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en Colombia: Reflexiones a partir de una colaboración
transcultural**






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ARTÍCULO DE REFLEXIÓN

Positive Youth Development in Colombia: Reflections on a Cross-cultural Collaboration

Desarrollo juvenil positivo en Colombia: Reflexiones a partir de una colaboración transcultural

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Abstract

This paper shares the story and reflections of an international collaboration aimed at cross-culturally adapting the United Future Leaders (UFL) program, originally developed in the United States (U.S.), for Colombian youth. The paper provides a comprehensive description of how the collaboration has unfolded from three perspectives: Conceptual (theoretical), functional (program adaptation), and reflective (insights from the collaboration team). Rooted in Lerner's and Lerner's Positive Youth Development model, UFL provides participants with an active learning experience focused on developing leadership competencies that promote the development of character, ethics, and civility. For the adaptation study, two schools (one public and one private) were chosen to represent the general population of the city of Medellín (Colombia). The paper describes how UFL is delivered in the U.S., the research activities that were undertaken to ensure methodological rigor for the adaptation process and the content and implementation of the pilot activities. Subsequently, the collaboration team reflects on the different perceptions and understandings of what it means to establish a PYD program such as UFL in Medellín, Colombia. Finally, it is discussed how adapting and implementing programs guided by PYD principles is a promising approach for Colombian youth.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Adaptation; Youth Programs; Positive Youth Development; Adolescent Development.

Resumen

Este artículo comparte la historia y las reflexiones de una colaboración internacional destinada a adaptar transculturalmente el programa Futuros Líderes Unidos (UFL) para jóvenes colombianos, desarrollado originalmente en Estados Unidos. Se ofrece una descripción exhaustiva de cómo se ha desarrollado la colaboración desde tres perspectivas: Conceptual (teórica), funcional (adaptación del programa) y reflexiva (percepciones del equipo de colaboración). Sustentados en el modelo de Desarrollo Positivo de la Juventud (PYD) de Lerner y Lerner, UFL proporciona a los participantes una experiencia de aprendizaje activo centrada en el desarrollo de competencias de liderazgo que promueven el desarrollo del carácter, la ética y la civilidad. Para el estudio de adaptación se eligieron dos colegios (uno público y otro privado) representativos de la población general de la ciudad de Medellín (Colombia). El artículo describe cómo se imparte UFL en EE.UU., las actividades de investigación que se llevaron a cabo para garantizar el rigor metodológico del proceso de adaptación y el contenido e implementación de las actividades piloto. Posteriormente, el equipo de colaboración reflexiona sobre diferentes percepciones y comprensiones de lo que significa establecer un programa PYD como UFL en Medellín, Colombia. Finalmente, se discute cómo la adaptación e implementación de programas guiados por los principios de PYD constituye un enfoque prometedor para la juventud colombiana.

Palabras clave: adaptación transcultural; programas juveniles; desarrollo juvenil positivo; desarrollo adolescente.

Introduction

At the heart of the positive youth development story shared in this paper is the power of serendipity. In 2014, two of the co-authors of this paper were introduced at a Society for Research in Adolescence conference in Austin, Texas. One was a faculty member at a large public university, Texas Tech University (TTU), located in rural west Texas; the other was a doctoral student from Colombia studying at the same university. Over the course of multiple conversations, it was apparent that these two individuals had much to offer for each other's scholarly interests in understanding optimal developmental trajectories for adolescents. In 2016, the doctoral student was able to join a research and community engagement unit lead by the TTU faculty member – the Center for Adolescent Resiliency (CAR) – to further her graduate and post-graduate research training. As part of her post-doctoral orientation to working with CAR, the post-doc did field observations with in-school and out-of-school programs offered to youth ages 10-18 in the community where the university is located. One of the programs, United Future Leaders (UFL), provided experiential social-emotional learning (SEL) activities in an after-school setting on school campuses for students in 5th and 6th grades (the last year of primary school and the first year of secondary school; students typically are 10-12 years old). The UFL curriculum is deeply rooted in positive youth development (PYD) principles; it is designed explicitly to foster healthy development in character, ethics, and civility to meet developmental needs while also promoting pro-social relationships and positive school engagement.

The purpose, content, and implementation of the UFL program struck the Colombia post-doc as something that could greatly advance the positive development of youth in her hometown of Medellin, Colombia. In turn, the faculty member (also the CAR director) sought to expand the UFL program's footprint outside of the United States (U.S.). The shared interests of the faculty member and the post-doc quickly expanded to a full collaborative that included the UFL program director, a faculty colleague from the Department of Psychology at Universidad CES, and several staff and graduate student research assistants from both institutions. This article shares the story of how the UFL in Colombia collaboration began in earnest in 2017 and continues with its ongoing evolution. The paper is organized to provide a comprehensive description of how the collaboration has unfolded from three perspectives: Conceptual (theoretical), functional (program adaptation), and reflective (insights from the collaboration team).

Conceptual perspectives

Positive youth development has been defined and understood as a process, philosophy, or programmatic approach that values or aims to promote positive developmental outcomes in multiple domains, considers the "whole" child, and focuses on key social relationships and interactions (Catalano et al., 2002; Lerner et al., 2011). How positive youth development has been operationally defined – whether as a general concept (the lower case "pyd") or as a strategic theoretical roadmap (the upper case "PYD") – often is a function of how it will be applied.

Families and individuals responsible for raising children perhaps view positive youth development as a goal to which they (naturally) aspire, or perhaps a goal they despair of if their perception of adolescence aligns with Hall's description of it as a period of "storm and stress" (1904, as cited in Steinberg, 2022). Practitioners have much in common with parents or other caregivers who seek to guide youth through the adolescent years in such a way as to optimize development through both promotion and protection. Whether as teachers, coaches, tutors, health care providers or even policymakers, practitioners should bring a certain amount of personal motivation (interest and concern), ethics, and professionalism (knowledge and training) to their work fostering positive youth development.

Researchers are perhaps the most explicit users of the upper case PYD. In the academic context, PYD reflects a decades-long shift from approaching adolescence as a period fraught with risks to present and future well-being to one that offers a rich landscape for understanding the more positive aspects of the transition between

childhood and adulthood (Catalano et al., 2004). Research efforts began to look beyond the pitfalls commonly associated with adolescence to better understand how the unique individual and ecological characteristics of this developmental phase can be leveraged in impactful ways. In other words, while the inherent risk and protective factors associated with adolescence should continue as important considerations for families, practitioners, and researchers, it is equally (if not more important) to consider how to leverage the enormous potential of the positives that are present (Catalano et al., 2002; Kea-Keating et al., 2011).

What PYD has to offer

Beginning in the 1990s, researchers, youth practitioners, and policymakers in the U.S. began to move away from “deficit models” for youth programs towards what is now known as the Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective (Lerner et al., 2018). Instead of focusing on what young people should not be doing (e.g., risk-taking behaviors), programs framed within the PYD perspective capitalize on the strengths of youth, viewing young people as having assets and skills to be developed rather than risks and problems to be managed (Lerner et al., 2015). Within the PYD perspective, several models have been developed, including Damon’s (2008) model of youth purpose, Benson’s (2008) model of developmental assets, and Lerner and Lerner (Lerner et al., 2015) model of the Five Cs of PYD. The Five Cs of PYD model has received the most attention in globally diverse settings (Petersen et al., 2017).

The commonality across the different PYD models is that they are derived from a relational developmental systems (RDS) metatheory of human development (Overton, 2015). RDS metatheory conceives the process of human development as involving mutually influential relations between individuals and their contexts (Lerner et al., 2015). From this perspective, positive youth development occurs when the strengths of youth and the resources of their contexts are integrated into mutually supportive and beneficial relations (Tirrell et al., 2018). Lerner et al. (2018) suggest that mutually beneficial individual-context relations in PYD exist for all youth around the globe. Regardless of the country, the community, and the time within which individuals are studied, the fundamental process of human development involves mutually influential individual-context coactions (Lerner et al., 2021). However, contextual variations are represented in what global youth bring to these individual-context exchanges and what the context provides to them (Lerner et al., 2018). Accordingly, the constructs pertinent to any PYD model may be manifested differently in different national or cultural contexts (Lerner et al., 2018).

The Lerner and Lerner model of the Five Cs of PYD. The Lerner and Lerner model of the Five Cs of PYD (see Figure 1) is a strengths-based model of development that aims to understand and enhance the lives of diverse youth through programmatic engagement with critical ecological contexts (e.g., families, schools, peer groups, and out-of-school programs) (Lerner et al., 2015). Youth will develop the Five Cs of PYD (i.e., competence, confidence, character, caring, and connection) when their personal strengths align with the resources and opportunities provided by their environment (Geldhof et al., 2015).

The first C, *Competence*, is defined as a positive view of one’s actions in domain-specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational (Lerner et al., 2005). The second C, *Confidence*, is an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy (Lerner et al., 2005). As suggested by Geldhof et al. (2015), youth gain a sense of confidence when they can navigate their contexts successfully. The third C, *Connection*, represents the positive bonds youth have with people and institutions around them (Lerner et al., 2005). These include bidirectional exchanges between adolescents and their peers, family, school, and communities. The fourth C, *Character*, is defined as respect for societal and cultural rules, developing standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong, and integrity (Lerner et al., 2005). When youth display character, they behave appropriately, even when nobody is around (Geldhof et al., 2015). Finally, the fifth C, *Caring*, is having a sense of sympathy and empathy for the feelings and experiences of others and believing that caring for others is important (Geldhof et al., 2015).

Youth who develop the Five Cs display lower risk and problem behaviors, including substance use, delinquency, and depression. Additionally, youth who exhibit the Five Cs are more likely to be active in serving others, acting in

ways that strengthen their families, schools, and the communities in which they live. This last characteristic has been named the sixth C: *Contribution* (Geldhof et al., 2015).

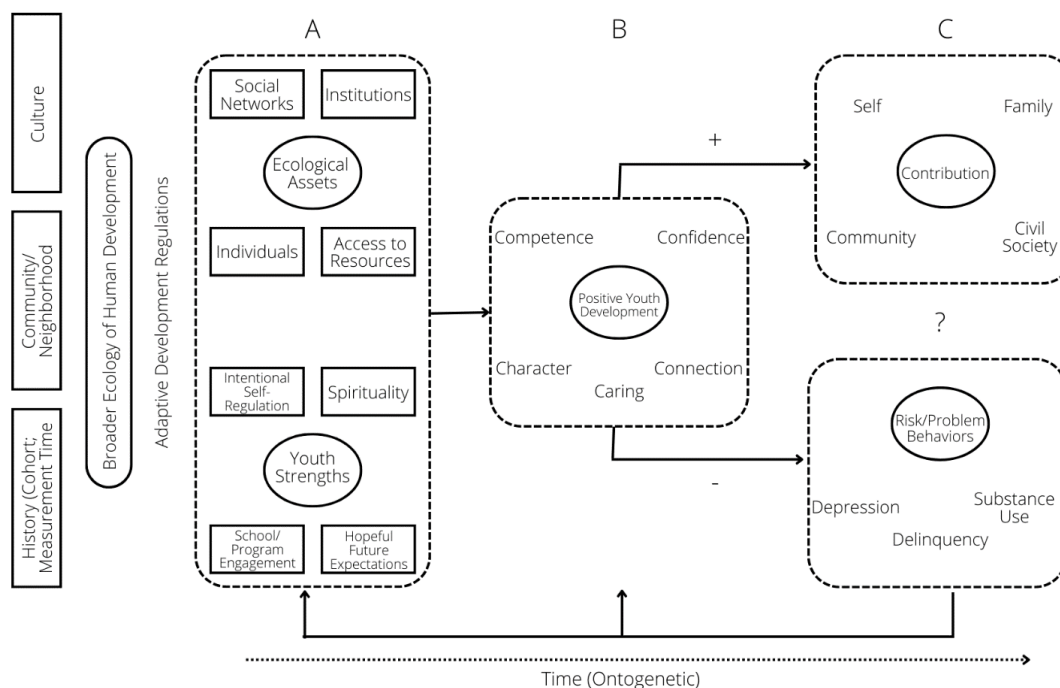


Figure 1. Lerner and Lerner model of PYD (2018).

5Cs PYD Practice in the U.S.

The Lerner and Lerner 5Cs model of PYD was tested in the longitudinal 4-H study of PYD conducted by Lerner, Lerner, and colleagues (e.g., Bowers et al., 2014; Lerner et al., 2005, 2015). Across eight study waves, a diverse sample of approximately 7,000 youth and 3,500 of their parents were surveyed. Overall, findings from the study supported the idea that links among the strengths of young people (e.g., intentional self-regulation, school engagement, hope for the future) and the ecological assets in their families, schools, and communities predict their thriving and, ultimately, their engaged citizenship (Lerner et al., 2018).

More recently, Johnson and Ettekal (2022) assessed the use of Lerner’s PYD model beyond basic patterns of PYD-informed program implementation and evaluation. They explored the efficacy of the 5Cs model for explaining antecedents and outcomes to considerations of “variability and specificity in PYD concepts and processes” (Johnson & Ettekal, 2022, p. 5). Data from the Lerner et al. 4-H study was used along with data obtained from three other youth programs; each program was informed by the 5C model and utilized the PYD short form (Geldhof et al., 2014). Results confirmed that despite shared demographic and socio-cultural characteristics among these four samples of young people in the U.S., the 5Cs were configured and expressed diversely between and within groups (Johnson & Ettekal, 2022). The 5Cs model accommodated this variability in terms of program design and evaluation, but the authors also explored implications for care in approaching how each of the 5Cs may be translated and applied.

Usefulness of Lerner and Lerner’s 5Cs model for PYD in Colombia

The Lerner and Lerner model of PYD is promising for adaptation with Colombian youth for two main reasons. First, the Five Cs model has been widely used and empirically tested in the U.S. (Bowers, et al, 2014; Lerner et al., 2005, 2015), demonstrating that programs framed within this model have positive short and long-term effects on youth (e.g., reducing behavioral problems, improving general well-being of youth, families, and communities) (Benson et al., 2011; Catalano et al., 2002; Lerner et al., 2005). The Lerner and Lerner model has

received the most attention in different countries around the globe (Petersen et al., 2017), but it has not been thoroughly assessed among global youth, especially among samples of youth living in diverse poverty contexts (Lerner et al., 2018). Therefore, adapting the Five Cs model for Colombian youth can significantly contribute to the PYD literature by illustrating how the PYD constructs work in this specific cultural context.

Second, due to Colombia's unique historical context, permeated by decades of internal armed conflict, Colombian youth have been exposed to special circumstances that can hinder their mental, physical, and emotional health. A model like the Five Cs of PYD, which recognizes the contextual characteristics of every youth and how these can be aligned with the youth's specific individual strengths, can be a valuable model to support thriving among Colombian youth.

Functional perspectives

This section of the paper covers practical aspects and outcomes of the program adaptation process for UFL Colombia. To provide a meaningful frame of reference, UFL Texas is described first. This contextual information is followed by a brief explanation of the research activities undertaken to ensure methodological rigor for the adaptation process. This section concludes with a description of the two schools where the UFL Colombia adaptation was piloted in 2018, and the content of the pilot activities.

Program Description

The United Future Leaders (UFL) program is an after-school program that was created to support adolescents between the ages of 11 and 12 as they transition between primary and secondary schools. UFL provides participants an active learning experience focused on developing leadership competencies that promote the development of character, ethics, and civility. The program originated as a partnership between a small urban school district, a corporate sponsor, a private foundation, and CAR.

UFL Participants and Program Settings in Texas. UFL began in 2007 with 26 students at one school in Lubbock, Texas, where TTU is located. Lubbock is a small city of approximately 275,000 people that serves as an economic hub for a sparsely populated area of Texas. By 2020, UFL was serving 250-300 students weekly on elementary and middle school campuses in multiple school districts¹. Campus and student profiles range from low to middle/upper-income neighborhoods, some with ethnically diverse student populations, and other very small rural schools (with less than 200 students in kindergarten through 12th grade) with large numbers of students whose families qualify for various types of government assistance based on their household income.

UFL lessons are rooted in experiential learning principles with age-appropriate activities that focus on developmental themes of physical safety, emotional safety, identity, belonging, mission and purpose, competence, and service. Community service activities are incorporated into the program to give students opportunities to practice what they are learning and thus reinforce the program's developmental goals. UFL's mission is to empower youth to lead themselves in healthy attitudes and behaviors and to exert a positive influence on their peers, schools, and community.

Adapting UFL for Colombia

With the support of internal grant funding from CES University an exploratory study was conducted in 2017 to understand the adaptations required for a UFL program to be relevant, effective, and well-received by Colombian adolescents. Parents, teachers, school psychologists, and students from a private secondary school in Medellín participated in four separate focus groups designed to (a) elicit each group's perspectives on the need for a leadership program for adolescents in the urban context of Colombia, (b) determine participants' understanding of the conceptual themes covered in the UFL curriculum, (c) identify potential differences between the youth that the Colombian program hopes to target and the Texas youth for whom the program was originally designed

¹ During the pandemic, smaller numbers of youth were served with limited online programming.

and (d) capture respondent suggestions for the program adaptation (e.g., methods for implementation, materials and supplies, and potential community partners).

The focus group results (Follmer, Vélez-Gómez, Moratto-Vasquez & Dodd, 2021) revealed broad levels of support for a UFL program in Medellín, in no small part because of UFL's learning-by-doing philosophy and its accompanying evaluation platform. At the same time, the program was considered relevant for promoting the integral healthy development of adolescents, particularly since extracurricular activities in educational institutions in Medellín typically focus on sports or artistic/cultural activities rather than programs centered on social-emotional development.

After the focus group study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two psychologists from the private secondary school to more fully explore the initial focus group results that offered insights for program adaptation. In addition, the collaboration expanded the frame of the study (and its program adaptation goals) to include a public school in Medellín that served an age group of students similar to the private school. A student focus group was conducted at this school in addition to a semi-structured interview with a classroom teacher who also has training in psychology. Data from this portion of the study will be reported elsewhere (Moratto-Vasquez et al., manuscript in preparation). All of these research activities were instrumental in guiding the members of the collaboration team as they worked together (from a distance) to select and adapt two UFL lessons for piloting with students from the two schools referenced above.

UFL Participants and Program Settings in Colombia. The two schools chosen for the adaptation study (one public and one private) were selected to represent the general population of the city of Medellín: students from all socioeconomic strata, with different ethnic and religious backgrounds, children and adolescents who are direct or indirect victims of Colombia's armed conflict, living in different parts of the city, and who were in fifth grade.

The public school was established in 2003 and is located in the central area of the city of Medellín. Since 2009, this school has a section for highly vulnerable and heterogeneous populations, i.e., students older than their grade level, and students with social, physical, psychological, cultural, and family problems (including a high level of experiences of suffering or discrimination). Most of them belong to socioeconomic strata 1 or 2² and are members of families living in conditions of poverty, forced displacement, victims of armed conflict, and psychoactive substance abusers. Their household income derives mainly from informal jobs such as car washers, street vendors, and so on; some are beggars. The school is located in a sector that serves as a gateway to downtown Medellín and is adjacent to a cemetery built two centuries ago; the cemetery is no longer in operation, but its empty vaults are visible from the school's playground. Inside, classrooms are filled with students of different ethnicities and races running around the rooms and corridors, talking and laughing loudly, and looking expectantly at any visitors. Walls are covered with colorful drawings and other work done by students.

In contrast, the other partner school is a private parochial institution with two locations: the main campus and the children's section. The school currently is classified nationally as "very superior" (Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación -ICFES), and has extracurricular offerings in academic, sports, and artistic areas. Throughout the history of the school, it stands out for its social and pastoral works to support children, youth, and poor families. The school is located in an area inhabited by middle and upper/middle-class families, corresponding to strata 4 and 5. Most families live in finished houses or apartments and have their own vehicles. Each classroom is similar, with religious decorations and institutional logos, televisions, computers, and audio/video capabilities. The students follow a daily routine of prayer and classes. Along the corridors, student posters are displayed that allude to vocation, service, and spiritual formation.

² Strata is a proxy for socioeconomic status used in Colombia; strata 1 compares to 'low low' and strata 6 to 'high' (DANE, 2022). [Estratificación socioeconómica para servicios públicos domiciliarios. https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/servicios-al-ciudadano/servicios-informacion/estratificacion-socioeconomica](https://www.dane.gov.co/index.php/servicios-al-ciudadano/servicios-informacion/estratificacion-socioeconomica)).

Pilot lesson for program adaptation. As the adaptation process unfolded (Moratto-Vasquez et al., manuscript in preparation), the collaborative team created a hybrid lesson that incorporated two themes (and accompanying activities) from the UFL Texas curriculum:

(1) “Beach Ball Q & A” -- an icebreaker activity highlighting the *identity* and *belonging* themes: Students stand in a large circle facing each other while a numbered beachball is thrown to a student standing in the circle. The individual who catches the ball looks for a number written below or near their left thumb; they state their name and reveal the number to others in the circle. The group facilitator then reads the question corresponding to that number. The questions vary from basic “What is your favorite color?” to the more personal, “When was the last time you cried?”. The activity repeats until everyone in the group has participated. The group facilitator then guides the adolescents to discuss and respond to questions emphasizing identity and belonging.

(2) “The Amazing Race” – an activity focusing on the *emotional security*, *physical safety*, and *belonging* themes: Students are challenged to journey with their peers on an imaginary adventure to a place where the weather is sunny and hot, a second place where it is cooler and rains frequently, and then back to their current setting (school). An additional component is added to the activity when the students are asked to accompany a “new” *buddy* (an inflatable figure) and to protect him/her in all circumstances during the course of the journey. They give their buddy a name and identity and introduce them to the entire group before the adventure begins. Along with their buddy, the students are given a bag of travel essentials. The bag includes items such as an umbrella and long pants for the cool, rainy place and sunglasses, swimsuit, and sunscreen for the sunny, hot place. What cannot be found in the bag is anything that will help protect their buddy from being bullied when they return to the school setting. The activity facilitator then guides the adolescents in discussing and reflecting on how they cared for their buddy. The facilitator is trained not to pass judgment when students don’t respond to the activity as might be expected from a young leader. The activity is designed to guide students in understanding what it means to be physically safe and emotionally secure. It is also intended to expand their capacity to be inclusive of others who may be different from them.

Program Adaptation Results

Pilot Implementation Settings. The first pilot session was conducted at the public school in the library. All members of the collaborative were present, with two CES students present to assist. The school partner was present for most of the session, but the UFL Texas program director (a Spanish speaker) was the chief facilitator, assisted by two of the collaborative team. Other team members observed and took notes. The library was spacious and well-lit by large windows; tables and chairs were pushed out of the way and the students sat or stood on the floor for all activities. The entry to the library stayed open and various teachers and students not participating in the pilot came and went during the session. When the 13 participating students arrived, there was a lot of chatter and laughter; the facilitator eventually had to call for quiet so the activities could begin.

The pilot session at the private school was conducted the next day. The same collaborative team members were present plus two school psychologists from the private school (one played an active role in facilitation). The space provided at the private school was a classroom with limited natural light and a closed door; 12 students sat quietly in desks and waited to be instructed on what to do; there were no external interruptions. When the activities began, the students pushed their desks to the wall and, again, waited patiently for the adults to initiate the activity.

Student responses to the pilot session. The students at the public school continued their chatter and laughter with the Beach Ball activity, answering questions (and responding to the answers of their peers) with overt body language and verbal aggression. One of the students, however, got the attention of the group when they answered the question “What is your least favorite smell?” with a reference to the smell of blood from a dead

body. In contrast, when a student at the private school answered the same question, they referenced the unpleasant smell of a soup their mother often cooked.

The Amazing Race activity also yielded starkly different responses. The original pilot session plan was for three different groups of students (4-5 students per group); each group would be given one of the inflatable figures (described above) to represent a new student at their school who would be their “buddy”. At both schools, one of the “buddies” wouldn’t inflate, so the groups were reduced from three to two.

When the buddy at the public school began to deflate, one of the students observed that the buddy appeared to be dying; a student standing next to him matter-of-factly commented, “like everything else in this neighborhood”. When the activity progressed to the part where a facilitator (one of the CES students) began to bully one of the buddies, the public-school students responded emphatically in defense of their buddy, even going so far as to threaten and name-call the facilitator. At the private school, however, when the “bully” (played by the school psychologist) began playing their part, the private school students hung back and were reluctant to confront the “bully”, even going so far as to make excuses for the bully’s behavior.

Reflective perspectives

In this third section of the paper, the collaboration team reflects on the different perceptions and understandings of what it means to establish a PYD program such as UFL in Medellin, Colombia. Of necessity, those with prior experience of UFL in Texas must reflect on relatively long-standing assumptions (and the basis for those assumptions). Those on the team whose experience with UFL is of shorter duration must reflect on expectations. And, for at least one person on the team with experience with both UFL Texas and UFL Colombia, it was important to explore the intersection of assumptions and expectations. All give voice to differing perspectives in the contexts of program delivery, program personnel, and program response.

Differing Voices

Program Delivery

UFL Texas: The UFL program generally takes place on a school campus after the school day has ended³. Program sessions are often delivered in a school library or cafeteria where tables and chairs make it easy for students to work in small groups but where there also is easy access to the outdoors for physical activities that require more space. Healthy snacks are provided and form the basis for nutrition activities. Program sessions last 90 minutes.

Each UFL session and its activities are built around a thematic lesson under the overarching umbrella of leadership, civility, and ethics. Although each lessons tend to focus on a single specific developmental theme, it is only natural that other themes emerge within the group processing/discussions that serve to conclude each session. This comprehensive approach supports lesson content becoming an innate part of an adolescent’s understanding of leadership. Connections are made weekly as adolescents begin to apply content to their own lives and realize the impact they make as individuals simply by choosing to positively respond or engage in their own environments.

UFL Colombia: The two schools where UFL has been piloted in Colombia have in common that the program is delivered during the school day, meaning that a certain level of noise and activity is a consistent backdrop, and also that at the end of the UFL session, students return to their normal class schedule. However, the two schools differ considerably regarding the physical setting they provide for UFL program delivery. At the private school, UFL sessions take place in a contained classroom; at the public school, in the library (where students and staff come and go frequently). The facilities and grounds of the private school are well-maintained and aesthetically pleasing; the overall environment conveys a sense of stability and confident care. The public school, on the other

³ During the Covid-19 pandemic UFL programming obviously was restricted; limited virtual programming was provided to students who had the ability (and parent permission) to participate from home.

hand, is located in a neighborhood where poverty and safety concerns are apparent. The school is an aging building with observable fraying structural components; the area outside where students gather to play is next to what was once a burial crypt.

Program Personnel

UFL Texas: The longevity of the UFL Texas program results from extensive and ongoing training of its staff. Program personnel includes professional staff, collegiate volunteers, and service-learning students⁴. All volunteers are expected to attend an orientation, weekly trainings and engage fully with training activities (such as scenario simulations) to maximize their impact as program facilitators.

UFL Colombia: Delivery of the pilot lessons was supported by professionals who work in both of the institutions and who, at specific times, supported the adaptation process as school liaisons. In the public school, the collaborative team was supported by a trained teacher with a master's degree and also a Ph.D. student. Similarly, the private school was represented by a psychologist with a master's degree in mental health, who is part of the Institutional Welfare area and directs the personal training programs required for the students. For both schools, several 3rd-year undergraduate psychology students acted as lesson observers. The collaborative team as a whole practiced the lesson delivery and trained the CES students for their roles the day before the first pilot session, using a classroom located on the CES campus.

Program Response

Historically, Texas UFL students find the “Beach Ball Q & A” activity to be light, fun, interactive, and non-threatening. Responses to questions are simple and telling as they reveal to the group whether they untie their shoes before taking them off or that their least favorite smell is dirty socks. They usually pause for a moment when asked, “When was the last time you cried?” with common responses being “When my dog died, or my grandparents were sick and, in the hospital”. With regard to the “The Amazing Race” activity, the Texas students find that this one challenges them to “dig a little deeper”, self-reflect, and show vulnerability. For this reason, practitioners are trained not to pass judgment when a child admits to falling short of demonstrating leadership characteristics. Will they feel pressured to join in and tease? Or will they stand up for their new friend?

Collaborative Team Response

From the perspective of the UFL Texas team members (one of whom was the only member of the collaborative team who has facilitated a UFL lesson in both Texas and Colombia), the presence of aggressive behaviors or low social interaction skills observed among the adolescents in Medellin did not negate the effectiveness of the UFL Colombia program implementation. If anything, it confirmed the need for this type of PYD programming. Teaching leadership while supporting diversity among adolescents requires that a practitioner be skilled in responding to whatever is said and shared during lesson activities. It requires the need to not react in a judgmental way to what is a reality in the life of that adolescent. It also requires finesse in acknowledging what is heard without losing control. Being able to either “shelve” the response (if it was inappropriate or irrelevant) or incorporate the response to the concept being taught becomes masterful and relevant.

From the perspective of the collaborative team member who, as a researcher and practitioner, had a “foot in both worlds” (i.e., born and raised in Colombia but completed graduate studies in the U.S.), the reflection process was constant throughout the curriculum adaptation and piloting of the sections. One of the main concerns was how to make the lessons engaging and a meaningful experience for all participants in Colombia while simultaneously recognizing the diversity of experiences that students from both schools (i.e., private and public) will bring to the sessions. With prior experience with UFL in Texas, the perception was that the private school in Medellin was a context where fewer adaptations to the curriculum would be needed, as opposed to session adjustments for the public school. When translating the sessions, specifically the “Amazing Race”, care was taken

⁴ Faculty from the College of Human Sciences act as research consultants to ensure that curriculum and training meet standards for evidenced-based practice.

to use places well-known to the students (e.g., Cartagena and Bogota). However, it was a concern that some students, especially from the public school, would feel unable to connect to an experience that assumed opportunities for recreational traveling. Furthermore, it was important for both pilot sessions to be mindful that this context was becoming somehow “foreign” to this team member, who by that stage had lived outside of Colombia for about eight years. This meant being attentive to students’ comments and their experiences, as well as exercising care not to bring preconceptions to verbal interactions with the students. It was very comforting to see that students from both schools engaged with the lessons. Despite the differences in the examples or content of their interventions, they were able to reflect on the themes of emotional security, physical safety, belonging, and identity in a deep and meaningful way. The engagement of the public-school students with the “Amazing Race” lesson was surprising, especially when they chose to protect their “buddy” from experiences of bullying and discrimination. The students displayed good skills for navigating the situation and protecting their friends in a context of exclusion. This was a powerful demonstration of how all students have strengths and highlighted the need for practitioners to build upon them; a core principle of the PYD perspective.

Lessons learned

Geographic location does not determine the need or benefit of a PYD program, such as UFL, but healthy development among adolescents does. Disparity in resources is a shared characteristic across many borders. Respectfully acknowledging the cultural context of each community served is vital in curriculum adaptation and training. Adaptation of lessons should consider potential differences between populations but must not change the intended purpose of the lesson(s). Program effectiveness relies heavily on the curriculum fidelity and training of the practitioner. Training should be experiential in all settings, because practitioners must also evaluate, internalize, and self-reflect. This, in turn, expands the practitioner's capacity to demonstrate compassion, empathy, and encouragement to adolescents. Adolescents must be seen for who they are, no matter where they are. The investment made by a practitioner to learn of the likes, interests, goals, and fears that youth possess increases emotional security, identity, and a sense of belonging. It strengthens resiliency and builds autonomy.

Final considerations

UFL in Texas is a program that promotes positive youth development. However, it is worth asking why it is necessary to adapt and implement a foreign program in Colombia since the government, nationally and locally, has designed different programs for the care of children, adolescents, and their families. To answer this question, it is necessary to acknowledge that it is the poorest of families who tend to be targeted for program participation through economic incentives. Moreover, these programs focus attention on the growth and development of very young children (ages 0 to 6) rather than adolescents. Youth who live in socioeconomic strata classified as middle and high may not benefit because of their family's income, without regard to whether that income can provide access to youth programs.

As described by Arboleda and Ochoa (2013), Colombia is a hierarchical and inequitable place, where lifestyles and access to food, recreation, health, and other services, are differentiated according to household economic stratum and place of residence. Similarly, the DANE's National Quality of Life Survey (ENCV) for 2018 reports that 23.8% of the population of Colombia corresponds to families with children under 18 years old who are classified as living in multidimensional poverty (National Administrative Department of Statistics [*Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística* -DANE-], 2019). This group has greater access to the different government care programs, meaning that the remaining 76.2% receive fewer services. In addition, the programs that are available have been designed to focus more on mitigating risk factors related to issues such as substance abuse and violence prevention. While these issues deserve attention, focusing on them exclusively overlooks an opportunity to promote programs highlighting socioemotional competencies, life skills, and personal growth.

Theoretical connections and affirmation for continued investment in UFL Colombia

Adapting and implementing programs guided by PYD principles is a promising approach for Colombian youth. PYD-based programs have demonstrated means to promote youth thriving and active and engaged citizenship among international youth (Lerner et al., 2021). Adapting a program based on PYD principles, such as UFL, can offer Colombian youth the tools and skills necessary to become transformative agents for new forms of social functioning and rebuild the fabric of Colombian society (Follmer et al., 2021).

An approach to youth programming based on PYD perspectives differs from traditional deficit-based interventions that have treated youth as “risks to be managed.” Instead, PYD is a strength-based model that acknowledges that all youth have strengths that can be nurtured and cultivated (Geldhof et al., 2015). A key principle of the Lerner and Lerner PYD model is that “if the specific strengths of youth and the resources in their context (assets for positive development found in their homes, schools, out-of-school activities, and faith communities, for instance) are systematically integrated across adolescence, the lives of all youth can be enhanced” (Lerner et al., 2018, p. 71). As a program based on the PYD model, UFL stands as a relevant and sustainable option in a context where societal ruptures and inequities affecting youth persist in the face of solutions that attempt to mitigate damage in the short-term, thus compromising the development of authentic skills and resources within the self and the community.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the collaboration described in this paper had its origins at the 2014 conference of the Society of Research on Adolescence (SRA). Fittingly, another serendipitous moment occurred at the same conference. The Colombian graduate student who was part of the conversation also crossed paths at the conference with a faculty member from Universidad CES. She shared with her that she had met a TTU scholar actively involved in research, teaching, and outreach related to positive youth development. Their continued conversations resulted in the CES faculty member spending a semester at TTU in 2016, where she was immersed in all aspects of UFL programming and research. Her experience was pivotal in growing and strengthening the collaboration team, resulting in the PYD story told here.

In conclusion, although it was not apparent at the time, a casual meeting several years ago brought together individuals living in different countries on different continents but who, together, are weaving an enduring tapestry for supporting positive youth development. The ripple effects of serendipity continue: A full replication of the adapted UFL program is now underway with one of the schools who participated in the 2018 pilot in Medellín.

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