Societal Perceptions and Developmental Assets of Latina Youth From Low-Income Schools: Implications for Social Work Prevention Efforts

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Abstract: *Ensuring healthy development for youth is one of the Grand Challenges of the social work profession. This Grand Challenge seeks to reduce behavioral health problems in youth through prevention efforts. This paper presents a mixed-methods study of sixty Latina adolescents from low-income schools to better understand their perceptions of what it is like to be a girl in U.S. society and explore their strengths through their developmental assets. Understanding their assets rather than deficits would allow social workers as program developers, practitioners, and researchers as well as educators, to be able to focus on prevention. Overall, the study participants showed a strong foundation of assets reflecting personal development along with perceived support from family, school, and other social aspects of their lives. Some of the girls exhibited developmental vulnerability in terms of positive identity and constructive use of time. Additionally, findings from focus groups suggested four themes, including feeling external pressure from both other girls and boys to meet societal beauty ideals, gender-based norm disparities and double standards, desire for reliable support systems, and belief in self about achieving their goals. Based on the findings, implications for social workers engaging in positive youth development and preventative programming for Latina adolescents are provided through intersectionality and equity.*

Keywords: *Latinas; Healthy youth development; societal perceptions; behavioral health; positive youth development*

The Grand Challenge to Ensure Healthy Development for Youth, as originally described by Hawkins et al. (2015) and recently updated by Shapiro et al. (2022), speaks to addressing one of the Grand Challenges for the social work profession, namely reducing behavioral health problems of youth while addressing the racial, gender and socioeconomic disparities for youth in this country. Preventative approaches, as described by Hawkins et al. (2015), are considered the keys to ensuring healthy youth development by reducing the adversities faced by youth that lead to behavioral health problems. Additionally, youth of color (and those that identify with multiple social identities, i.e., intersectional) are more often disproportionately affected in terms of social determinants of health in comparison to other youths. Although there are a few evidence-based prevention intervention programs (see Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, 2024), there is much more to be learned on promoting positive youth development, particularly for ethnic communities, such as the Latinx and those with intersecting identities.

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It is widely known that Latinx populations are one of the fastest-growing demographics within the United States (ACT for Youth [ACT], 2021; Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), however, the specific strengths and challenges that Hispanic/Latina adolescents face are still areas in need of greater study and research. With an increased understanding of the importance of an intersectional approach to research, it is becoming clear that individuals experience life differently based on their various social identities. As defined by Mehrotra (2010), an intersectional approach to research is one in which race, gender, class, and privilege are recognized as "interlocking and interdependent oppressions that are simultaneously experienced" (p. 418). Based on this definition, there are risk factors that disproportionately impact Latina youth. For instance, teenage pregnancy rates among Latina adolescents in the U.S. remain significantly higher than those seen among their white counterparts (Barber et al., 2008; Berg & Nelson, 2016; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). For instance, from 2018 to 2019, birth rates for Latina adolescents were 25.3 births per 1,000 girls (between the ages 15-19), almost two times higher than those of non-Hispanic white females (11.4; CDC, 2021). Pregnant Latina adolescents are 4.5 times more likely than their White counterparts and 1.5 times more likely than Black girls to drop out of school (Berg & Nelson, 2016). This has far-reaching implications for Latinx communities, such as poorer general health, higher incidents of drug abuse, and higher rates of incarceration when compared to those who completed high school (Berg & Nelson, 2016; Peguero et al., 2016).

Arguably, one of the most troubling threats to youth of color, such as Latinas, is that of sexual exploitation and abuse. Todres and Diaz (2019) contend that while there is no singular profile of the diverse range of youth who fall subject to abuse and exploitation, there are clear individual, relational, and communal factors that contribute to individual risk. Most notably, young girls from marginalized and low socio-economic groups are consistently the most vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking.

Past research efforts have played an important role in uncovering the health and well-being disparities that exist for often disenfranchised populations, giving shape to systems of oppression that can otherwise be hard to grasp. Despite this research being critically important in validating and conceptualizing the experiences of underserved populations, focusing entirely on deficits and risk factors overlooks the areas of strength and resilience that can also comprise parts of their experience. This emphasis on deficits can be harmful to underrepresented individuals, perpetuating narratives of damaged communities in need of dominant culture/settler interventions (Wood et al., 2018). In their study centralizing empowerment theory, a modality defined by enhancing wellness, identifying strengths, and searching for environmental influences instead of fixing problems and cataloging risk factors, Lardier et al. (2018) found that psychological empowerment and a strong sense of ethnic identity act as a buffer against risky behaviors. Similarly, Motti-Stefanidi (2014) determined that immigrant adolescents with higher self-efficacy beliefs were often protected from a number of the risk factors isolated in previous research. This led the researcher to conclude that the way young people see the world can greatly influence how they experience their surroundings, and this subjective perspective often has a greater impact on their ability to adjust than the objective environment itself. By shifting the focus

from what is not working to what is working, we reinforce narratives of communal and individual strength in the face of limiting environmental realities.

The study on Latina youth which will be described in the next section, uses the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP; Search Institute, n.d.) as a way to measure in a more balanced manner the positive ingredients needed for successful youth development. One of the major strengths of this tool is the practical findings that can empower youth and their support systems to take meaningful action (Benson et al., 2011). In the 40-plus decades since its inception, the DAP has shown that positive outcomes (e.g., social and emotional health, the absence of health-compromising behaviors such as alcohol use, drug use, violence, and antisocial behavior, school success, contribution, and caring) increase as developmental assets increase, positioning itself as an important complement to understanding and reducing risk factors (Benson et al., 2011).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the knowledge base on the Grand Challenge of ensuring healthy development for youth, specifically Latina adolescents from low-income schools. By utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study aims to comprehensively understand these adolescents' perceptions of girlhood in U.S. society and explore their strengths through developmental assets. Social workers, educators, and researchers can emphasize prevention efforts by shifting the focus from deficits to assets.

The Study

Given their demographic prominence, Latina youth in the U.S. are relatively understudied, but the few statistics that have been reported often depict them as an at-risk population. To address the research gaps, this exploratory study applied a cross-sectional and mixed-methods approach and focused on discovering the societal perceptions and developmental assets of Latinas attending middle and high schools in low-income neighborhoods. The mixed-method approach allowed the researchers to collect quantitative data to empirically understand Latina youth's functioning. To supplement the quantitative results, a qualitative component of the study produced rich descriptions underlying the analytic results that provided meaning that Latina youth make of their supports and developmental assets. A positive youth development approach provides the potential for examining the growth and adaptive functioning of Latina youth rather than a problem or deficit-focused approach (Benson et al., 2011). In this study, it should be noted that the terms Hispanic and Latina/x will be used interchangeably.

Latina students from Southern California middle and high schools participated in a one-day positive youth development convening titled “Keepin’ it 100,” a slang phrase that refers to one’s own integrity or to being one hundred percent real or true to who you are (Urban Dictionary, 2017). During the convening, before any positive youth development activities took place, participants engaged in focus groups and completed the Developmental Assets Profile (DAP; Search Institute, n.d.). The purpose of the study was to add to the knowledge base about Latina adolescents’ perceptions of what it is like to be a girl in U.S. society today, including what is important to them, as well as to explore their developmental assets as part of what Hawkins et al. (2015), describe in their discussion paper titled, *Unleashing the Power of Prevention*.

Procedures

A convenience sample was used to recruit 61 girls who volunteered for the convening and the research study. The girls were recruited from public middle and high schools located in Southern California from the Santa Ana School District, a predominantly Hispanic school district that has over 80% of students receiving free or reduced meals (Education Data Partnership, 2024). All the youth participated in the girls' convening, a one-day event on a university campus where girls were transported by school buses and exposed to talks from inspirational young female leaders of color. Girls participated in guided expressive arts activities meant to be self-affirming and empowering.

Data collection occurred on June 17, 2017, during the convening. Before the youth development activities began, the girls were randomly assigned to nine focus groups of 5-7 girls in each group. The focus groups asked them to identify what it is like to be an adolescent girl in the 21st century, among other questions. Each focus group was led by a female educator and lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour. The educators were given an hour of training before the convening on data collection, and the lead author provided them with a semi-structured interviewing protocol. Each session was audio recorded by a master of social work level student who later transcribed the recordings.

Immediately following the focus groups, the youth were administered the DAP, which they completed with brief instructions provided by a female educator. The participants were provided 30 minutes to individually complete the DAP via paper/pencil format. The data was then transferred onto an Excel sheet for analysis. The University of Southern California's Institutional Review Board deemed the study exempt. Both parent/guardian consent and youth assent were obtained as part of the research study. No financial compensation was provided for study participants; however, they all received free breakfast and lunch along with a copy of a poetry book written by a young female poet who read her poetry as part of the convening. The girls were also given a gift bag with inspirational writings and college paraphernalia.

Measures

Demographics

This study sought demographic information about the participants, such as age, grade level, race/ethnicity, and gender identity. Race/ethnicity was described through several categories such as Black or African American; Asian; American Indian or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; White; Hispanic or Latina; and Other.

Developmental Assets

The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) for youth ages 11-18 was used in the study (Search Institute, n.d.). The DAP is comprised of 8 subscales that measure the following developmental assets: internal assets (or character strengths), including a commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity; the external assets (or

social relationships and opportunities) include, support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. The instrument is composed of 58 items on a 4-point Likert scale (where 0= *not at all or rarely*; 1= *somewhat or sometimes*; 2= *very or often*; 3= *extremely or almost always*). Additionally, the participant responses to the list of assets (or "positive things") also comprise five asset-building context measures that they might have in themselves, "now or within the past 3 months," as it regards their family, friends, neighborhood, school, and community. Higher asset levels correlate with increased youth well-being across gender, race/ethnicity, urbanicity, and socioeconomic status (Benson et al., 2011; Scales et al., 2006). Scales (2011) provides a composite of scores for each DAP asset category that are interpreted as developmental experiences that are "challenged" (with scores of 0-14), "vulnerable" (represents scores of 15-20), "adequate" (scores between 21-25) or "thriving" (scores of 26-30). Scale ratings are also used for the overall composite asset, which includes both internal and external scores, measured out of a total score of 60. The interpretive ranges for the total composite asset are: "Excellent" (with scores 51-60), Good (with scores 41-50), "Fair" (with scores 30-40), and "Low" (with scores 0-29).

The DAP has an internal consistency average estimate of .81 for the eight asset category scales and 0.88 for the five context subscales (RAND Corporation, 2018). With respect to validity, Wilson-Ahlstrom et al. (2011) found validity evidence to be moderate, and Haggerty et al. (2011) determined the DAP has significant criterion, convergent, and discriminant validity. The DAP has also been adapted and tested on international samples with acceptable reliability and validity estimates for the total DAP and most of the subscales (Scales, 2011; Scales et al., 2017). Thus, it is considered a cross-culturally reliable and valid instrument. For this study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient calculated for the DAP was excellent (α =.94).

Qualitative Approach

Using an inductive, comparative, and emergent approach based on grounded theory, finding the girls' voices was of utmost importance (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The following four questions were addressed through the focus groups: (1) "What are the challenges girls face today?" (2) "What resources do they need?" (3) "What are your aspirations?" And (4) "What is it like to be a girl in the 21st Century?" These questions were derived from an examination of the literature and informed by the researchers' work in gender studies and women's rights advocacy. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the focus group data from verbatim transcripts of audio recordings. This involved independent coding of all responses by one of the study's senior investigators through the NVivo software package (QSR International, 2020) and then compared by another study investigator until consensus was reached. Constant comparative methods were used by the researchers to determine analytic distinctions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Participants

Overall, less than 0.2% of data on the DAP assets were missing. The researchers used a screening criterion that omitted any DAP respondent that had more than 10% of missing

data (i.e., greater than six or more missing items), which could lead to questionable validity and potentially significantly impact the results. One respondent had 11 items missing (19% of responses were left blank) and so was removed from the data, leaving 60 respondents. Of the remaining respondents, 90.2% had no missing items, and 100% had three or fewer missing items.

Youth self-reported identifying in various racial and ethnic groups for this study. Most of the girls identified as Latina (73.3%), eight (13.3%) did not report their race/ethnicity, and four (6.7%) identified as "Other" (Table 1). The mean age for the sample was 15.64 (*SD*= 1.12), ranging from 14-18 years. The 10th grade represented both the mean and median grade, with 23 (36.7%) of the sample, and 8 participants (13.3% of the sample) did not respond. All of the girls self-identified as female.

Table 1. *Sample Characteristics (n=60)*

Characteristic	*n* (%)
Race/Ethnicity	Number
Asian	2 (3.3%)
White	1 (1.7%)
Hispanic/Latina	44 (73.3%)
American Indian	1 (1.7%)
Other	4 (6.7%)
Did not respond	8 (13.3%)
Grade Level	
9th	17 (28.3%)
10th	23 (36.7%)
11th	11 (18.3%)
12th	3 (5.0%)
Did not respond	7 (11.7%)

Results

Quantitative

Composite scores for each of the assets were obtained by creating scaled variable responses to items for each asset, context, and internal/external asset. The eight individual asset categories were scaled by averaging the scores for items in each asset and multiplying by 10. External and Internal asset scores were scaled out of 30 by averaging the internal asset categories. For instance, the External Asset score is the average of the scale scores of Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, and Constructive Use of Time. Similarly, for the Internal Asset scores, the Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity scores are averaged. The Total Composite Score is the sum of the Internal and External Asset scores. Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the consistency of the composite variables and the extent to which they operationalize the assets.

This study focused on the results of the Latina participants, who comprised the majority of the study population (roughly 74%). Due to the small number of participants who identified their race/ethnicity and were non-Hispanic/non-Latina (only four students identified as either Asian, White, or American Indian), data for these participants were combined with data from respondents who either identified as Other or left the race/ethnicity blank to create two categories: Latina (*n*=44) and non-Hispanic/Latina (*n*=16).

As shown in Table 2, the overall composite asset for all participants, comprised of all items on the questionnaire, was found to be highly reliable (α=.94). Reliability analysis for the two individual racial/ethnic groups was equally as high in reliability. Internal and external assets also had excellent reliability for the groups separately as well as altogether. Of the eight assets, all had acceptable ($.6 \leq \alpha \leq .7$) to very good reliability ($\alpha > .8$) with the exception of two variables. Empowerment for the Latina group was borderline acceptable ($\alpha = .59$), but the reliability for this variable was in the acceptable range for the non-Hispanic/non-Latina group. Constructive use of time had poor internal consistency over all subjects ($\alpha = .31$) driven mostly by the Latina group ($\alpha = .27$), while the non-Hispanic/non-Latina group was higher but still poor ($\alpha = .46$). The interpretation for a low Cronbach's Alpha is that the items that are used in the constructive use of time variable are weakly related and, for this group of participants, the composite does not adequately represent constructive use of time for either group. The context assets were all in the "very good to excellent" range of reliability.

Table 2. *Reliability All Participants, Latina, and Non-Hispanic/Non-Latina Groups Results*

	Reliability [Cronbach's α]		
	All Participants (*n*=60)	Latina (*n* = 44)	Non-Hispanic/ Non-Latina (*n* = 16)
Composite Asset	.94	.94	.95
Internal Assets	.89	.88	.93
Positive Values	.75	.71	.87
Positive Identity	.74	.75	.69
Social Competencies	.66	.61	.73
Commitment to Learning	.81	.70	.90
External Assets	.90	.89	.92
Support	.83	.77	.89
Empowerment	.58	.53	.67
Constructive Use of Time	.31	.27	.46
Boundaries & Expectations	.84	.81	.89
Context Areas	.94	.94	.95
Personal	.77	.80	.76
School	.85	.73	.92
Social	.80	.73	.84
Family	.89	.89	.92
Community	.75	.73	.77

The researchers compared differences between the two racial/ethnic groupings by first testing for normality of the composite variables using the Shapiro-Wilk test and determined that some of the variables were not normally distributed (Table 3). The Mann-Whitney test is a nonparametric test to compare means of samples that is similar to the t-test but does not assume normality in the data, thus it was used to compare differences in means between the Latina group and the non-Hispanic/Latina group. Results showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the groups on the composite variables with the exception of the constructive use of time variable (Table 3). This result may not be reliably interpretable since the constructive use of time variable had very poor internal consistency.

Table 3. *Test for Normality, and Mean Comparison Between Latina and Non-Hispanic/ Non-Latina Groups Results (n=60)*

	Shapiro-Wilk Test	Wilcoxon Rank Sum Test	
	p-value	Z-value	p-value
Composite Asset	.04	1.51	.13
Internal Assets	.18	1.09	.28
Positive Values	.82	1.13	.26
Positive Identity	.08	1.69	.09
Social Competencies	.12	1.55	.12
Commitment to Learning	<.01	.66	.51
External Assets	.02	1.15	.14
Support	<.01	.95	.34
Empowerment	.60	1.57	.12
Constructive Use of Time	.24	2.44	.01
Boundaries & Expectations	<.01	0.84	.40
Context Areas	.04	1.56	.12
Personal	.65	0.87	.38
School	<.01	1.20	.23
Social	.01	1.77	.08
Family	<.01	0.83	.41
Community	.30	1.75	.08

The Composite Asset Score gives a sense of the strength of the Developmental Assets (see Table 4). On average, the Latina girls in this study scored 44.6 (out of 60; *SD* = 7.12), which is associated with an adequate foundation level. Non-Hispanic/non-Latina girls scored lower, 40.74 (*SD* = 7.60) on average, indicating a vulnerable foundation level. The data show that 80% of the Latina respondents are either adequate or thriving overall, and 7% are in the lowest category, challenged. These results suggest that overall, the Latina girls in this study have a very strong foundation of assets; 20% of the respondents have room for improvement. The non-Hispanic/non-Latina group also had a strong foundation, with 75% in the adequate or thriving level, but 13% were challenged. The Latina girls scored, on average, in the adequate range for four of the five asset-building contexts, reflecting high levels of support in personal, social, family, and community areas of their lives and, on average, are thriving in school. Non-Hispanic/Latina girls were found to have adequate levels in social, family, and school but were found, on average, to be vulnerable in their personal and community assets. Few of the Latina respondents were found to be in the challenged level for personal support (5%) and community support (5%), but 36% were found in the vulnerable range for personal support (44% for Non-Hispanic/Non-Latina) and 45% for community support (56% for Non-Hispanic/Non-Latina). These vulnerability scores in personal and community support for the Non-Hispanic/Non-Latinas could be explained by their smaller numbers in their communities than the Latina youth who are a majority, however, this interpretation would require further investigation.

External assets include students' support from their families, schools, and communities and incorporate a sense of support, empowerment, boundaries, expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets include the categories of commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Internal and external assets are

measured on a scale from 1 to 30. This group of Latina girls scored in the adequate range for both internal (22.44) and external (22.11) assets, while non-Hispanic /non-Latina students were vulnerable in these areas (external, 19.76 and internal, 20.93). Latina girls scored consistently with adequate levels on most of the eight asset categories but had vulnerabilities in two categories. Among the external assets, the Latina adolescents scored highest on boundaries and expectations (23.99) and were found to be vulnerable in their constructive use of time (19.80). Further inspection revealed that 40% of the Latina respondents were vulnerable, while 18% were challenged in their constructive use of time. Non-Hispanic/Non-Latina girls were similarly vulnerable in their constructive use of time (16.73). Constructive use of time was the only variable in which the two racial/ethnic groupings had a statistical difference, but this variable should be interpreted with caution as the reliability was found to be poor.

Table 4. *Means and Standard Deviations of DAP Scores*

	Mean (SD)	
	Latina Participants (n=44)	Non-Hispanic/Non-Latina Participants (n=16)
Total Composite Asset	44.63 (7.12)	40.74 (7.60)
External Assets	22.11 (4.04)	19.76 (4.60)
Support	22.01 (3.91)	20.66 (4.88)
Empowerment	22.84 (2.53)	20.38 (2.65)
Boundaries & Expectations	23.99 (4.68)	22.91 (5.03)
Constructive Use of Time	19.80 (2.30)	16.73 (1.55)
Internal Assets	22.44 (3.46)	20.93 (4.00)
Commitment to Learning	23.75 (2.75)	22.75 (4.54)
Positive Values	23.17 (3.75)	21.12 (4.57)
Social Competencies	23.78 (3.19)	22.12 (3.68)
Positive Identity	19.19 (3.54)	16.28 (2.80)
Context Areas	22.75 (3.55)	20.93 (3.97)
Personal	21.04 (5.88)	19.47 (4.63)
Social	23.93 (4.52)	21.89 (5.56)
Family	23.76 (5.45)	22.69 (6.33)
School	24.73 (3.92)	22.69 (5.79)
Community	20.27 (5.54)	17.88 (4.58)

On internal assets, both groups had the highest foundational asset scores in commitment to learning, positive values, and social competencies but had vulnerable levels of positive identity (19.19 for Latina girls and 16.28 for Non-Latina girls). Sixty percent of Latina respondents had challenged or vulnerable positive identity levels, and just over one-fourth were in the adequate range, while 75% of the Non-Hispanic/Non-Latina were challenged or vulnerable, and close to one-fifth were in the adequate range. The Latina students were, on average, committed to learning, with 73% at the adequate (30%) or thriving level (43%). A similar result was found for the Non-Hispanic/Non-Latina group, with 25% in the adequate range and 38% thriving. Overall, these results reflect strong personal and psychological development in this group of girls on most assets. However, the results also indicate that a sizable portion of both groups of girls are at increased risk

for negative outcomes in positive identity and constructive use of time, where preventative interventions would be highly recommended.

Qualitative Data Findings

Theme 1. Fitting in: External Pressure to Fit in and Meet Societal Standards for Beauty and the Influence of Social Media

One of the most common challenges discussed by these girls was their awareness of external pressure from both other girls and boys to meet the beauty ideals and standards of dominant groups. More often than not, this awareness manifested itself as a feeling of needing to be perfect, as well as a perception of one's own lack of traditional beauty when compared to others, as demonstrated in the following quote:

> *Society makes it seem like...the perfect body, the nice lips, natural face or stuff like it's just like put it out there for guys to see and girls be like that, "oh I want to be like that girl because she has this and I don't, and I want to have that."*

A perceived inability to meet these standards often made them feel like they did not fit in with the other girls at their school. As demonstrated in the comment below, many participants credited other girls with policing one another's physical appearance:

> *It's cuz everyone wants you to be like, like, so pretty and, like, just like a certain weight and put this pressure on you, like, like, some girls they try so hard, but you can't reach that level. Um, some girls even, "oh, you'll never get a boyfriend, you're ugly." Like, that gets me so mad. Like, why are you putting another girl down?*

Social media was discussed as harming their perceptions of self due to their near-constant exposure to unrealistic and often manufactured representations of beauty. The participants also attributed the unachievable beauty expectations they experience from boys to their generations' access to and participation in social media. When discussing Kylie Jenner (social media influencer) and the impact that her surgically altered appearance has on other adolescents her age, one participant said, "if we don't look like that, we doubt ourselves because that is what guys look for into [sic] girls. That nice hourglass figure, perfect skin and we don't have that." Another participant conceptualized the negative impact of social media as a series of ever-changing trends and pressures when she said, "they used to be, 'oh, you have to be skinny'. Now it's like, thick. It's like what's next?" These perceptions are substantiated by the quantitative findings that reflect, on average, a vulnerability in the Latina girls' positive identity, which includes self-esteem and anxiety.

Theme 2: Gender Norm Disparities and Double Standards

By far the most pervasive theme among the focus groups was that of awareness of gender-based disparities in the treatment and overall expectations for success and capability when compared to their male counterparts. According to the girls, these differences were experienced at multiple levels (i.e., in school and family). They felt

negatively judged by boys and other adults. In a school setting, these differences often presented themselves as an expectation of modesty that did not apply to the boys in their school. For example, one of the girls stated, “Like we [girls] can't wear shorts, jeans that are ripped because our knees and shoulders will provoke guys.” And another example is, “I saw this one girl she had ripped jeans and she was in the nurse's office, and she got a dress code (demerit). But I saw some guy, like, literally the next day in ripped jeans, yeah, the entire day nobody said anything.”

In relation to their families, these disparities and double standards most often took the form of differing expectations around the house and pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, such as participating in traditionally feminine activities (e.g., cooking and shopping). For example, a participant indicated,

> *Like, my mom treats me very differently than my brother because she expects me to know how to cook, how to do everything, how to clean the house. When it comes to my brother, he can be asleep the whole day and it would be fine. If I take a little nap, it’s like: “what are you doing? You’re supposed to be helping, making food’ and I feel like these roles are expected of you.”*

Theme 3: Desire for Reliable Support Systems

Throughout the focus groups, the girls expressed a desire for and an emphasis on the importance of reliable support systems. These experiences are consistent with the quantitative results that showed a large percentage of girls of both groups at the vulnerable level in their personal and community assets. At times, this want was expressed in terms of connections to their female peers in order to foster supportive relationships between girls. Support within the family was also frequently discussed, although this topic more often than not led to expressions of feeling pressure from the family system, rather than love and support.

In each group, a wish was communicated for a mentor, either within or outside of the school system. Many of the girls seemed to believe that having external encouragement and guidance would help them develop more self-confidence and navigate systems in which their families of origin may lack experience. For instance, one participant noted: “I think girls need more girls that will help them and not bring them down, like, help them bring their self-esteem up and like someone whom they can talk to.” Another stated, “Yeah, in school, yes, like I feel like we need more people to like, you know, like encourage us and like support us into like our dreams, you know? Yeah, counselors? They could tell us like, you know, the steps we need to take to accomplish them.”

Theme Four: Belief in Self

Many of the girls throughout the focus group sessions expressed strong beliefs in their ability to accomplish the particular goals that they had set for themselves. For most, these beliefs took the form of faith in their ability to accomplish goals set with respect to work or study, with many girls vividly describing their desires to become teachers, lawyers, veterinarians, creative people (like artists), and doctors. When asked about her aspirations,

one of the participants stated, “like, people laugh at that when you say, ‘oh, I want to be President [of the U.S.]’...but they can actually do it if, like, you have the motivation, determination…you can do it. For sure. That’s what I believe.” This idea of being able to accomplish anything with enough hard work and desire came up throughout the group discussions.

For many participants, self-belief also functioned as an antidote to the external doubt they came up against from family, peers, and society at large. A number of the participants shared sentiments along the lines of wanting to “prove everyone wrong, like the ones that would tell me I couldn’t do it.” One of the other participants remarked that she would like to accomplish her goals in order to “show her family that she can move forward, that she’s somebody that’s always gonna achieve her goals.” A number of the girls viewed belief in self and striving as a way to overcome the gender norm disparities which prohibit them from acting in certain spaces, with one girl stating, “a girl can be a mechanic. You can drive [pilot] an airplane if you wanted to, it's like you can do the same thing a guy can do.” In respect to perceived barriers, another shared, “not being able to [sic] a boy’s standard of what is um…is supposed to be right…you probably think, ‘oh I can’t do that, I am a girl’...but in reality, you can do it, you just have to put your mind to it.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to highlight the perceptions, experiences, and developmental assets of Latina youth in order to discover areas for preventative work. There were several limitations in this study, namely a small sample, reliance on a sample of convenience, and the participation of non-Latina/non-Hispanic students in focus groups. Participants were recruited from only one school district connected to one of the researchers, thus limiting the representativeness of the study. The self-report nature of the DAP instrument is another limitation, as social desirability can result in biased responses. Additionally, age was not analyzed in terms of the DAP, as the literature points out that younger people tend to score higher (Scales et al., 2017). Although the researchers did not have racial/ethnic data on the focus group respondents that specifically mapped to the responses participants gave, the researchers estimate that the results reflect the lived experience of the Latina respondents as a group for two reasons. First, close to three-quarters of the sample were Latina making them the majority of the focus groups. Second, the quantitative variables do not reflect significant differences between the Latina group and the non-Hispanic/Latina respondents; thus, the two groups reflect similar experiences on the items of interest in the study.

The findings from this regional sample suggest that building a positive identity, having support systems, and reducing gender-based inequities for Latina adolescents in the U.S. are needed to develop important assets such as self-actualization, sense of belonging, motivation, engagement, and well-being. The quantitative results on vulnerabilities in positive identity lend further support for this need. Peer relationships also play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging at school and in other environments. In addition, adults at home and in school environments are instrumental in shaping the gender identity

of Latina youth. Overall, the results reflect high levels of school, family, personal, and social assets.

As social norms are embedded in a web of beliefs, values, practices, and other norms (Bicchieri, 2016), a collective commitment is needed in order to socialize girls to be empowered when cultural norms collide with social norms (Frese, 2015). An important finding from this research was the power of narrative storytelling, especially in their uniqueness- every Latina youth expressed authentic ways of articulating what is important to them (Fernández-García, 2020; Miville et al., 2017). The intergroup dialogue about their self-perceptions and aspirations reaffirmed that they are not alone.

When positive youth development is the goal, it is essential to create programming for targeted participants (e.g., by age, gender, sexuality, and/or race/ethnicity) and type of prevention program (e.g., empowering, mentoring, family or peer-based, parenting, etc.). Furthermore, capitalizing on these differences by hosting creative expression showcases could create a space for spotlighting important issues affecting girls (Barron, 2016; Flores, 2021). For example, Flores (2018) demonstrates a family-based program that used creative expression, where Latina girls and their mothers used writing and visual arts as the primary artistic mediums to create art forms from their own individual perspectives and even to highlight differences shared with each other. The author found a deeper understanding and appreciation of perspectives, not just what important issues were but how they were being experienced by each. Specifically, Anzaldua's (2002) description of the liminal spaces that are navigated by the girls and also their mothers theorize that creative expression programs are spaces of transformation that can be showcased. In addition, exposing them to a diverse array of positive youth development activities (i.e., finding commonalities, gaining self-confidence, taking action through self-expression, and using positive affirmations) could help them share areas of hope, tension, confusion, and doubt.

Self-perception can also shape personal and professional trajectories. Helping Latina girls notice their emotions and the language used to describe their experiences and perceptions may be necessary healing and coping strategies (Flores, 2021). This point is important because it recognizes how essential it is to intentionally design an interactive space for artistic expression, making connections, and facilitating creative interactions to empower girls with the knowledge, skills, and supports necessary to identify their strengths and work through barriers to their sense of belonging, being valued, and being respected.

Social workers acting as program developers, practitioners, and researchers as well as educators should focus on prevention. Developing prevention programs for empowering girls could also foster a sense of belonging that can benefit their growth and development and potentially prevent behavioral health problems as well as their involvement in sex trafficking, intimate partner violence, and the juvenile justice system. Furthermore, gender-specific prevention programming grounded in culturally relevant and evidence-based approaches can contribute to positive youth development. Thus, in any program, explicitly addressing persistent social determinants of health, including poverty and racial inequities among marginalized communities, through effective preventive interventions is needed (Shapiro & Bender, 2018). Shapiro et al. (2022) note that any prevention program would benefit from "directly addressing oppressive social structures as well as the implicit biases

and social norms that sustain them" (p. 38). Furthermore, the authors note that the registry of preventative intervention programs (i.e., Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development, n.d.) for the most part does not include prevention programs that examine specific group differences based on racial or ethnic identities. In searching through this registry, there is one prevention program, *GenerationPMTO* (a family management skills training), that is considered a best practice or one that falls under the "Model Plus" certification (i.e., scientifically proven effectiveness, GenerationPMTO, para. 1) that is effective across race/ethnicity and gender (male/female). A culturally adapted parent management training has also been previously found to be effective specifically for Latinx youth at risk for problem behaviors (Martinez & Eddy, 2005). The other program that is listed as Promising in the Blueprints registry (which, as defined by the registry, demonstrates promise in terms of efficacy, but requires further study) is the *Familias Unidas* (n.d., para. 1). For example, *Familias Unidas* (originally developed by Pantin et al., 2003) is a multi-level family-based empowerment program for Latinx immigrants to foster healthy youth development in their children. There is another "Model Plus" evidence-based prevention program such as Multisystemic Therapy for juvenile crime prevention (originally developed in the 1990s, see Henggeler, 1999 for an overview), however, this is not specific to Latinx youth.

Conclusion

Further research studies on gender identity formation among adolescent girls from different racial and ethnic groups using an intersectional approach are recommended. Given the realities of social and economic vulnerabilities, studies are also needed that address the impact of COVID-19 on teen behavioral health, isolation, social exclusion, and the adverse impacts of social media, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, human trafficking, and community violence. This research agenda will help in understanding how to support Latina youth and perhaps other youths of color to prevent behavioral health problems and achieve their career and education goals and help them during stressful times (such as developing coping strategies to grow in confidence, develop socially, deal with social isolation and maintain a positive mindset).

Gender differences should also be more widely studied for those that identify as non-binary or transgendered (Shapiro et al., 2022). Thus, gender (Graham et al., 2020) and race/ethnicity (i.e., intersectionality) need to be further examined by social work practitioners and researchers in any prevention efforts to foster healthy youth development.

One of the issues here, as eloquently described by Shapiro et al. (2022), is that prevention programs may be able to help youth cope, but they do not address the underlying societal structures (including gender norms) that perpetuate inequities for diverse and marginalized populations.

Developing practices and programs that address individual development as described above is important, but addressing underlying social structures emphasizes the need for programs/interventions that build communities or increase capacity with the goals of transformation and empowerment. For instance, Photovoice is a community-based participatory research model that uses the creative medium of photography to engage Latina adolescents in documenting their community, and then sharing their findings

(Hannay et al., 2013. Through a non-threatening, easily understood form (photography), parents and Latina girls are able to define the problem and barriers and shape the community's policy agenda from their understanding. Similarly, a study of Latina girls in STEM programs reveals that it is their cultural assets that influence successful outcomes, and not just individual constructs (Rincón & Rodriguez, 2021). Young adult poet and novelist Elizabeth Acevedo powerfully demonstrates the integral relationship between personal empowerment and changes in societal structure through her work which implicitly suggests the need for decolonial mindsets to combat xenophobia, racism, gendering, and othering (López, 2021).

Given the growing Latinx population in the U.S., Latina youth have the potential to become the next generation of leaders. By empowering Latina adolescents through prevention programs that also challenge institutional and oppressive practices, there is the potential to foster a new generation of powerful, inclusive women leaders who break the chain of abuse and are unafraid to pursue their dreams and reach their full potential. Stronger girls can result in strong women building equitable and just communities and giving back to their own communities.

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