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## **Providing Heritage-Based Social and Emotional Learning Opportunities for Middle Grade Latina Students**

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Providing Heritage-Based Social and Emotional Learning

Opportunities for Middle Grade Latina Students

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

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### **Dedication**

This capstone project is dedicated to all of my students - past, present and future.

*¡Sé el cambio que quieres ver en el mundo!*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the question that will serve as a lighthouse for the research in the following chapter. This question is: *“How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program that revolves around the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning skills?”* This chapter will be tri-fold. It will begin by addressing the key terminology, defining the main terminology used throughout the research. Next, I will be sharing about a personal and professional rationale behind pursuing this research, as well as the historical significance of the topic. Lastly, I will summarize the main ideas behind the capstone project.

### Key Terminology

To begin, it is essential to acknowledge that the terminology for more inclusive language is ever-changing in society throughout time. Traditionally, the Spanish language has been categorized into two genders, male and female. Today, terms such as Latine, Latinx, and Latin@ allow us to be more gender-inclusive in addressing communities from Latin America. While referring to this community non-specific to gender, I will be using the term “Latine”. While writing about the Latine population in my capstone who identify as female, I will be using “Latina”.

I will be using the term ‘immigrant-origin students’ in reference to immigrant youth and students who have at least one foreign-born parent. This includes both the first-generation who were born outside of the United States, as well as the second-generation who were born within the country. In my writing, I will expand this term to include students with families from Puerto Rico. It is important to include first-generation and second-generation immigrants in the category

of “immigrant-origin” because of the many shared struggles and experiences within these groups of students.

### **Personal and Professional Significance**

Since completing my undergraduate studies in Spanish and Communications at Winona State University, I have spent the majority of my career surrounding myself with immigrant communities in the United States, or as a foreigner myself living and working abroad. My identity as a white, queer, middle-class, American woman with Scandinavian roots impacts every part of my life. Despite growing up in a monolingual English-speaking household, I have been fortunate enough to travel, live abroad at three different points in my life, and have a family who has always encouraged me to connect with and learn from others around me. A lot of the people I love and hold dear to my heart are immigrants, whether first or second generation. The connections I have made with those around me have drawn me to learn more, as well as grow my heart and open my mind.

Before committing myself to the field of education, I worked in two different non-profit organizations that serve the Latine communities in Minnesota, HACER (Hispanic Advocacy and Community Empowerment through Research) and La Oportunidad. It was in this time that I learned of the wide opportunity gap that exists amongst students based on race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status in Minnesota’s education system. At HACER, one part of my job was to help lead summer camps for Latine youth ages 13-18 called “Líderes del Mañana” (Leaders of Tomorrow). This program focused on helping students develop the five fundamental aspects of success: self-esteem, teamwork, community leadership, civic responsibility, and setting and planning for personal goals. At my job in La Oportunidad, I worked in various urban schools as a

Latine Youth Program Coordinator. In this role, I worked with various public schools in the urban Twin Cities to provide weekly after school programs to at-risk Latine / Hispanic middle school students. This curriculum revolved around themes such as positive relationships, cultural empowerment, building identity and self-esteem, goal-setting, self-control and conflict resolution, leadership, and community involvement. I could see the need for students' social and emotional needs to be met, as well as the benefits of how programs like these were able to support immigrant-origin youth. Both of these experiences helped solidify my desire to dedicate my time and career to the field of education.

I have had experience teaching youth in three different countries: the United States, in México, and in Spain. Each of these experiences have been very different from the next. Throughout my time working in all of these varying school systems, I have had opportunities to teach students with a wide variety of different backgrounds culturally and linguistically, as well as based on race, gender, religion, age, socioeconomic or documentation status, and of many differing strengths and abilities. In each setting, I have also seen different spectrums of personal, family, or cultural patterns that impact students' abilities to learn. I have also noticed that there is one thing that all of my students have had in common: all students want to feel valued, safe, and loved. In my experience working and teaching in Minnesota's schools, all of which have had a high number of students who were identified as immigrant-origin, I was able to see firsthand the growing need for educators to incorporate a more culturally responsive and trauma-informed approach to teaching newcomer and immigrant-origin youth and supporting their mental health needs.



### **Historical Significance**

Throughout history, society has marginalized and oppressed students with Latine origin, which has bled into countless failures upheld by the US educational system. In the effort of Americanizing newcomer students in the early 1900's, many stood by the claim that segregation in schools was essential (Lander, 2022). Segregation was a standard practice by the start of the 1920's, and not only in the field of education. Many divisions were drawn in public life, while residents with Latine heritage were prohibited from restaurants, prevented from abiding in different neighborhoods with restrictive covenants, and had very limited and sanctioned access to community spaces such as movie theaters or public pools (Lander, 2022).

During this time of segregation, students with Latine heritage were said to be “unclean, disease ridden, slower learners, and overall lacking in moral fiber” (Lander, 2022, p. 121). Some people claimed that separation from white students was beneficial for Mexican students, as it helped support them in learning English, despite the fact that many of these students were already bilingual. Other people argued that the white students' academic achievement would be lessened if they were learning with their Hispanic peers (Lander, 2022). While segregation does not present itself as blatantly as it has done in the past, it still bleeds into the way the education system treats immigrant-origin students today.

### **Supporting Immigrant-Origin Students**

Today, approximately one in every four students under the age of seventeen is an immigrant or the child of immigrants in the US, and it is projected that by the year 2050, this ratio will grow to be one in every three students (Lander, 2022). Many immigrant-origin and refugee youth experience multiple stressors of cultural adaptation, residence in security, social

isolation, or experiences of discrimination (Kevers et. al., 2022). The Latine community is the fastest growing ethnic population in the United States, and Latine students encounter many challenges within public schools that their peers do not experience (Kelson et. al., 2022). Students who identify as Latine often experience distinct problems that affect their mental health that their white peers do not experience, yet they receive half of the mental health services (Mendiola et. al., 2021).

Racism, discrimination, bullying, stereotypes, microaggressions, as well as anxiety revolving around documentation status or deportation of loved ones, are some common problems that Latine students face in United States' school systems (Mendiola et al., 2021). Lack of resources, food, and stable housing in Latine communities have further exacerbated these issues. Education becomes central in changing the trajectory and statistics for children of color, specifically Latinas, yet Latina students are consistently being failed by the United States' educational systems (Martin, 2011). Latina immigrant-origin youth face a unique set of multifaceted challenges, especially within the education system in the United States. While there are countless resources and research dedicated to teaching immigrant-origin students the English language, there is very little research that goes beyond language learning in regards to how to nurture immigrant-origin students to succeed academically and socially at school (Lander, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Chapter One sheds light on the guiding question “*How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program that revolves around the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning skills?*”. This chapter addresses the need for comprehensive and culturally appropriate mental health care for immigrant-origin youth, as well as explains both the personal and professional significance of

this research for myself. The following chapters (2, 3, and 4) will dig deeper into the research question and guide the way for my capstone project. Chapter Two will focus on reviewing the literature and honor those who have researched and shed light on this topic before me. It will dive deeper into the rationale behind focusing on Latina middle school students, heritage education, mental health, extracurricular programs, social and emotional learning. Chapter Three will explain the premise of the capstone project I am designing, the curriculum rationale, setting and audience, as well as the project outline and timeline. This will include the preparation, implementation, and assessment of the capstone. Chapter Four will highlight what was learned from the research project, including my personal reflections and the growth I have made throughout this process. It will also revisit important parts of the literature review and cover any possible implications or limitations of the project, as well as recommend pathways for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The research in this literature review revolves around the question: *“How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program that revolves around the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning skills?”*

In this section, I will be providing a brief summary of the foundational research revolving around students who identify as Latina immigrant-origin and their social-emotional needs at the middle school level. The research throughout this chapter is built around four pillars: Latina immigrant-origin students, mental health in middle school, extracurricular heritage activities, and teaching social-emotional learning skills.

In the first section, I will be answering the question, “Why focus on students who identify as Latina immigrant-origin?”. I will provide a brief history of marginalization and discrimination against Latine immigrant-origin students, as well as the barriers that Latina students face in the public school system today. The second section will include research regarding mental health at the middle school level and the varying factors that impact the mental health of Latina students specifically. In the third section, I will lay out an overview of research regarding extracurricular heritage activities at school, and dig deeper into the benefits and barriers to holding space for extracurricular activities, as well as why they are so important for students at the middle school level. The final section will revolve around the key aspects of social-emotional learning and why explicit instruction of these skills are crucial, specifically for Latina middle school students.

## **Why Latina Immigrant-Origin Students?**

Despite the growing numbers of Latina women participating in higher education, there are still considerable disparities such as lower graduation rates and more barriers to hurdle. The internalization of messages from sources such as school, media, parents, and society have made students feel doubts in being able to achieve them (Martin, 2011). There are a multitude of factors that youth may be impacted by, all of which interact together and either serve as assets or buffers from risks on the path to healthy development. Societal, neighborhood, school, community, and family factors all work together to help youth construct this pathway. The clash of collectivist and individualistic cultures, as well as gender norms and expectations, also creates tension in Latinas desiring to attain higher education and pursuing their dreams (Sims et. al., 2020).

Within a Latine family unit, the Latina girls and women are oftentimes taking on the caretaking roles at home and act as a surrogate parent, simultaneously while they are expected as the motherly figure to be “keepers of the culture”, and pass the cultural traditions down the family line (Niño & Hearne, 2022, p. 965). This inherently makes it more difficult for Latina students to find the time to focus on academic expectations and social demands. Throughout the history of this nation, Latinas have been marginalized and subjected to society’s toxic cycles of educational failure and poverty (Sims et. al., 2020).

### ***History of Marginalization and Discrimination***

**Americanization.** Through key historical events, laws and policies, Supreme Court cases, and national movements that have shaped what immigrant education is today, the educational system has created division in attempts to Americanize their students. The concept

behind Americanization was founded on the assumption that immigrants posed a threat to the political, economic, social stability, and security of the nation (Lander, 2022).

**Segregation.** The curriculum, resources, books, and buildings at the time were very different in the schools designated for Latine students. The boys were taught subjects such as bootmaking, gardening, blacksmithing, and carpentry in order to prepare them to work in low-paying jobs in the trade industry, while the girls studied subjects such as sewing and homemaking (Bowman, 2014). The superintendent of schools in Ontario, California, stated, “Girls should be trained to become domestic servants, and to do various kinds of hand work for which they can be paid adequately after they leave school” (Bowman, 2014, p. 12). These schools would open at 7:30am in the morning and would end at 12:30pm, so the children could go to work in the fields. The predictable outcome of this was that many students had to repeat grades and eventually drop out of school altogether.

***Méndez v. Westminster.*** Parents in the colonias of Orange county, like Gonzalo and Felicitas Méndez, knew that their children’s only hope for escaping poverty was in education. Felicitas would say: “Our children, all of our children, brown, black, and white, must have the opportunity to be whatever they want to be, and education gives them that opportunity” (Bowman, 2014, p. 12). The day after his children were turned away from Westminster Main school, Gonzalo Méndez spoke to the principal, and despite his efforts, his children were still not permitted to attend. The following day he went to the school board, where he was turned away once again. After this, he went to the Orange County school board, where the narrative was repeated and he was unsuccessful in his case.

Undeterred by the failures they saw as blatant injustice, the Méndez family was no less determined to fight for the education of their children. In 1946, *Mendez v. Westminster* was the

first federal court case to uphold that separating Latine students into different schools based on their skin color violated students' constitutional rights (Bowman, 2014). This holding was one of the earliest victories in school desegregation, which paved the way for *Brown v. Board*, and is a crucial part of history in the fight for equality in the United States. Both of these cases are still relevant today in our educational system, as segregation and inequalities present themselves in different ways (Chinchilla, 2020).

### ***Present Day Challenges of Latina Immigrant-Origin Students***

**Educational Opportunity Gap.** The Latine population is the largest marginalized population in the United States, yet they have the lowest high school graduation rates (Chinchilla, 2020). Today, Latinas account for 8.4% of students who drop out of high school in comparison to the 4.1% of white females and 6.5% of Black females (Leslie, 2021). According to Chinchilla (2020), two of the major barriers in pursuing higher education that Latinas encounter are a lack of role models/mentors, and inadequate support from academic institutions. Many Latina students have claimed that their families that tend to promote the concept that "it is more responsible to work than to attend college" (Pecina & Marx, 2023, p. 530); and the families who do encourage their Latina family members to pursue higher education often lack the essential support systems needed to address the educational opportunity gap, particularly for first-generation students (Chinchilla, 2020). According to Pecina & Marx, "Institutions must look at their own culture and climate and identify the challenges it creates that deters Latina student's academic success and degree completion" (2023, p. 540). Studies have shown that Latina women receive less financial aid than any other group trying to pursue higher education and are often challenged by their families because they're expected to contribute to the family financially (Chinchilla, 2020). It is not enough for academic institutions to admit and enroll

students who identify as Latina, without taking the time to identify the barriers these students are facing and being willing to engage in meaningful discourse and adjust their practices to support student success.

**Microaggressions.** On top of being placed in remedial or English language development classes, many English language learner students experience microaggressions from educators at school (Chinchilla, 2020). Latina students whose primary language is other than English often feel like their teachers deem them as unintelligent or uninvested in their education because of the language barrier (Chinchilla, 2020). Young people need supportive networks to navigate both social and academic spheres, with "social capital" denoting the access to valuable resources gained through social connections (Szlyk, et al., 2020). Studies indicate that Latine immigrant-origin students achieve higher academic success when they possess increased cultural and social capital, but schools are the first and oftentimes only point of service for newcomer students (Szlyk, et al., 2020).

**Lack of Representation.** Research has demonstrated that there is a cultural disconnect that sets Latinas apart from schools and plays a part in their lack of engagement in school (Leslie, 2021). Bernal states “Although students of color are holders and creators of knowledge, they often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures, and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” (2013). Critical Race Theory (CRT) sheds light on how marginalized student groups experience detachment from educational systems, linking these discriminatory practices to broader societal biases, whereas Latine Critical Theory (LatCrit) addresses some issues often ignored by CRT theorists (Leslie, 2021) (Bernal, 2013). From a Latine Critical Theory lens, textbooks and curriculum should depict the intricacies and complexities of women and their racialized experiences in a diverse manner, presenting



narratives that challenge prevailing negative stereotypes of Latinas. This includes factors such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and sexuality.

Latina students in particular are often left out and made invisible within textbooks, learning resources, and within the curriculum. Many critics of CRT and LatCrit do not acknowledge that Eurocentrism is and has been the domineering state of mind, which directly impacts any story told about race (Bernal, 2013). For example, notable Latina figures often don't receive due recognition for their achievements, and there's a major lack of discussion in books about the gendered challenges and discrimination they have faced throughout history (Leslie, 2021). This invisibility can lead students into believing that their culture or gender is not valued in school or society. When Latinas are mentioned in textbooks, the details provided are often brief and shallow, and there are few pictures of well-known Latinas, with even fewer depicting unidentified Latinas. Moreover, most illustrations depict Latinas either as immigrants/migrant farm workers, in domestic roles, or as activists (Leslie, 2021). According to student interviews done by Penn State (2020), if Latine youth were given the opportunity to learn about or people who look like them in positions of power, it would not only inspire Latine students to follow their dreams, but all students would also be able to form more educated opinions regarding topics that affect the Latine community. The exclusion of marginalized groups, such as Latinas, exacerbates the disconnect between students and the curriculum, diminishing their sense of empowerment within their surroundings. One way to combat this disconnect is by empowering students through heritage education and ethnic studies.

### **Heritage-Based Education**

The major lack of diversity represented within the curriculum reinforces white-washed and eurocentric ideologies while simultaneously marginalizing other cultures, communities, and

stories, whereas investing in heritage education and ethnic studies pedagogy provides educational opportunities for students by meeting the needs and building on the strengths of students from marginalized communities. Through connecting students' lived experiences and cultural history to relevant advocacy within their communities, teaching ethnic studies has a long history of empowering students and fostering academic achievement (Nojan, 2020). According to Himlie (2020), "Learning about other cultures will help students connect with those who are of different races and extend compassion for them". Despite the growing literature regarding the benefits and practices of incorporating this kind of curriculum into K-12 school settings, there is less research regarding how teaching ethnic studies affects students at the middle school level, or how it can be effectively taught in after-school programs. Students of color should be provided with opportunities to learn more about their own culture's history, and white students need opportunities to learn about cultures other than their own. According to Nojan (2020), studies have shown that implementing heritage education and ethnic studies curriculum leads to improved academic outcomes, academic confidence, critical thinking skills, self-efficacy, and better relationships between students and teachers. This research also found that it encourages social awareness, leadership, and advocacy skills.

### **Mental Health in the Middle Grades**

The transition to middle school can be exceptionally challenging for many students, socially, academically, and psychologically (Borman et. al., 2021). Middle schools often are unprepared to meet students' psychological needs, leading to less support from teachers, a weaker sense of belonging, and lower academic engagement. During this stage of critical development, which is often characterized by an intensified sensitivity to social acceptance,

internalized self-doubt, both socially and academically, can harm students' well-being, engagement in class, and long-term academic achievement (Borman et. al., 2021).

Early adolescence represents a pivotal developmental stage in which youth become more cognizant of and vulnerable to family stressors. This heightened awareness can lead adolescents to exhibit adverse reactions to family stress, such as heightened depression, involvement in substance use, or other forms of externalizing behavioral issues (Giano et. al., 2020). Students in marginalized groups have a particularly difficult time during these years, as they are simultaneously having to navigate their ethnic and cultural identity formation (Borman et. al., 2021).

Students of color are less likely to seek support in schools, highlighting the need for addressing mental health disparities and cultural practices (Mendiola et. al. 2021). First, this section will talk about the unique issues that students who identify as Latina face in the US school system. This section will then delve into the barriers that Latina students face in regards to finding support for their mental health. Finally, this section will identify different steps that can be taken to address students' mental health needs in a school setting.

### ***Latina Mental Health***

Latina students report greater risk than their male counterparts for mental health problems, such as depression, as well as suicidal ideation and behavior (Llamas, 2020). The factors that predicted this risk of suicidal behavior includes loneliness, hopelessness, and delinquency. Additionally, the risk of suicidality among Latinas who partake in higher education may be intensified by factors such as economic hardship, violence exposure, and familiar pressures. Most present research focuses on conventional mental health related symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, aggression, or hyperactivity; however, culturally focused researchers have

argued that these symptoms do not fully capture the mental health problems that exist for marginalized ethnic groups, like the Latine community, and acculturative stress has been noted as a major contributing factor to mental health issues in Latine youth (Albeg et. al., 2014).

Acculturative stress refers to the psychological and social pressures associated with navigating two conflicting cultures and the perceived necessity to assimilate into the new culture to avoid discrimination (Niño & Hearne, 2022). This has a negative impact on students' academic performance and leads to decreased engagement at school. Factors like language barriers and pressures, discrimination, parent-child acculturative gaps, and the loss of native cultural practices and values all fall into ways in which students can experience acculturative stress. When parents are experiencing these stressors and feeling heightened depressive symptoms, they are likely to detrimentally affect the family's overall functioning as well as the emotional and mental well-being of their children (Lorenzo-Blanco et. al., 2017).

Political and social contexts are often overflowing with negative messages on acceptance and belonging. Sociopolitical tensions and messaging regarding host countries, through topics such as deportation, xenophobia, and discrimination, are all playing a part in influencing the sense of belonging that students feel at school or within their communities (Llamas, 2020).

Despite the high number of Latinas experiencing persistent mental health issues, there are several barriers that come in between utilizing available mental health services.

### ***Barriers to Mental Health Services***

The barriers to receiving mental health care occur all the way from the patient level, the provider level, to the systemic level. For instance, Latine youth are less likely to seek or receive mental health services than their white peers (Lilly, 2024). Studies have shown that there are many reasons behind the under-utilization of mental health services among Latine youth. These

factors include logical or practical barriers, negative experiences or worries regarding healthcare, as well as personal beliefs and attitudes in regards to mental health (Lilly, 2024). According to Moses and Holmes (2022), research has shown that a negative stigma revolving around mental illness plays a significant role in whether or not Latine youth decide whether or not to seek help with mental health struggles. Addressing the topic of mental health and starting discussions revolving around seeking mental health treatment is often culturally viewed in a negative light.

Historically, mental health has often been perceived as taboo within Latine families and communities because of the cultural norms that promote silence around sensitive topics. One of the most common stigmatizing notions to Latine youth is that therapy should only be considered for very severe cases of mental illness, and brands those seeking mental health services as "crazy" (Lilly, 2024, p. 7). Latine students not only receive stigmatizing messages regarding mental health, but also ones that either minimized or silenced their mental health needs, which results in youth suffering in silence. In this case, the negative perceptions regarding seeking help within Latine families, and the inclination of Latina youth to suffer in silence might be viewed as a form of adaptation, serving to shield Latine families from further vulnerability within systems of oppression already impacting them.

It is also important to consider the reasonings behind potential negative associations with the clinically oriented health care system in the United States. In Latin and South America, many clinical mental health services are still limited, despite recent progress (Lilly, 2024). More often, informal approaches to managing mental health are utilized, including talking to family members, religious leaders, or through the act of prayer. According to Moses and Holmes (2022), religion was a prominent factor in the way that people perceive mental health and mental health services, with mental illness being associated with shame or the possession of evil spirits.

When Latine people do try to access mental health services in the United States, they often experience many barriers in the process, or have negative experiences and disengage from treatment. Some factors at the patient level that interfere with accessing comprehensive mental health care include the language barrier, immigration status, and mental health literacy (Lilly, 2024). In a school setting, teachers' expectations, whether they may be high or low, result in self-fulfilling prophecies of students' academic success, despite the accuracy of those expectations. These biases affect Latina students' mental health, as well as their own academic expectations for themselves. In fact, declining grades in middle school are one of the most prominent warning signs that predict whether or not a student will drop out of high school (Borman, et. al., 2021). Because of this, it is important early on for teachers and adults in general to pay careful attention so students' mental health needs can be addressed sooner rather than later. Adults working in schools also must take the emotional requirements of youth with undocumented parents, particularly in the context of immigration enforcement into account (Giano, et. al., 2020).

As schools serve as an important place in society, specifically for youth, the school environment and the connections formed within it are pivotal factors for the adjustment and integration of immigrant children and their families into the host community (Kevers et. al., 2022). The practice of mental health services within school settings holds significant potential for fostering positive intercultural connections and mitigating the social dynamics of stigma and discrimination within diverse classrooms. Research has shown that fostering healthy peer and adult connections at school serves as a protective factor from mental health issues, as well as lessens the effects of reduced parental presence and societal challenges, such as stereotyping and

discrimination (Kevers, et. al., 2022). One way to foster positive connections at school and address Latina students' mental health needs is through extracurricular activities.

### **Extracurricular Programs**

Extracurricular programs are beneficial for students in high-risk situations or struggling in school, particularly Latine children of immigrants. These programs, which are not part of the traditional school curriculum, can help students feel less social isolation in disenfranchised urban communities (Heath et. al, 2022). This section will begin by providing an overview of the short-term and long-term benefits of extracurricular activities. The next part of this section will include a deeper look at which students are most likely to be participating in these programs, as well as the barriers to participating in extracurricular activities.

#### ***Benefits of Extracurriculars***

According to research, after-school programs are fundamental within any plan aimed at enhancing the opportunities and results for young people, especially those facing disadvantages (Heath, 2023). Extracurricular activities provide students with the opportunity to interact with others, face unique challenges, and explore their own identities (Feraco et. al., 2023). Engaging in extracurricular activities is associated with improved academic performance, decreased likelihood of substance use, fewer behavioral issues, and a stronger focus on academics among middle school students (O'Flaherty, 2022).

Students in high-risk situations or experiencing difficulties in school are the most likely to reap the highest benefits from participating in afterschool programs, and participation in extracurriculars nearing the transition to high school has been associated with better grades in high school classes, which was an even stronger trend for low-income students (Heath et. al., 2022). Through extracurricular activities, students from different socioeconomic backgrounds

have the opportunity to gain and practice cognitive, motor, and socioemotional skills (Ilari et. al., 2022). Despite underprivileged youth from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds seeming to gain the most from these activities, they are also the least likely to participate in them because of the added barriers they face (O’Flaherty, 2022).

### ***Barriers to Extracurriculars***

Studies have shown that students with lower socioeconomic status are less likely to participate in extracurriculars than their peers with high socioeconomic status (Health et. al., 2022). This research also shows that families and neighborhoods with a higher income are associated with increased participation in extracurricular programs. Families who are financially advantaged also have social, capital, and economic resources that grant them access and information to high quality extracurricular programs, the fees and costs associated with them, as well as commit to them long-term (Kravchenko & Nygård, 2023). Low-income youth in urban areas have lower participation rates, likely due to added barriers in these areas, and this connection between socioeconomic status and participation appears consistent nationwide (Health, et. al, 2022).

Students in highly marginalized urban communities often face social isolation that hinders their social development (Heath et. al., 2022). Ilari et. al. (2022) states that extracurricular programs and extended learning opportunities aim to mitigate the disadvantages caused by this. Many working adults rely on after-school activities to help their children with homework, develop skills, and keep them safe. Heath et. al. (2022) adds that factors like family structure, supervision, and school-home communication influence the likelihood of immigrant-origin students’ participation in extracurricular activities, and this is particularly true for Latine students. Research emphasizes the necessity of creating new policies that support



working parents and families in being able to manage their work, home life, caregiving, schooling, and extracurricular activities (Ilari et. al., 2022).

### **Social Emotional Learning**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been proven highly effective and well-established in many studies, though most of them revolve around the elementary school level (Coelho et. al., 2023). Social and emotional learning focuses on developing five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, aiming to help students to recognize emotions, regulate thoughts, empathize with others, and maintain healthy relationships. These are highly important skills for students to learn, especially in the transitional years of middle school. This section will begin by delving into what social emotional learning entails and what the explicit instruction of it generally looks like. Next, it will go into the short-term and long-term benefits of learning social emotional learning skills in the key developmental years of middle school.

#### ***What is SEL?***

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leading organization in the field of social-emotional learning studies, defines social-emotional learning as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions“ (CASEL, 2024). The five basic skill areas in social-emotional learning are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

**Self awareness.** Self-awareness encompasses the way students see themselves, the ability to describe their emotions, and being able to recognize their own personal strengths and limitations (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021). Students with a healthy level of self-awareness would be able to recognize and label their feelings, and demonstrate self-confidence and self-advocacy. These skills would provide students with a realistic perception of themselves, which can make them more capable of attaining their personal and academic aspirations (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021).

**Self-management.** Self-management refers to a student's ability to regulate their emotions and control their behaviors in different scenarios. According to Kasikci & Ozhan, (2021), indicators of having a competency in self-management include managing impulses and stress, as well as having self-discipline and motivation. Students with self-management skills are able to set and reach their academic and personal goals, while being realistic about their own needs and constraints (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021).

**Social awareness.** Social awareness competency reflects students' ability to hold empathy for others and understand different perspectives (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021). Students with high social awareness skills respect differences between themselves and other people, and are able to empathize with others' points of view (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021).

**Relationship skills.** Relationship skills pertain to a student's ability to establish and keep healthy relationships with people from varying cultures and backgrounds than their own (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021). Some behavioral indicators of relationship skills revolve around qualities such as healthy communication, relationship-building, social involvement, and a capacity for teamwork. Because of this, research suggests that high social awareness and relationship skills is

correlated with higher happiness levels and positively affects students' psychological well-being (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021).

**Responsible decision-making.** Responsible decision-making constitutes the students' ability to make healthy choices revolving around relationships and behaviors. This involves students being able to recognize a problem, analyze the situation, solve the problem, receive feedback, and stay on task.

### ***Benefits of SEL***

Incorporating culturally responsive social emotional learning can be a powerful tool in cultivating inclusive, caring, and healthy school settings that support all students in reaching their highest potential. Social emotional skills are beneficial for all students, despite differences in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, learning abilities, home language, immigration status, gender identity, or sexual orientation (CASEL, 2024). Educational settings where adults are able to adapt to and respect students' developmental needs, grow deeper awareness of the backgrounds, cultures, and learning differences of their students, are beneficial for both students and teachers alike.

As social emotional learning emphasizes the practices of empathy, respectful communication, and building deeper relationships, which transfers to the cultivation of a classroom culture that is inclusive of all students. According to CASEL (2024) schools in Minneapolis have been successful in integrating SEL strategies into their district, and the superintendent and cabinet leaders often even integrate the three signature SEL practices into their meeting sessions in order to add intentionality for relationship-building and reflection (CASEL, 2024). These practices are beneficial for people of all ages and have a positive impact on many different aspects of students' learning and well-being.

**Academic Achievement.** Students' learning social-emotional skills can have a positive impact on their academic achievement (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021). Self-management skills are crucial for managing and reaching academic goals that are appropriate for students' needs and learning styles. Learning these skills will assist students in more readily being able to attain their academic aspirations and reach their full potential. According to CASEL (2024), stronger social and emotional learning skills are correlated to positive outcomes up to 18 years later, including being more likely to graduate from high school, postsecondary enrollment and completion, as well as stable employment as adults.

**Mental Health.** While learning social emotional skills does not substitute the need for mental health interventions for those who need them, they can build "protective factors" that can safeguard against potential mental health risks (CASEL, 2024). Mental health symptoms like depression, anxiety, and negative sense of self can be reduced by acquiring and growing social-emotional learning skills (Kasikci & Ozhan, 2021). Social and emotional skills enhance students' coping skills and resiliency, which can help decrease symptoms of anxiety and depression in the short term. Through building caring relationships in learning environments that feel supportive and safe, students feel a higher sense of belonging at school. This further on contributes to less negative behaviors and discipline issues, which leads to reduced aggression and bullying in a school setting (CASEL, 2024).

**Cultural contexts.** Social emotional learning has proven to be effective across all demographic populations; whether their backgrounds may differ socioeconomically or culturally, or whether they live in urban, suburban, or rural areas (CASEL, 2024). Despite this, it is not an approach that is "one-size-fits-all". Social emotional learning strategies are most efficient when designed with a particular culture or context taken into consideration. Research consistently

demonstrates that the students having the ability to retain their cultural heritage while adapting to life in the USA is crucial for successful acculturation and may enhance their overall success in school settings (Kaplin, 2009). With this being said, it is important to advocate for social and emotional learning instruction that is culturally relevant and reflects students' heritage and culture.

### **Summary**

This chapter has introduced the reader to the groundwork of how middle school Latina immigrant-origin students could benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program focused on explicit instruction of social-emotional learning skills. I have synthesized the literature review into four foundational pillars: the unique experiences of Latina immigrant-origin students, the complexities of mental health in middle school, the significance of extracurricular activities, and the importance of teaching SEL skills. By investigating the historical marginalization and discrimination that Latina students have faced and recognizing the barriers they encounter today within the US educational system, we have highlighted the importance of targeted support and interventions. We have examined mental health at the middle school level, as well as emphasized the need for tailored strategies to address Latina students' mental health needs in a culturally-responsive manner. Furthermore, we explored how extracurricular programs could serve as spaces of belonging and empowerment for Latina students. Finally, we highlighted the need for explicit instruction revolving around SEL skills, recognizing its potential to foster resilience, emotional well-being, and academic success among Latina middle school students. Moving forward, it is of utmost importance to translate this research into a plan of action in order to prioritize the holistic development and empowerment of

Latina students. To do this, I will be designing a culturally-responsive after-school curriculum program revolving around SEL skills created for 7th-8th grade Latina immigrant-origin students.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

This chapter will introduce the framework of an after-school SEL curriculum revolving around culturally relevant social and emotional learning skills for 7th-8th grade Latina students. It describes a curriculum for a program that utilizes the best SEL practices from a foundation of understanding the unique experiences and barriers that Latina students face. The research question guiding this program is: *“How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program that revolves around the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning skills?”* This curriculum project is meant to be flexible and replicable, with the aim to best suit the needs of the students, as well as the needs of the staff supporting them. To demonstrate how this curriculum will fulfill this goal, this chapter will provide a description of the project, as well as the intended setting and audience. Next, this section will dive into a cohesive timeline explaining how long it has taken to design the project and the proposed timeline for the curriculum’s implementation. Finally, it will describe the assessment process and how the data will be collected in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

#### Project Description

This program will be built on five main pillars: SEL skills, exploration and celebration of heritage, creative expression, cultivating empathy, and building community. Each session will provide students with the opportunity to practice their skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, all in a safe and inclusive environment. Students will be able to foster pride and appreciation for their own cultural

backgrounds while developing curiosity and respect for their peers' heritage. By exploring the stories, traditions, and experiences of different Latine cultures and communities, students will gain a sense of cultural pride, as well as skills in perspective-taking and practicing empathy.

### **Curriculum Rationale**

This project was designed to fill a gap in the current research, as well as address the lack of after-school curriculum opportunities available for low-income students in Minnesota. Based on the research shown in the literature review, it can be concluded that providing culturally relevant interventions that integrate Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skills with heritage-based education can have significant positive impacts on the well-being and academic success of Latina students in middle school. By validating students' cultural backgrounds and experiences, heritage-based education cultivates resilience, cultural pride, and academic engagement in students.

To build the full curriculum, I will be using the Understanding by Design Framework (Wiggins & Tighe) and construct the lesson plans by beginning with the end goal in mind. The overarching goal of this project revolves around encouraging a sense of cultural pride, positive well-being, academic engagement, and empathy in students, as well as to foster a deeper sense of belonging and connectedness to the school environment. This curriculum plan will be guided by the signature practices of SEL that have been proven successful by CASEL and various school districts implementing more SEL tactics, such as in Minneapolis. An example of one of the signature practices that Minneapolis schools have integrated into SEL curriculum includes a welcoming inclusion-based activity, routine, or ritual that builds community and connects to the work in store (Schwartz, et al., 2022). Every session within the curriculum created will begin with this key practice.



## **Setting and Audience**

This after-school curriculum was created to be implemented in a public middle school in an urban area of Minnesota. The school is right outside of a major metropolitan area, in a historically wealthy area. Throughout the past five years, this school has experienced a massive influx of students from varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. One of the biggest increases in the student population have been students with Latine heritage. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), this middle school was reported to have a student population of 735 students in all (2022-2023). The student demographics are rapidly changing, but the NCES report from 2022-2023 noted that one quarter of the student population identified as Latine. In the year 2021, this school hired a Spanish-speaking cultural liaison to help address the major cultural disparity between the student population and the staff that works with them. This has been highly beneficial for the students and the school environment in many ways, but there is still a much greater need to address the barriers Latina students face at school.

The location of the sessions will take place in an accessible classroom after school. The size of the group will be in between eight to ten students, as well as one or two bilingual (English/Spanish) staff members leading the group. Ideally, this unit plan was designed for 7th and 8th grade Latina (female) immigrant-origin students. The Latina students at this school come from a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures, family structures, and socioeconomic statuses. The staff member in charge will work with the cultural liaison as well as the ESL teachers at the school in order to select students that would be most likely to benefit from the program. Students will be asked to apply for the program through a short application process and turn in a specific form with a signature of a parent or guardian in order to participate.

## **Project Outline and Timeline**

This curriculum was constructed as a unit plan for a weekly after-school program that shines light on the question: *“How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program that revolves around the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning skills?”*

### ***Preparation***

The preparation of this project has taken five months of collecting research and data in order to learn the best practices for incorporating SEL strategies into an extracurricular program and working with middle grade Latina immigrant-origin students in an urban setting. All of the lesson plans, instructional materials, and assessments have all been designed specifically for the curriculum design.

### ***Implementation***

This program will consist of twelve sessions that occur once a week after school in a classroom space. Throughout each session, students will have the opportunity to take part in enriching activities, arts and crafts, and games that aim to meet their academic, cultural, social, and emotional needs. Every session will follow a different theme that focuses on a specific social and emotional skill set. The curriculum will revolve around elements of Latina culture and heritage in order to cultivate a culturally affirming environment where students feel like their identities are valued and affirmed. Students will partake in group activities, reflections and curriculum that will help them gain skills and knowledge in relation to leadership, healthy relationships and conflict resolution, decision-making and problem-solving, goal setting, and community involvement, all while developing their own sense of self and cultural identity.

- 1. *Introduction and Relationship Building.*** In the first session, students will take the pre-assessment survey. This session will serve as an opportunity for students to become more comfortable in the small group and act as a catalyst for relationship building. There will be time for fun icebreaker activities that get all students involved.
- 2. *Navigating Mental Health.*** The third session will revolve around understanding and regulating complex emotions. Students will learn about the importance of mental health, healthy coping mechanisms, and how to find resources for support. This topic is important to approach with sensitivity and empathy, creating a safe space for students to engage in open dialogue and seek support if needed. The staff members should ensure that students know where to turn for help both within and outside the school environment.
- 3. *Building Self-Confidence.*** In the fourth session, students will learn skills in building self-confidence. Students will learn why self-confidence is important and how having it has a positive effect on various aspects of life. Students will learn about the impact of self-talk, and how to recognize negative thoughts and replace them with positive affirmations. Students will practice positive self-talk and share examples of empowering affirmations.
- 4. *Healthy Communication and Conflict Resolution.*** In this session, students will learn about different communication styles, active listening, empathy, and setting healthy boundaries. Students will practice using “I” statements to express feelings and concerns, discuss the importance of self-advocacy, and look at how culture can influence communication and conflict resolution.

- 5. *Self-Management and Goal Setting.*** In this session, students will learn about the connection between personal values and success, as well as the importance of setting realistic and achievable goals. Students will learn about time management, organization, and balancing responsibilities with self-care. Students will be encouraged to embrace their cultural identity, leverage their strengths, and pursue their goals with confidence.
- 6. *Healthy Relationships.*** In this session, students will work together to outline what they believe a “healthy relationship” looks like and feels like. Students will then learn about recognizing unhealthy behaviors in relationships, such as manipulation, disrespect, jealousy, lack of boundaries, etc. Students will practice setting boundaries with others and staff will reinforce the idea that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and that healthy relationships are for everyone.
- 7. *Cultural Exploration Enrichment Day*** Students and staff will take a field trip to a local environment that reflects Latine heritage and culture. This session will be open to different opportunities and options that may be available at the time of the program. Some ideas may include, but are not limited to, museum exhibits, food markets, theater performances, and more.
- 8. *Mindfulness and Self-Care.*** In this lesson, students will learn about the importance of mindfulness and self-care in promoting their overall well-being. Students will learn practical techniques for practicing mindfulness and discuss how cultural values intersect with self-care practices. Students will learn about the importance of practicing gratitude and how it can be transformative for their mindset and well-being. Students will brainstorm a list of self-care activities they

enjoy or find helpful and build personalized plans that include physical, emotional, social, and spiritual self-care.

- 9. *Leadership and Empowerment.*** Students will learn about the importance of cultural identity in leadership while learning about influential leaders from past and present. They will have the opportunity to reflect on their own leadership skills and learn more about how to grow those skills through joining initiatives that align with their interests.
- 10. *Community Engagement.*** Students will understand the importance of community engagement by identifying and discussing key strategies for effectively participating in and contributing to their local communities. They will be able to develop a community service plan that addresses a specific need within their community, demonstrating how their actions can foster positive change and strengthen community ties.
- 11. *Resilience and Perseverance.*** In this lesson, students will learn about the characteristics of resilient individuals, such as adaptability, problem solving, and the ability to ask for support when needed. Students will learn about what it means to have a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset, and have the opportunity to share their own experiences of overcoming challenges.
- 12. *Celebration and Reflection.*** In the final session, students will complete the post-assessment survey. Afterwards, they will have the opportunity to celebrate and reflect on all of the work they had completed throughout the program.

## **Assessment**

There will be two assessments for students to complete in order to evaluate the project's effectiveness: a pre-assessment on the first day of the program and a post-assessment on the final day of the program. The pre-assessment would guide which topics need to be dived deeper into throughout the program and the post-survey will evaluate the program's efficiency. The surveys will include questions that use the 1-5 Likert scale (Strongly Disagree/Strongly Agree or Very Satisfied/Very Dissatisfied) as well as open-ended short answer questions that could provide insight for improving the program. The data taken from the assessments will help direct any improvements while replicating the program in the future.

## **Summary**

This chapter has outlined the framework for an after-school program tailored to 7th-8th grade Latina (female) students that revolves around SEL skills and heritage learning. It introduces the foundation of a program that has been designed to address the unique challenges and experiences faced by Latina students, utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy and social emotional learning practices. The central research question guiding this initiative is: "How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program that revolves around the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning skills?". The curriculum aims to meet both student and staff needs effectively, as it emphasizes flexibility and replicability. This chapter provides an overview of the project, including its intended setting and audience. Additionally, it outlines the project's timeline starting from the design process all the way to implementation. Finally, it covers the assessment process for evaluating program effectiveness, including data collection methods. As we journey onward to Chapter Four, I will be reflecting on the capstone process, revisit sections of the literature

review, and discuss potential implications and limitations of the project. I will also suggest pathways for future research, reflect on the growth I have made throughout this process and look ahead towards possibilities encompassing my own research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

#### Overview

This project has sought to answer the question: “*How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program that revolves around the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning skills?*” Through gathering a diverse array of literature, as well as utilizing the knowledge I have gained in my own life experiences, I have constructed an after-school heritage-based curriculum that fosters and embraces the unique social and emotional needs of middle grade Latina (female) students. Chapter Four encompasses a personal reflection, as well as a general review of my learning experience while fulfilling the requirements of this project. The first section will include a summary of the major learning outcomes throughout the process of designing the capstone. Secondly, I will provide a brief overview of the literature and its impact on the curriculum design. Next, I will address the implications of the research and capstone project. From there, I will cover the limitations associated with the research, as well as the next steps for the project and future research possibilities connected to the capstone. Finally, I will share how this project has the potential to benefit educators and students alike, and how I intend to use everything I have learned throughout this capstone project to make a positive impact and contribution to the field of education.

#### Major Learnings

Everything I have learned throughout this research journey, I would like to carry into my career as an educator. One big takeaway I have gained throughout the creation of this project is that being a good educator goes hand in hand with being a good researcher. In order to respond



to the infinitely changing needs of the students I serve, I must continue to search for new and innovative ways to provide the best possible learning opportunities for each student.

This project has felt so rewarding. As a researcher and as a writer, I have had to continuously push past my own limits to seek out new relevant information and bring my pen back to the paper (my fingers to the keyboard) over and over again.

Throughout the research I have done for this project, I have delved deeper into the well of information regarding the importance of culturally responsive educational opportunities for students who are oftentimes underserved and underrepresented. Another main takeaway has been the value of fostering and advocating for students' social and emotional learning needs. Students must feel safe, secure, and welcomed at school before they can be expected to excel at their academics.

### **Revisiting the Guiding Literature**

I would like to take a moment to thank all of the brilliant minds behind the literature I had gathered in Chapter Two. The research that I collected for this chapter of this capstone project greatly influenced the creation of the curriculum. Literature regarding the unique experiences of Latina immigrant-origin students, the complexities of mental health at the middle grade level, the significance of extracurricular activities, and the importance of teaching SEL skills, drove my desire to design a curriculum that truly fits the needs of the students it will serve.

As I mentioned in Chapter Two, Latina students have been marginalized and subjected to society's toxic cycles of poverty and systemic educational failure (Sims et. al., 2020). According to Leslie (2021), despite being the largest marginalized population in the United States, Latina female students represent 8.4% of high school dropouts, in comparison to 4.1% of white female students and 6.5% among Black female students. Through my own experiences working with

Latina students in the public school system and seeing these disparities play out in real life, I chose to dedicate my project to creating a curriculum that can hopefully bridge some of the gap in between these statistics.

I wanted my project to focus on 7th and 8th grade students at the middle school level because of the unique challenges faced during these years. Borman et. al (2021) noted that students in marginalized groups have a particularly difficult time during the middle grade years, as they are simultaneously having to navigate their ethnic and cultural identity formation.

My curriculum was designed to be an extracurricular program because I believe these programs have the capability to provide students with the opportunity to interact with others, face unique challenges, and explore their own identities. According to Heath et al. (2022), extracurricular programs are particularly advantageous for students in high-risk situations or those who are struggling academically, especially for Latine children of immigrants. These programs, which fall outside the standard day-to-day school curriculum, can help reduce feelings of social isolation among students in marginalized urban communities and increase feelings of connection to their school community.

In regards to learning more about social and emotional learning, I relied heavily on the research, frameworks, and strategies from CASEL (2024). According to CASEL, integrating culturally responsive social-emotional learning can be an effective strategy for creating inclusive, supportive, and healthy school environments that help every student achieve their fullest potential. Social-emotional skills benefit all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, learning abilities, home language, immigration status, gender identity, or sexual orientation. I believe that teaching culturally responsive SEL skills can be a catalyst in making schools a better place for both students and staff alike.

## **Implications**

The research clearly calls for more opportunities that serve as a bridge between students who have been historically underrepresented in the public school system and the school community in itself. This can be done by providing more extracurricular activities for students that seek to meet the diverse social and emotional needs of the student body.

The literature throughout this project has shown that there are many benefits to investing in and fostering students' social and emotional learning skills, as well as utilizing culturally relevant teaching strategies when working with students from underrepresented populations. Holding the space and time after school to invest in programs that serve these students would be beneficial to students and the school community as a whole.

## **Limitations**

As for the research, I relied on the results drawn from research studies gathered throughout my literature review. Despite having similar experiences of leading after-school programs, I have not conducted any official research studies nor have any of my own tangible results to demonstrate similar programs' success. My aim was to collect information from as many diverse sources as possible, in order to provide a broad array of different perspectives and viewpoints, but I know that there were some areas that I could still dig deeper into if more time was available. Some potential limitations for replicating this project could include lack of funding, transportation, or qualified staff willing to lead the afterschool program.

## **Future Research**

This curriculum was created with my students in mind, and with every school year, new students will come and go. As I learn more about my students and their needs, I will be adjusting this project as time goes on. Based on my findings, I would love to see future research focus on

the long-term effects of a program like this one implemented at the middle-grade level. It would be fascinating to see how participating in a program focused on a culturally responsive social and emotional learning curriculum could impact the many different factors of a student's educational experience.

It would also be interesting to research more how this program could be replicated for different demographic groups at the middle grade level. This could mean piloting a group for male Latino students, or broadening the scope and designing a program for students from different ethnic backgrounds. Other future research could be dedicated to SEL implementation strategies in extracurriculars, how culturally responsive SEL practices can be tailored to different cultural contexts and communities, its impact on educators, and how policy changes (at the local, state, or national levels) can support the integration of culturally responsive SEL practices.

### **Benefits the Profession**

As extracurricular programs provide students with multiple benefits that lead to increased academic performance, fewer behavior issues, and a stronger sense of connection to the school community (O'Flaherty, 2022); this improves the school environment as a whole for students and staff alike. This project could be replicated and adjusted to fit the needs of students from different backgrounds in a variety of settings. While the general content regarding social and emotional learning skills are for everyone, it would be necessary to ensure that the SEL strategies and heritage-based learning aspect of the curriculum is culturally responsive and meets the specific needs of the student group.

Integrating culturally responsive social-emotional learning through extracurriculars can be a powerful way to create inclusive, supportive, and healthy school environments. Educational environments where adults adapt to and honor students' developmental needs, and develop a

deeper understanding of their students' backgrounds, cultures, and learning differences, support both students and teachers effectively. This program could promote empathy, respectful communication, and stronger relationships, fostering a school-wide culture that embraces community and improves both the teacher's and student's overall experience in the classroom.

## **Results**

The results from this project will be recorded and utilized to advocate for more culturally responsive extracurricular programs and activities for youth at the middle school level. My hope is that this project and the curriculum that goes along with it can be replicated and implemented in other schools to benefit as many students as possible.

## **Conclusion**

This project explores the question: *“How can Latina immigrant-origin middle school students benefit from a culturally responsive extracurricular program focused on the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning (SEL) skills?”* In response to this question, I have designed an after-school curriculum that integrates heritage-based elements to address and support the distinct social and emotional needs of Latina middle school students. The curriculum is informed by a comprehensive review of relevant literature and is enriched by my own personal experiences. Chapter Four provides a detailed account of the project's progression, including a personal reflection and an analysis of the learning outcomes achieved during the development of this capstone project. It begins with a summary of the key insights and learning outcomes gained from creating the curriculum and is followed by an examination of how the literature informed the design and implementation of the program. The chapter also discusses the broader implications of the research and the capstone project, highlighting potential impacts on both educational practices and student outcomes. Additionally, the chapter addresses the limitations

encountered throughout the research process and outlines potential directions for future research. It concludes by emphasizing how this project can benefit educators and students, and discusses how the insight this project provides will be applied to contribute positively to the field of education. The goal is to leverage the findings to enhance educational practices and support the social and emotional development of Latina students, ultimately making a meaningful difference in both their academic and personal lives.

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