

**Positive Latino Youth Development: The Impact of Perceived Community Support on Latino Youths' School Plans**

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### **Abstract**

There is minimal research in the current literature investigating the important cultural contexts relevant to the development of ethnic minority youth. Positive youth development theory and research have identified seven key components that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The current study entails a secondary data analysis of an existing database that elucidates the associations between one of those seven key hypotheses, Community Support, and its antagonist, Negative Affect, in the Latino population. Additionally, the current study found significant correlations between the amount of perceived community support and Latino youths' feelings about attending middle and high school as well as their future school plans. The database contains 7,019 Minnesota Latino adolescents from 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

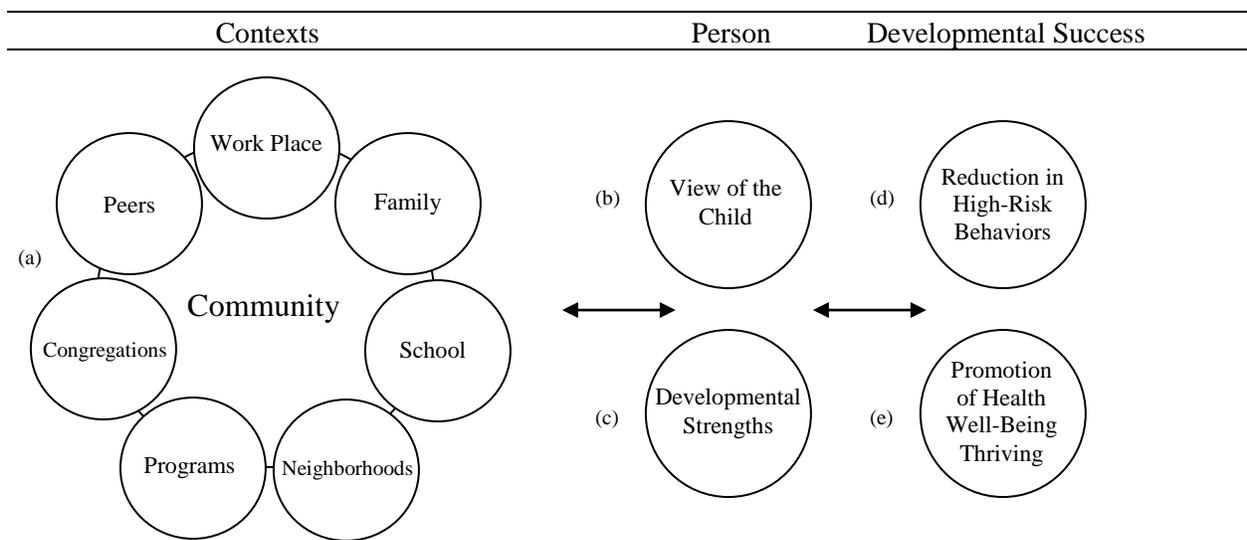
## **Positive Latino Youth Development: The Impact of Perceived Community Support on Latino Youths' School Plans**

The Latino population is the country's largest ethnic minority group. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), Latinos represent 14.8% of the current population, projecting that by the year 2015, the Latino population will grow to an estimated 53.7 million. By the same year, Latino youths between the ages of 10 and 20 years will comprise 16.7% percent of the Latino population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Eamon and Mulder (2005), along with other researchers, indicate that Latino youths "fare worse on several indicators of well-being, such as socio-emotional functioning, academic achievement, and educational attainment" (p. 117). To date, social psychology research has provided a tremendous amount of information about individual attributes (i.e., behaviors/attitudes), family-related attributes (i.e., family structure/social capital), and structural attributes (i.e., school practices) that are associated with Latinos' educational *failures* (Vélez and Saenz, 2001). But, on the other hand, there has been minimal research regarding the factors that influence Latino students to thrive and succeed (Rodriguez, Morrobel, & Villarruel, 2003). This positive information, as stated by many researchers, educators, and demographers, would be useful to practitioners and policymakers in creating programs, policy, and practices that would benefit Latino youths. "Policymakers and educational leaders need to promote efforts aggressively to ensure that today's Latino students do not turn into a lost generation" (Vélez & Saenz, 2001, p. 462). In this study, we will focus on one of the seven key hypotheses identified in the Positive Youth Development literature as one of the largest possible approaches of improving positive youth development: Community Support (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006).

### *Positive Youth Development*

In their comprehensive review of the theory and research on positive youth development, Benson, Scales, Hamilton, and Sesma (2006) identified six principles about which there is broad consensus, including (a) youth have the inherent capacity for positive development; (b) positive development is enabled through relationships, contexts, and environments that nurture development; (c) positive development is enhanced when youth participate in multiple meaningful relationships, contexts, and environments; (d) all youth benefit from these opportunities, the benefits of which generalize across gender, race, ethnicity, and family income; (e) community is a critical delivery system for positive youth development; and (f) youth themselves are major actors in their own development, serving as a central resource for creating the kinds of relationships, contexts, environments (ecologies), and communities that facilitate optimal development.

The core ideas on positive youth development involve those represented in Figure 1. The developmental contexts from an ecological perspective where youth are located (a) interact with the inherent capacity of youth to grow and thrive, (b) their developmental strengths, skills, competencies, values and dispositions, (c) and two related aspects of developmental success, (d) the reduction of high-risk behaviors, and (e) the promotion of healthy well-being or thriving (Benson, et al., 2006).



Source: Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma (2006)

*Figure 1. Core Positive Youth Development Constructs.*

Benson et al. (2006) identified three theoretical strands that contribute centrally to a theory of youth development, an area that integrates multiple theoretical orientations, including human development, community organization and development, and social and community change. Benson et al. (2006) cite Damon (2004) from his article “What is Positive Youth Development,” who argued that a positive vision of youth potential has implications for research, education, and social policy, and the relevance of three additional areas of research including resilience, the newborn capacity to demonstrate empathy, and moral awareness and prosocial behavior. They also cite Lerner’s (2002) statement that “changes across the life span are seen as propelled by the dynamic relations between the individual and the multiple levels of the ecology of human development (family, peer group, school, community, culture), all changing interdependently across time” (Lerner, cited by Benson et al., p. 904). Lerner (2004) also employs the concept of developmental regulation to help us understand how individuals manage their relations with multiple contexts (from the idea of relative plasticity). Most importantly, on

top of this, diversity both in terms of persons and contexts is clearly important in the domains of ecological and systems dynamics. McLoyd (1998), Rodriguez and Morrobel (2004), Sesma and Roehlkepartain (2003), Spencer (1995, 1999), and others are investigating important cultural contexts relevant to the development of ethnic minority youth. Unfortunately, the areas of theories of context and community change are suggested to be the least developed (Benson et al., 2006).

### *Positive Youth Development Hypotheses*

Through their comprehensive review of positive youth development theory and research, Benson et al. (2006) have identified seven key hypotheses, for which there is emerging empirical support: (1) Contextual Change; (2) Youth Action; (3) Covariation; (4) Pile-Up; (5) Longitudinal; (6) Community; and (7) Universality/Diversity. In this context, community is viewed as a viable focus for understanding and promoting dynamics, crucial for maximizing context-person relations. It is important to highlight that the largest improvements in positive youth development will occur in response to interventions that are aimed at changing communities rather than individuals.

### *The Importance of Community Support for Latino Youths*

Community, as stated above, is a tangible medium in which children are able to interchange and communicate with others, and more importantly, it is the critical delivery system for positive youth development. But, unfortunately, a high percentage of Latino youths live in higher poverty rates than of non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Due to this factor, Latino youths are more likely to face developmental risks such as being born to teenage mothers, attending low-quality/segregated schools, and residing in disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities (Eamon & Mulder, 2005). These negative factors, among many

others, are highly associated with poor academic achievement, low educational attainment, and the detrimental decision of many Latino youths to leave school indefinitely (Vélez & Saenz, 2001). The need to increase Latino youths' educational resilience and positive development, through increased community support, is considered imperative, especially since it is estimated that Latino youths will account for the majority of the overall youth population growth by 2015 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2008).

In order to highlight the critical importance of community, in the current paper we investigate the impact that perceived community support has on Latino youths' feelings about attending middle and high school, and especially their feelings regarding their future school plans. Additionally, since negative affect has been shown to be a driver to engage in risky decisions and behaviors (e.g., Bruyneel, Dewitte, Franses, & Dekimpe, 2008), we look at the relationship between Latino youths' perceived community support and their perceived negative affect. As researchers, we hope that these results help augment the lack of Latino youth asset development literature.

### **Methods**

*Minnesota Student Survey (MSS).* The current study entails a secondary analysis of the Minnesota Student Survey database. The MSS is administered every three years, most recently in 2007. During each administration year, all operating public school districts are invited to participate. In 2007, a total of 136,549 students participated from grades 6th, 9th, and 12th. Some items were deemed inappropriate for students in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and were not asked on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade form. Results from the MSS are provided by public school students in Minnesota via local public school districts and managed by the MSS Interagency Team, including the MN Departments of Education, Health, Human Services, Public Safety, and Corrections.

*Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).* For the creation of both Community Support and Negative Affect scales, the following methodology was followed. The factor structures, based on factors expected from theory and prior research, were assessed through CFA. It's been shown that CFA provides strong construct-related evidence regarding the factor structure of measurement scales. To complete the CFA for each measure, MPLUS 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007) was used at the student level. MPLUS is useful for CFA analysis because it allows for dichotomous and ordinal factor indicators (items), and utilizes an estimation routine that accommodates missing data. The estimator for this type of analysis is a robust weighted least squares estimator (WLSMV), employing probit regression for factor estimation. Thus, the CFA correctly models thresholds of rating scale items (steps between rating scale points) rather than intercepts and means (typically modeled by CFA with continuous indicator variables). We hope to provide evidence to support the use of these measures for future Latino youth research.

*Rasch Scaling.* Both measures were Rasch scaled conducted with Winsteps 3.67 (Linacre, 2008). Rasch scaling was used to create scale scores, providing scale (statistical) properties that make them stronger variables in General Linear Model (GLM) based analyses. Rasch scales move indices from an ordinal level of measurement to interval level, providing a stronger scale for correlational methods. The interval level of measurement in the Rasch scale values is probably the most significant benefit of using Rasch scaling, rather than simple summed scores. These scale scores contain the maximum variance possible. Rasch analysis also provides a strong tool to evaluate the rating scale structure of survey rating scale items. It allows us to evaluate the ordinal value of each point (thresholds) on the rating scale, potentially identifying points on the scale that are not functional or questions for which the rating scale points are disordered – indicating more fundamental problems with the measure as constructed by a specific set of items.

It is possible that such items would also be identified in the CFA analyses described above. Rasch analysis essentially locates each indicator on the same scale as person trait levels, providing for a meaningful ordering of indicators relaying information about their rarity or severity of each indicator (a form of item difficulty). Rasch scaling provides an efficient way to estimate trait values for individuals who have not responded to every item. The Rasch model also provides a strong basis from which to estimate reliability of each measure.

*Pearson Correlations.* The primary analyses for this paper include a series of correlations conducted with SPSS (Version 17.0; SPSS, 2009). We present the correlations among the scales described above as well as the correlations between each scale and Latino youth scores regarding their feelings about attending middle and high school and their scores regarding future school plans. We also present differences in scale descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) by grade, gender, and students of Mexican descent compared to other Latino students.

## **Results**

The MSS database included a total of 7,416 participants (48.8% Males) that described themselves as Mexican American/Chicano/Chicana and/or Puerto Rican/Other Latin American. Since the choices for the ethnicity/race question were non-mutually exclusive, there was an overlap for the Latino participants: 5,598 described themselves as Mexican American or Chicano/Chicana, 2,215 as Puerto Rican or other Latin American, and 397 as both. Those participants that checked both choices were not included in the analysis. The final breakdown in grade level is as follows: 42.7% in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 38.3% in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and 19.0% in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Table 1 presents the descriptive information of the dataset.

Table 1: Gender and Latino Group Percentages by Grade of the Minnesota Student Survey 2007 (MSS)

Grade	Male (%)	Female (%)	Mexican American/ Chicano/Chicana (%)	Puerto Rican/ Other Latin American (%)
Sixth Grade	49.9	50.1	79.6	20.4
Ninth Grade	47.5	52.5	72.7	27.3
Twelfth Grade	50.4	49.6	64.7	35.3

*Note: N = 7019.*

### *Scales and Items*

Incremental fit indices such as the comparative fit index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used. The CFA showed that the model produced the following fit indices: CFI = 0.82 and RMSEA = 0.06. Both the Community Support and Negative Affect scales were found to be unidimensional and have adequate rating scale structure. Five items of the Community Support Scale (Table 2) were submitted to Rasch analysis. The hierarchy of item-difficulty was found to be logical and estimates ranged from -3.15 to 3.06 logits; the person reliability index was 0.76. This indicates that fair consistent inferences can be made. Ten items of the Negative Affect Scale (Table 2) were also submitted to Rasch analysis. The item-difficulty hierarchy was also found to be logical and estimates ranged from -5.36 to 3.85 logits; the person reliability index was 0.86. This indicates that good consistent inferences can be made.

Table 2: Scale and Item Information for the 2007 Minnesota Student Survey (MSS)

Scale Name	Item Stem
Community Support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How many of your teachers are interested in you as a person?</li> <li>2-5. How much do you feel ...</li> <li>2. friends care about you?</li> <li>3. teachers/other adults at school care about you?</li> <li>4. religious or spiritual leaders care about you?</li> <li>5. other adults in your community care about you?</li> </ol>
Negative Affect	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1-6. How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</li> <li>1. I get a lot of headaches, stomachaches or sickness</li> <li>2. I am often irritable and angry</li> <li>3. I often have trouble concentrating</li> <li>4. I am restless and cannot stay still for long</li> <li>5. I often have trouble getting to sleep and staying asleep</li> <li>6. I am often unhappy, depressed or tearful</li> <li>7-9. During the last 30 days,</li> <li>7. have you felt sad?</li> <li>8. have you felt so discouraged or hopeless that you wondered if anything was worthwhile?</li> <li>9. have you felt nervous, worried, or upset?</li> </ol>

*Note:* Items 1 (Community Support Scale) and 1-9 (Negative Affect Scale) were reversed scored.

Furthered correlations were carried out between the scales described above and the two other items that assessed Latino youths' feelings about attending middle and high school and their future school plans (Table 3). The Community Support Scale significantly correlated with Latino Youths' feelings about attending middle school and high school and with their future school plans ( $r = .30, p < .001$ ;  $r = .23, p < .001$ ; respectively); showing that the higher one feels supported by members of the community, the higher their current school feelings, but more importantly, the higher the perceived community support, the higher their feelings about futures school plans, supporting the importance of community support in the Latino youth population.

Table 3: Item information and Item/Scale Correlations

Item Stem and Answer Choices

Feelings about attending Middle School and High School (Current School Feelings)

1. How do you feel about going to school?
  - I like school very much
  - I like school quite a bit
  - I like school a little
  - I don't like school very much
  - I hate school

Feelings about future school plans (Future School Feelings)

1. Which of these best describes your school plans?
  - I would like to quit school as soon as I can
  - I plan to finish high school but don't think I'll go to college
  - I'd like to go to some kind of trade school or vocational school after high school
  - I'd like to go to college after high school
  - I'd like to go to college and then go on after college to graduate or professional school

	CSA	NAS	CSF	FSF
Community Support Scale (CSA)	-			
Negative Affect Scale (NAS)	-.32**	-		
Current School Feelings (CSF)	.30**	-.21**	-	
Future School Feelings (FSF)	.23**	-.07**	.32**	-
<i>M</i>	15.69	22.13	3.47	3.85
<i>SD</i>	5.10	7.93	1.15	1.04
<i>Range</i>	1 – 25	1 – 44	1 – 5	1 – 5

Note: Current School Feelings Item was reversed. \*\* $p < .001$

As seen below (Table 4), as community support decreased (from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade), there's a decrease in current school feelings, but, as community support increased (although not significantly) from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, current school feelings and future school feelings increased. Furthermore, the decline in current school feelings was associated with the loss of perceived community support, coupled with an increase in negative affect.

The differences in scale descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) are shown below (Table 4) and are broken down by grade, gender, and students of Mexican descent compared to other Latino students. There's a significant decrease in perceived community support from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(5646) = -17.68, p < .001$ , and from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(4305) = -14.12, p < .001$ , but not from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in which there's a non-significant increase in

perception of community support. Negative affect, on the other hand, significantly increased from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(5506) = 7.32, p < .001$ , and from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(4206) = 6.06, p < .001$ , but not from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, where there's a non-significant decrease. The relationship between these two variables go hand in hand, as perceived community support significantly decreased from 6<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, negative affect significantly increased, and vice-versa, as perceived community support increased from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, negative affect decreased.

Table 4.  
Scale Means (SD) by Grade, Gender, and Latino Group.

Scale	Grade			Gender		Latino Group	
	6th	9th	12th	Male	Female	Mexican American/Chicano/a	Puerto Rican / Other
Community Support Scale (CSA)	16.92 (5.11)	14.78 (4.94)	14.80 (4.81)	15.21 (5.17)	16.16 (4.98)	15.64 (5.12)	15.86 (5.03)
Negative Affect Scale (NAS)	21.40 (7.87)	22.74 (8.06)	22.59 (7.67)	20.37 (7.41)	23.80 (8.05)	22.11 (8.00)	22.19 (7.74)
Current School Feelings (CSF)	3.60 (1.16)	3.33 (1.13)	3.45 (1.12)	3.35 (1.18)	3.58 (1.11)	3.46 (1.16)	3.49 (1.12)
Future School Feelings (FSF)	-	3.82 (1.07)	3.92 (0.96)	3.71 (1.09)	3.99 (0.97)	3.75 (1.05)	4.08 (0.97)

Note: Future School Feelings Item was not asked in the 6th grade form.

Furthermore, Latino youths' current school feelings significantly decreased from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(5640) = -8.83, p < .001$ , and from 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(4296) = -4.10, p < .001$ , but significantly increased from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(3992) = 2.98, p < .01$ . The relationship between community support and current school feelings was statistically significant, meaning that as perceived community support decreased from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, current school feelings decreased, and vice-versa, as community support increased from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, current school feelings increased. Lastly, there's also a significant increase in future school feelings from 9<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade,  $t(3960) = 3.01, p < .01$ . As perceived community support increased from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, future school feelings increased. The familywise error rates were controlled for by utilizing Fisher's (1935) least significance difference (LSD) test.

Additional statistical tests showed gender differences across the two scales and school feelings. All four variables favored the females; more specifically, females had higher perceived community support,  $t(6929) = 7.74, p < .001$ ; higher negative affect,  $t(6791) = 18.28, p < .001$ ; higher current school feelings,  $t(6894) = 8.57, p < .001$ ; and higher future school plans,  $t(3837) = 8.46, p < .001$ , than males. Lastly, statistical differences were found between the Mexican American/Chicano/a and Puerto Rican/Other in future school plans, where the Puerto Rican/Other group had higher scores,  $t(2420) = 9.442, p < .001$ . Further inquiries should be directed to these group differences.

## **Discussion**

Through further and deeper analyses such as ours, we expect to augment the importance that community, and especially community support, has on Latino adolescents, hoping to bring much attention to the utility of the literature of Positive Youth Development for the Latino population. Community support has been shown to be an assuaging tool for school and academic

failure and we have shown this to be true for this Latino youth sample; more specifically, school feelings decrease as perceived community support decrease, and future school plans increase as perceived community support stabilizes. It is essential to communicate the importance that community support has on Latino students' school feelings and future school plans to community members, but, we believe it is more important to also teach community members how to best support their youth population that require their support and attention.

Even though population statistics show that Latinos are the largest ethnic minority, only a small amount of research has focused on Latino adolescents. It is our attempt to augment this asset orientation data to the existing iota of data. Research analyses such as ours are useful to practitioners and policymakers in creating programs, policy, and practices that would benefit Latino adolescents. "Communication between researchers, policy makers, youth service providers, parents, and youths themselves must occur to achieve the goal of successful Latino youth development" (Rodriguez & Morrobel, 2004, p. 122).

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