An Examination of Critical Consciousness,

Gender and Discrimination as Experienced By Youth in Movimiento Al Éxito

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**ABSTRACT:**

This study measures the degree to which youth in the afterschool program Movimiento Al Éxito experience, critically think about, and respond to discrimination against Latino/a people in Iowan schools. Findings demonstrate that not only do girls in Al Éxito more frequently claim to experience a higher degree of discriminatory climate than boys in Al Éxito do, but that these girls also exhibit a higher degree of critical consciousness than the boys do. Recognizing these gendered differences amongst youth in Al Éxito is critical to the success of the program’s mission, which entails meeting every student where they are so that mentors may guide Latino/a youth and their families towards their greatest potential.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Literature Review

Movimiento Al Éxito is an after school program for Latino/a youth in high school and middle school. Through involvement with Movimiento Al Éxito, young men and women across the state of Iowa are learning to become leaders in their communities. The group’s name refers to its ultimate goal: “movement toward success” for Latino/a students and their families. The group is herein referred to as Al Éxito. Al Éxito values education and the learning process, collaboration, and safety for everyone the program serves. The program claims to be “reflective and forward thinking”, always in relation to community-centered values of culture and family. The program has several goals for its youth, including: increased school attendance, academic achievement, and parental involvement, as well as graduation from high school and enrollment in post-secondary education. Al Éxito aims to meet these goals through youth-led research, data analysis and leadership through civic engagement, as well as entrepreneurial work and product development. This study measures the degree to which youth in Al Éxito experience, critically think about, and respond to discrimination against Latino/a people in Iowan schools.

Al Éxito is a statewide organization, located at ten schools throughout the state of Iowa. It was founded in 2006 in Marshalltown as an Iowa American Association of University Women (AAUW) project. The program model expanded to six school districts throughout Iowa, including Des Moines in 2008. In the year 2009, Al Éxito became a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Later in 2013, Al Éxito’s Board of Directors hired its first executive director, Dawn Martinez Oropeza. From that point on, the program was no longer led by volunteers alone. In a consultation, the executive director stated that she hopes this research will reveal potential areas of growth for Al Éxito, as well as for the youth the after school program serves.

Movimiento Al Éxito was established in 2006 to help meet the needs of the growing population of Latino/a families in Iowa. The idea is that helping Latino/a youth meet their greatest potential in school and beyond builds the foundation for a stronger Latino/a community in Iowa, and a stronger Iowa overall. Al Éxito is not alone in drawing this conclusion. A recent article published in *The Atlantic* asserted that Latinos will be the ones to “save Iowa” from its declining rural communities (Vasilogambros 2014). According to the most recent data from the *Latinos in Iowa: 2016* report, as of July 2015 there were an estimated 178,620 Latino people in Iowa (*Latinos* 2016). That would be 5.7 percent of the total Iowan population, making Latinos the largest race or ethnic minority in Iowa. 75.4 percent of these people are minor children, in need of schooling. These most recent numbers demonstrate a 116.6 percent increase from the 96,147 people living in Iowa in July 2000. Based off of these figures, the projected Latino population in Iowa in July 2050 is said to be 441,049 people, or 12.9 percent of the total population of Iowa (*Latinos* 2016). Latino/as are revitalizing rural Iowa, and can be predicted to do so in the future.

Yet, Latino/as continue to struggle in comparison to the rest of the population of Iowans. According to the *Latinos in Iowa: 2016* report, the unemployment rate for Latino/a people in Iowa in 2015 was 7.1 percent – 3.1 percent higher than the corresponding rate for Iowa overall. The median income of Latino/as was $38,141, far less than Iowans’ overall median income of $54,736. The poverty rate for Latinos in 2015 was 25.6 percent. The fact that a quarter of the Latino/a population in Iowa is living in poverty may be attributed in part to the fact that the number of Latino/as in Iowa aged 25 years and over with at least a high school education was a mere 57.7 percent, in contrast to the corresponding rate of 91.7 percent of Iowans overall who had a high school education (*Latinos* 2016). These numbers indicate a serious issue facing Latino/a families, particularly Latino/a youth who are looking for jobs to support themselves and their families.

In their efforts to combat the distinct issues that young Latino/as face, Al Éxito has incorporated into their curriculum ways of thinking which encourage students to take seriously the power of an education to uplift one’s self and one’s family. One such addition to the curriculum is critical consciousness theory. Critical consciousness theory was developed by Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. Critical consciousness entails the perception and exposure of sociopolitical contradictions, such as discrimination in a society which proclaims itself to be the gold standard in basic human decency and equality. By definition, critical consciousness is not simply a way of thinking, but a call to action against harmful contradictions such as discrimination (Freire 1970). For this reason, critical consciousness in Al Éxito youth may be measured in terms of awareness of discriminatory experience, knowledge that discrimination is wrong, and the desire to say something about it.

**METHODOLOGY:**

Measures and Methods

In order to determine the attitudes of Al Éxito youth towards an extensive array of topics pertaining to their ethnicity, education, and their daily lives as students and young people, this study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods in the form of a survey paired with a letter, which is written to one’s self in the future. Although Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is not required for a survey conducted for undergraduate research, all researchers completed the “Protecting Human Research Participants” training course offered online through the National Institute of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research’s website. Informed consent to participate in the survey was obtained through a document produced by the researchers. Participants were required to read the document and provide a digital signature prior to accessing the survey and letter. Researchers read the document aloud for all participants prior to administering the survey and letter.

The measures and terminology utilized by the researchers in the survey and the letter prompt are validated several times over in research conducted prior to this study. Validated measures incorporated into this study’s survey design include: the Social, Attitudinal, Familial, and Environmental Acculturative Stress Scale for Children (SAFE); the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM); the Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS); and the Gallup Student Poll. Researchers also consulted previous Al Éxito surveys, as well as Al Éxito executive director, Dawn Martinez Oropeza, and Al Éxito facilitator Julio Cammarota, in order to ensure the goals of the program are addressed in the survey and letter components. Utilizing validated measures in an effort to meet the concerns of Al Éxito mentors and staff increases not only the validity of the study itself, but also the reliability and practical application of the information produced in the data analysis.

Both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study were piloted on location at Drake University by a sample of eight student representatives from Al Éxito. Half of the pilot participants were middle schoolers; the other half were high schoolers. In both the pilot and the final version of the study, the digital surveys were administered online via Qualtrics software and upon survey completion, respondents were asked to write a handwritten letter to one’s future self in response to a prompt prepared by the researchers for the respondents. Based off of observation as well as feedback from the students and the Al Éxito facilitators, the research team found these two components completed in this order to be the most intuitive and efficient use of time and resources.

While a digital survey lends itself to clean and incisive report of significant data regarding attitudes and demographics, a letter to one’s self places this information within a rich context that is explored further by the researcher. The letter is a potentially powerful source of information, as it provides a space for the students to envision their lives now and beyond Al Éxito and to realize this vision in their own words, whether in English, Spanish or both. This increases the validity of the findings, as it increases the likelihood that youth are finding a way to communicate that best suits them. Although an analysis of the students’ letters was not completed for the purposes of this paper, future research should involve close reading of the letters.

The initial period in which the survey and letter were administered together on location at participating Al Éxito after school programs yielded less survey responses and letters than was predicted. The initially low number of participants may be attributed to student absences, due in large part to school holidays. Technical difficulties – including forgotten computers or the inability to access computers for many students – may also have been a factor in the initially low numbers. The rest of the survey responses and letters were collected in the week or so following the initial period of on-location survey and letter administering. The total number of responses analyzed in this study is equal to 128, which is 42.6 percent of Al Éxito’s total population of 300 students. Thus the findings of this study are derived from a significant sample – nearly half of all Al Éxito youth.

Names and student ID numbers associated with responses to the letter prompt are maintained only on the original copies, which are to be returned and re-examined by Al Éxito staff and students at the end of the academic year. Names and student ID numbers are to be kept strictly confidential, and will not under any circumstances be used by the researchers to identify a student with his or her information provided in the survey or letter. A digital copy of the nameless and numberless handwritten letters was produced to prepare for data analysis alongside the digital survey, which was downloaded from Qualtrics to SPSS Data Analytics (SPSS).

Based off the data analyzed in SPSS, this study develops a discussion of Al Éxito youth response to discrimination against Latino/a people in school. The study examines the types of discriminatory behavior students are exposed to in school, as well as the frequency of instances in which youth have verbally rejected discrimination at school. Data on these experiences and responses is analyzed in conjunction with data regarding youth critical consciousness. This analysis seeks to understand the degree to which Al Éxito youth develop a sense of critical consciousness surrounding discrimination against Latino/a people. Thus this study produces three separate measures to explore how students experience, think about, and react to discrimination against Latino/as in school. For the purposes of this project, this paper examines these three dimensions of discrimination and critical consciousness through the lens of gender.

Variables

Independent Variables

Independent variables explored in this study include demographic information provided by the survey respondents: age, years in Al Éxito, school location, ethnicity, and gender. These variables are identified in Table 1: Sample Demographics. The implications of these data are further explored in the section below titled Sample Characteristics.

The age variable was indicated by age group rather than grade level and thus this variable had two attributes: middle school or high school. An answer of “middle school” was coded as 1 and “high school” was coded as 2. While the options in the survey reflect the possibility for students to have attended up to six years of Al Éxito programming, very few respondents actually participated in more than four years of Al Éxito. Thus, for the sake of brevity in this analysis 1 represented “None – this is my first year”, 2 represented “1 year”, 3 represented “2 years”, 4 represented “3 years” and 5 represented “4 years or more” of years participating in Al Éxito programming.

Respondents included in this survey sample came from schools in Des Moines, Marshalltown, Ottumwa, Clarion and Hampton. Based off the number of respondents from each school, the schools located in Ottumwa, Clarion, and Hampton were grouped into one category labelled Other. Thus school location is represented by 1 for “Des Moines”, 2 for “Marshalltown”, and 3 for “Other”.

 Respondents were initially allowed to self-identify their ethnicity by writing their own answers. As is explained in further detail in the section titled Sample Characteristics, a pattern amongst these answers was identified. Thus the unique answers written for ethnicity were recoded into the attributes Latino/a, Hispanic, Mexican, and Other. These categories were then coded as 1 for “Latino/a”, 2 for “Hispanic”, 3 for “Mexican”, and 4 for “Other”.

For the sake of clarity, the survey options for gender were Female, Male, and Other. If a respondent identified as Other, they were given the option to self-identify through a written option. “Female” was coded as 1, “Male” was coded as 2, and Other was coded as 3. Given the limited number of students who claimed the Other category – 2 respondents – the answers for the Other category need not be coded.

Dependent Variables

Dependent variables investigated in this study include all questions strictly related to Al Éxito students’ experiences of critical consciousness in regards to discrimination against Latino/as in school. The aforementioned concepts were operationalized into 15 of the survey questions, which are listed under Table 2: Survey Questions Used in Scales. Using aggregates of responses to these questions, three scales were created. These scales measure the degree to which Al Éxito youth experience, critically think about, and respond to discrimination against Latino/a people. Depending on the number of times youth responded “Yes” or “No” to the relevant questions listed in Table 2, youth received a score of 1, 2, 3, or 4. These scores were assigned labels of (1) “Low”, (2) “Medium”, (3) “High”, or (4) “Very High”.

Sample Characteristics

This section summarizes the information found in Table 1: Sample Demographics, which includes the aforementioned data on age, years of participation in Al Éxito, school location, ethnicity, and gender of respondents. Table 1: Sample Demographics also describes whether or not this information is statistically significant. In all cases, the groups identified in this study are statistically significant characteristics of the sample. Information on respondent age, years of participation in Al Éxito, school location, and ethnicity provide context for this study’s analysis of the correlation between gender and student experiences of discrimination.

In this study, age is indicated by age group – middle or high school – rather than grade level. While there were 128 students in the sample for this study, two of the 128 respondents did not answer whether they were in high school or middle school. Thus there were only 126 respondents for this question. There were 41 respondents in middle school and over twice as many (85 respondents) in high school.

There was also two respondents who did not answer how many years they have participated in Al Éxito. Of the 126 students who did answer, the majority (44 respondents) report they have not participated in Al Éxito before this year. This number of students decreases from 33 students with one year of previous participation, to 20 students with two years, 18 students with 3 years and only 11 students with four years or more of participation in Al Éxito programs.

Again, 126 of the 128 students answered the question regarding the location of the school where they attend Al Éxito. Of these 126 students in the sample, the majority (55 respondents) were from Al Éxito programs in Des Moines. Marshalltown was represented by 25 students alone, closely followed by Ottumwa with 23 students, and then Clarion with 15 students and Hampton with 8 students. As is explained under Variables, the latter three towns were grouped into one category labeled Other.

All 128 students answered the question on ethnicity. For this question, students were allowed to self-identify their ethnicity by writing their own answers. While nearly every respondent offered a unique answer that spoke to the multiple facets of their ethnic identity, there was a significant pattern in which students identified as Latino/a first, and another group that identified as Hispanic first. There was also a large group of students who identified as Mexican. Students who did not identify with any of these three identities are, for the purposes of this study, grouped into an Other category. In summary, there were 37 Latino/a students, 44 Hispanic students, 32 Mexican students, and 15 Other students.

All 128 students also answered the question on gender. For the sake of clarity, the three categories for gender in this study were Female, Male, and Other. Other was included for those respondents who did not identify with the gender binary, but may have also been used to refrain from revealing one’s gender. If a respondent selected the Other option, they were asked to write how they identified. There were a very small minority of two respondents who claimed the category of Other. These respondents refrained to use any specific descriptor beyond “None” and “x” respectively. In addition to these Other respondents, there were 87 female respondents and 34 male respondents. Thus there were 2.5 times as many female respondents as there were male respondents included in the sample.

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| Table 1: Sample Demographic |
|  | **N** | **%** | **Significant** |
| Age  | High school | 41 | 32.0 | YES |
|  | Middle school | 85 | 66.4 | YES |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Years in Al Éxito | None – this is my first year | 44 | 34.4 | YES |
|  | 1 year | 33 | 25.8 | YES |
|  | 2 years | 20 | 15.6 | YES |
|  | 3 years | 18 | 14.1 | YES |
|  | 4 years or more | 11 | 8.6 | YES |
|  | **Total** | **126** | **98.4** |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Location of school | Des Moines | 55 | 43.0 | YES |
|  | Marshalltown | 25 | 19.5 | YES |
|  | Other | 46 | 35.9 | YES |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Ethnicity | Latino/a | 37 | 28.9 | YES |
|  | Hispanic | 44 | 34.4 | YES |
|  | Mexican | 32 | 25.0 | YES |
|  | Other | 15 | 11.7 | YES |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Gender | Female | 88 | 66.8 | YES |
|  | Male | 35 | 27.3 | YES |
|  | Other | 2 | 1.6 | YES |
|  | **Total** | **128** | **100** |  |

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| Table 2: Survey Questions Used in Scales |
| Measure of Discriminatory Climate in School |
| 1 | Discrimination against Latinos negatively affects my life. |
| 2 | People at school exclude me from activities because of my Latino background. |
| 3 | Because I am Latino/a, I do not get enough credit for the work I do. |
| 4 | I have heard jokes at the expense of being Latino. |
| 5 | I have been called names or slurs that I find offensive. |
| 6 | I have heard other students called names or slurs. |
| 7 | I have been stereotyped for being Latino by my peers. |
| 8 | I have been stereotyped for being Latino by my teachers. |
| 9 | My teachers try to put a stop to bullying. |
| Measure of Youth Critical Consciousness |
| 1 | I feel uncomfortable when others make jokes about Latino/a culture. |
| 2 | I feel comfortable speaking up when I see injustice or discrimination. |
| 3 | I do NOT try to just enjoy myself and NOT worry about things like discrimination or human rights. |
| Measure of Youth Rejection of Discrimination |
| 1 | Have you spoken up when you saw discrimination? |

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| Table 3: Measure of Discriminatory Climate in School |
|  | **All** | **F** | **M** |  |
| **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **Significant** |
| DiscriminatoryClimate | 1 – LOW | 22 | 17.2 | 15.3 | 8 | 23.5 | 15.3 | YES |
|  | 2 – MEDIUM | 68 | 53.1 | 55.3 | 20 | 58.8 | 55.3 | YES |
|  | 3 – HIGH | 29 | 22.7 | 27.0 | 6 | 17.7 | 27.0 | YES |
|  | 4 – VERY HIGH | 2 | 1.6 | 2.4 | 0 | 0.0 | 2.4 | YES |
|  | **Total** | **121** | **94.5** | **100** | **34** | **100** | **100** |  |

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| Table 4: Measure of Youth Critical Consciousness |
|  | **All** | **F** | **M** |  |
| **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **Significant** |
| Critical Consciousness | 1 – LOW | 17 | 13.3 | 10.4 | 7 | 20.6 | 10.4 | YES |
|  | 2 – MEDIUM | 48 | 37.5 | 35.6 | 17 | 50.0 | 35.6 | YES |
|  | 3 – HIGH | 46 | 35.9 | 40.2 | 10 | 29.4 | 40.2 | YES |
|  | 4 – VERY HIGH | 12 | 9.4 | 13.8 | 0 | 0 | 13.8 | YES |
|  | **Total** | **123** | **96.1** | **100** | **34** | **100** | **100** |  |

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| Table 5: Measure of Youth Rejection of Discrimination |
|  | **All** | **F** | **M** |  |
| **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **Significant** |
| Have you spoken up when you saw discrimination? | I have done this | 36 | 29.3 | 27 | 31.0 | 8 | 23.5 | YES |
|  | I am planning to do this | 43 | 33.6 | 33 | 37.9 | 10 | 29.4 | YES |
|  | I might do this | 36 | 28.1 | 21 | 24.1 | 14 | 41.2 | YES |
|  | I don’t thinkI would do this | 8 | 6.3 | 6 | 7.0 | 2 | 5.9 | YES |
|  | **Total** | **121** | **94.5** | **87** | **100** | **34** | **100** |  |

**FINDINGS:**

Bivariate Analysis

A bivariate analysis was conducted in order to determine whether there is a statistically significant correlation between gender and one’s place on the three scales created for the purposes of this study. While it is important to note there are two individuals in Al Éxito who do not identify with the gender binary in this survey, the vast majority of Al Éxito youth self-identified as either male or female. No statistically significant conclusion may be drawn from the analysis of two individuals, therefore this analysis focuses on the students who identified as either male or female.

The first of the aforementioned scales is located in Table 3 and may be referred to as the Measure of Discriminatory Climate in School. This first scale includes responses to nine of the selected questions. Looking at Table 3, it is evident that the vast majority of both female and male respondents (77.4 percent) report experiencing somewhere between a medium to very high range of discriminatory climate. Over half of both male and female student responses (55.3 and 58.8 percent, respectively) measured at least a medium degree of discriminatory climate. The second largest group measured at a high degree of discriminatory climate, at 27 percent for girls and 17.7 percent for boys. This statistically significant difference between boys and girls demonstrates that overall, girls in Al Éxito report experiencing a higher degree of discriminatory climate than boys in Al Éxito do.

The second scale is located in Table 4, titled Measure of Youth Critical Consciousness. The Measure of Youth Critical Consciousness denotes whether or not students in Al Éxito have acted on their sense of critical consciousness by speaking against instances of “injustice or discrimination”, as stated in the survey prompt. This scale includes responses from three of the selected questions. It is evident that the majority of respondents measured at a medium to high degree of critical consciousness (37. 5 and 35.9 percent total, respectively). However, there is also a small but still statistically significant difference between boys’ and girls’ responses in this scale as well. While exactly half (50 percent) of male youth in Al Éxito exhibit at least a medium degree of critical consciousness, only 29.4 percent of male youth exhibit a high level of critical consciousness. Perhaps more strikingly, zero (0 percent) of male youth exhibit a very high degree of critical consciousness. In contrast, 40.2 percent of female youth exhibit a high degree of critical consciousness, and 13.8 percent of female youth exhibit a very high degree of critical consciousness.

The third scale is located in Table 5, titled Measure of Youth Rejection of Discrimination. Note that this scale is not an aggregate of questions, but is rather a singular question that was originally included in the survey. The question is, “Have you spoken up when you saw discrimination?” Youth responded if they “have done this”, are “planning to do this”, “might do this”, or “don’t think” [they] would do this”. The answers to this question reveal that while the majority of all Al Éxito youth (33.6 percent) claim to plan on speaking up when they see discrimination, only 29.3 percent actually have. Also notable is that 7.5 percent more girls than boys have spoken up about discrimination. (That would be 31 percent of girls versus 23.5 percent of boys.) All in all, these findings demonstrate a subtle but significant difference in the willingness of Al Éxito boys and girls to act on principles of critical consciousness in school.

**DISCUSSION:**

One cannot definitively state based off this data alone that young women in Al Éxito are exposed to discrimination against Latino/as more than their male counterparts. While that may be one interpretation of the data, interviews with youth and participant observation in schools would be necessary to confirm whether or not the young women in Al Éxito actually experience a higher degree of discrimination against Latino/as than the young men in Al Éxito do. Comparing the degree of discriminatory climate Al Éxito students report to observations of discriminatory climate in Iowan schools would be an area of future study. That being said, this research alone demonstrates that the female youth in Al Éxito do report experiencing discrimination more often than the male youth do. It is also evident that the young women of Al Éxito have developed a greater degree of critical consciousness than their male counterparts.

With the possibility that Al Éxito’s Latina youth experience more discrimination than their Latino youth set aside for further study, there are other reasons why the young women of Al Éxito may report experiencing a higher degree of discrimination than the young men report. These reasons would also account for the higher degree of critical consciousness exhibited by the female respondents in this survey. One of these reasons may be that the young women of Al Éxito are more perceptive of the types of behaviors this study defines as discrimination, and consequently exhibit a higher degree of critical consciousness according to the standards defined in this study. However, another reason may be that the young women simply report discrimination more frequently than the young men do. In that case, it is possible that the Latina students feel more comfortable admitting that they have been discriminated against than the Latino students do. Rather than admit to feeling threatened by a discriminatory climate in school, Latino students might understate the amount of discrimination they experience.

One certainty is that these disparities in the data reveal the differing needs of the young men and women of Al Éxito. Future programming should take this nuance of experience into account. Indications as to how Al Éxito might modify its programming to meet these needs may be obtained by pairing this study’s findings with qualitative data gathered through examination of the students’ letters to themselves, as well as close observation on-location in Al Éxito schools, student and staff focus groups, and one-on-one interviews with the Al Éxito students. Recognizing the gendered differences amongst youth in Al Éxito is critical to the success of the program’s mission, which entails meeting every student where they are so that mentors may guide youth towards their greatest potential. It is crucial that Al Éxito modify its approach to critical consciousness to address the apparent disparity in development between boys and girls.

**CONCLUSION:**

While it may not be advisable to burden the youngest of Al Éxito youth with the intricacies of an education in critical consciousness theory, it is essential that all youth understand that the wrongs committed against them are not something they must suffer in silence. One way to encourage critical thinking amongst Al Éxito youth of all ages may be to emphasize the importance of personal boundaries in everyday life. Emphasizing personal boundaries would require Al Éxito students and staff cultivate a healthy understanding of a few things: first, all people owe each other a certain level of respect. Second, it is appropriate for a person to hold others accountable for treating people – including one’s self – with this same level of respect. To do so may entail doing the difficult thing and acknowledging harm has been done, but it is important to remind youth that a threat to one’s person is not a reflection of one’s character. Providing Al Éxito youth of all ages with this language and these tools to navigate the social world would go a long way in preparing youth to navigate discriminatory and unjust experiences in the future.

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