes emerged from the analysis. They are (a) the role of the family, (b) important life skills, (c) factors determining youth engagement in PYD, and (d) school success.

Role of Family

The first theme that emerged from the data was around participants' beliefs about the role of parents and family in PYD involvement. Although youths suggested that they typically initiated their own involvement, they indicated that family members also encouraged participation. Youths also touched on indirect encouragement, such as that that they participated in PYD programming because it was of value to their families. There were no youths who indicated that they were discouraged from participating. Below is an excerpt that reflects these ideas.

> Researcher: Do your parents or other adults in your life encourage you to go out for school activities?
> Participant 1: My uncle wants me to go out for football so I can get better.
> Participant 2: Yes.
> Researcher (to Participant 2): You said yes. What's the reason behind that?
> Participant 2: It's important to our family.
> Researcher: Do you have an example?
> Participant 2: Like a lot of our family plays instruments.
> Researcher: Is that why you are in band?
> Participant 2: Yes.

Important Life Skills

Youths recognized that PYD programs are intended to encourage positive outcomes, life skills, and assets. They identified skills such as being "respectful," being "polite," and "not being rude"; being able to resist peer pressure; and displaying "cooperation." When asked about how such skills can be gained, they indicated that participation in PYD programs helped but also pointed to the importance of spending time with people who display positive skills and behaviors and emphasized the role of family in this regard. As some youths put it, these other methods for gaining such skills included "not hanging out with bullies" and "spending time with good people."

Factors Determining Youth Engagement in PYD

Several participants indicated that they were involved in formal programs and activities that could be classified as PYD. When asked about why they were participating, they provided various reasons. First, several indicated simply that these activities were available in the community. Second, several indicated that the activities and programs were "fun" and that the activities provided "entertainment" and "something to do." Third, participants noted that the activities provided opportunities to meet other people.

School Success

Finally, about a quarter of the participants indicated that they believed PYD participation was linked to school success. Several gave examples of how their grades increased as they participated in a program. Participants shared a variety of observations regarding a potential link between PYD activities, programs, or experiences and school success. The 25% of participants involved in PYD were able to share personal stories of connections between specific PYD involvement and academic success. Below is an excerpt that exemplifies this idea.

> Researcher: When you were involved with Girl Scouts, were your grades better?
> Participant: Umm, yes.
> Researcher: Why do you say that?
> Participant: I started Girl Scouts in the After School Program and then joined on my own. When I started, my grades go higher and higher because Girl Scouts teaches me about math and all that. Just because of them I had higher grades.

Discussion

The goal of the study described here was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Hispanic youths around PYD programming. Several key points can be gleaned from the findings. First, participants' understanding of PYD focused on outcomes around specific life skills that can be gained from participation in PYD activities (e.g., being polite, resisting peer pressure). Such responses reflect a deep understanding of PYD principles—focusing on the underlying skills versus the nature of the activity (e.g., soccer)—and are generally consistent with broader scholarly definitions of PYD (e.g., Lerner et al., 2005; Roth et al., 1998).

Second, although participants talked about specific skills that can be gained by participating in PYD programs, they also talked about how these same skills can be gained in other, nonformal contexts, such as from interacting with family and being with the right people. Thus, although they indicated that participating in PYD is a way to gain these skills, they recognized that it is not the only way. Third, participants' discussions about why they participate in PYD programs included a range of reasons that may be of special relevance to educators and programmers who are targeting rural Hispanic youth. Consistent with other scholars' assertions regarding limited availability of programming in rural areas (e.g., Riggs et al., 2010), several youths indicated that they participated in such programs simply because they were available. Youths also talked about the role of family in both directly and indirectly promoting participation and about the fun, enjoyable, and engaging nature of the activities.

Implications for Extension

Several implications can be gleaned from the findings. The findings suggest the need to explore how programming in Extension captures the reality and perceptions of rural Hispanic youth. For example, participants in the study, like most youths, reported valuing experiences that allow them to develop critical life skills and that are enjoyable. However, their responses also suggest that these perceptions and experiences were culturally mediated. For example, consistent with research on the importance of family among Hispanics, youths noted the role of parents and family members in encouraging them to participate in PYD programs and their motivation to participate in programs that were valued within their families. As Hobbs (2004) noted, Extension professionals can combine knowledge and understandings of PYD and Hispanic cultural connectivity to create programming that

is engaging to youth, yet culturally responsive. Extension programming that draws on the "collective identity" of the Hispanic community is also important to consider. For example, in recruitment, do we go beyond educational professionals to a youth's family, older siblings, peers, or other trusted adults? How do our programs represent the activities Hispanic youths regularly engage in within their communities and also invite community members to participate?

Lastly, the research reported in this article suggests the importance of integrating PYD into activities for rural Hispanic youth. Youths in the study who participated in PYD programs indicated that one motivation for doing so was that the programs were available, but they also accurately named many of the skills targeted by PYD. In addition to appreciating the enjoyable aspects of programming, rural Hispanic youth may be motivated by the skills they can gain from PYD activities. As we in Extension integrate our knowledge of PYD with culturally responsive engagement, we can better recruit, retain, and serve Hispanic youth with Extension programming.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

1. What is positive youth development?

2. What examples of positive youth development can you share?

3. What opportunities are in the Columbus community for youth your age?

4. Have you been recruited by these groups?

5. What skills are important for youth your age to learn?

6. How do you learn these skills?

7. How are other kids gaining these skills?

8. Why or why not are you involved in some of the groups that other kids are involved in?

9. What has been the most influential out-of-school experience for you? Why?

10. What specifically do you like the most about positive out-of-school experiences?

11. How has your out-of-school experience changed your success in school?

12. How do your grades change when you are involved in such activities?

13. How do you think this would be different for you if you lived in a bigger city?

14. How do your parents or other adults in your life support your involvement in out-of-school activities?