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Bringing Carnaval Drum and Dance Traditions into 4-H Programming for Latino Youth

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Abstract: 4-H Bloco Drum and Dance is an afterschool program that teaches adolescents drumming, dancing, and theater arts in the rich traditions of Brazilian Carnaval. Teens learn to express themselves in a variety of modalities and perform at community events. The program was developed by a community coalition that included 4-H, other youth programs, and the school district. Most program participants are Latino, high-risk youth. Program evaluation revealed that 4-H Bloco has positive impacts with regard to cultural appreciation, gang-related attitudes and awareness, health awareness, exercise, and nutrition. Bloco demonstrates the value of culturally relevant arts education in Extension youth programming.

Introduction

In the California town of Windsor about an hour north of San Francisco, population 25,000, the Sonoma County 4-H Program teaches teens the drumming, dancing, and theater arts associated with the expressive, spontaneous, and joyous traditions of Brazilian Carnaval. High school and middle school youth develop and

practice these skills throughout the year and perform at a wide variety of community events. The afterschool program, called 4-H Bloco, is designed to prevent gang involvement, promote cultural understanding, increase exercise, and promote good nutrition.

Cultural Arts Programming for Latino Youth

Arts education programs can promote positive youth development in multiple ways. They can engage young people who are difficult to reach through academic or other contexts (Fiske, 1999; Gadsden, 2008), and they stimulate planning, problem solving, and creativity (Health & Roach, 1999). Music education programs, in particular, can allow youth to express identity and emotions, communicate with peers, and explore their cultural backgrounds (O'Neill, 2005). The 4-H Bloco program uses teens' natural love of music and movement to get them more active in their everyday lives.

Latino youth are often a challenging audience to recruit into Extension programs (Borden et al., 2006; Hobbs, 2004). Arts programs that reflect Latino culture can be especially powerful in attracting and engaging Latino youth (Blanco-Vega, Castro-Olivo, & Merrell, 2008). Through its exploration of drum and dance traditions that exist across South America, Bloco offers teens a variety of musical choices, as well as drum and dance instructors who have extensive knowledge about these cultural traditions.

Community Context and Program Aims

In 2003, there were several good reasons for bringing a creative approach to teen programming to Windsor. The town had been experiencing increased problems with gang activity and youth crime, and its high school had experienced incidents of friction between youth of different ethnicities.

An afterschool program that could keep teens engaged would be an important approach to this issue. Studies show that the afterschool hours are the peak time for juvenile crime and risky behaviors, including gang activities and alcohol and drug use, but those hours can also provide numerous opportunities for learning and productive activity. Afterschool programs have demonstrated their potential to produce important outcomes for teens, although it can be challenging to attract teens to these programs and keep them there with enjoyable, rewarding activities (Ferrari & Turner, 2006; Granger, 2008; Hirsch, 2005; Shernoff & Vandell, 2008; Weiss, Little, & Bouffard, 2005).

In order to address these programming needs, representatives from Windsor's community youth programs, high school, middle schools, and local government formed a task force to study the issue and develop programming for Windsor's youth. The group conducted a needs assessment that included a survey for parents and teens administered through the schools and held several community meetings to share findings and gather program ideas.

The task force determined that Windsor teens were not being well-served, especially in the Hispanic community. In the community meetings the idea formed to offer a drum and dance program as a way to increase exercise, embrace the community's diversity, and reduce gang activity. The Extension 4-H Program became the lead agency for program development.

The 4-H Bloco Drum and Dance Program was developed over the next year. Patterned in part on a highly successful San Francisco program for Latino youth called Loco Bloco, the 4-H program sought to provide low-income minority and immigrant families with professional-level arts education. From 2003-2008, 4-H Bloco received grant funding through Extension's national Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) initiative.

Bloco in Action

4-H Bloco Drum and Dance currently serves about 60-80 youth in grades 6-12 annually, providing afterschool classes in theater arts, music, and dance at three sites, drawing from four schools in the Windsor district. To implement the program, 4-H Bloco hires arts professionals from the San Francisco Bay Area who are active in Latino arts programs. Drum students learn basic music concepts and techniques for playing various percussion instruments, while dance students learn dance steps and develop their own dance routines. High school participants serve as mentors to younger students. The program also contains a nutrition component that includes healthy snacks and regular food demonstrations.

After developing their music and dance routines, students are offered opportunities to perform at local and state events (Figure 1), including school assemblies, community fairs, annual Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and the San Francisco Carnaval each spring. In addition, the 4-H Bloco teens performed at half-time of a 2007 Oakland Raiders football game, and they were the opening act for Carlos Santana at a 2007 benefit concert in Santa Rosa.

Figure 1.
The 4-H Bloco Drum and Dance Program in Action



Evaluation of Bloco's Program Outcomes

Evaluation results for 4-H Bloco are presented for three program years, from 2006-07 through 2008-09. The primary outcomes of interest include cultural appreciation, gang-related attitudes and involvement, health awareness, exercise, and nutrition. The evaluation used a pretest-posttest design, with participants completing questionnaires at the beginning and end of the program year. Across the three years, 229 youth completed the pretest, and 218 completed the posttest. The ethnicity of program participants was 72% Latino, 14% Caucasian, 7% mixed ethnicity, 3% African-American, 2% Native American, and 2% Asian or Pacific Islander. Fifty-nine percent came from single-parent homes, and 32% came from immigrant families. Thirty-five percent of the teens reported having a good friend in a gang.

Figure 2 presents the evaluation results, showing a variety of positive changes for 4-H Bloco participants from pretest to posttest. The following gains all showed very strong statistical significance ($p < .001$),

two-tailed):

- *Cultural appreciation*: At pretest, 50% of teens felt it was important for kids their age to learn what life is like in different cultures, compared with 82% on the posttest. At pretest, 76% felt it was important to spend time with peers of different races, compared with 94% at posttest.
- *Gang-related attitudes and involvement*: When asked whether being in a gang is a good idea for young people, 54% at pretest reported "definitely not" or "probably not," compared with 95% at posttest. Eighty percent at pretest believed that the Bloco project would definitely help them stay out of a gang, compared with 96% at posttest. At pretest, 72% percent believed that Bloco would definitely help "most kids" stay out of a gang, compared with 92% at posttest.
- *Health awareness*: At pretest, 28% felt it was definitely important for kids their age to think about their health when deciding what to eat, compared with 54% at posttest.
- *Exercise and nutrition*: At pretest, 69% reported exercising outside of school at least 2 days a week for 20 minutes during the past week (not counting Bloco itself), compared with 84% at posttest. At pretest, 36% reported eating vegetables or green salad daily during the past week, which increased to 60% at posttest. Also, 33% at pretest reported eating fruit 4-6 times in the past week, compared with 78% at posttest. Finally, 14% at pretest reported eating sweets not more than three times in the past week, compared with 67% at posttest.

Figure 2.

Evaluation Results for the 4-H Bloco Project

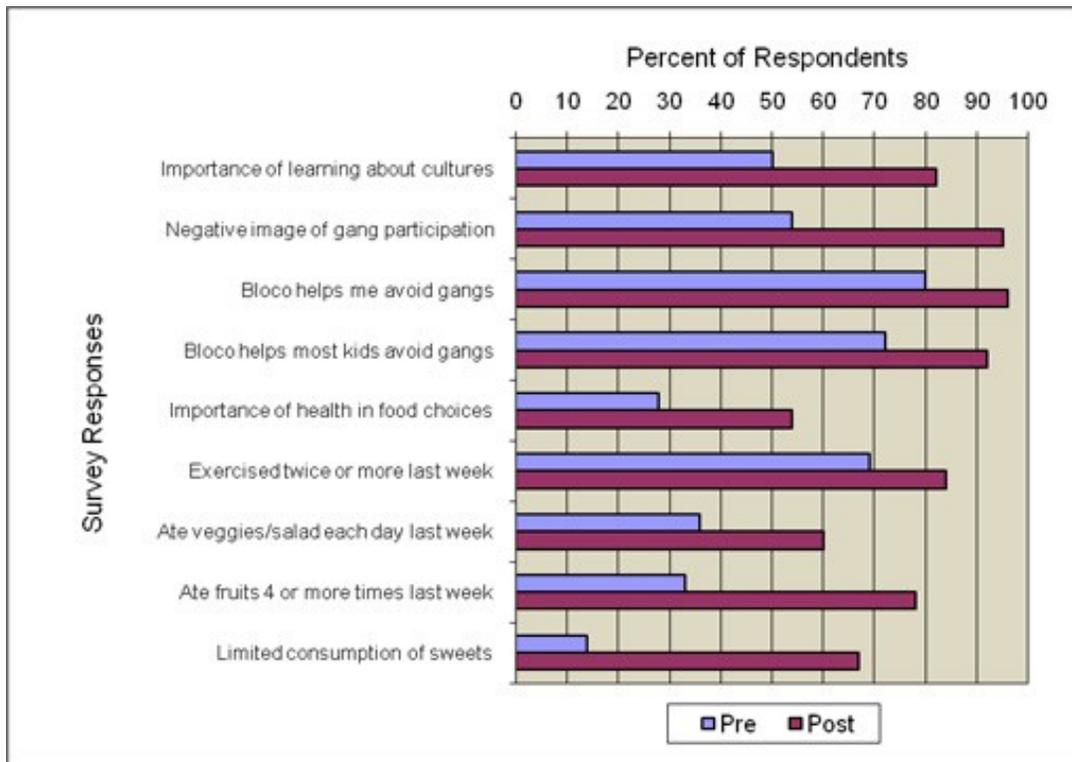


Figure 3 presents a more personal evaluation of Bloco, comments from participants and instructors.

Figure 3.

In Their Own Words: Participants' Comments on the Bloco Experience

From the teen participants:

- "4-H Windsor Bloco feels like family to me." (Male, 13)
- "Bloco gave me a bunch of friends." (Male, 13)
- "I was alone in middle school and I didn't fit in. Now as part of Bloco I am proud and strong, and I feel like I can do anything." (Female, 16)
- "When I am performing with 4-H Windsor Bloco, I can get away from all the negative things." (Male, 18)
- "We don't talk about gangs in Bloco. We don't need them and we don't want to be part of them either. We have each other!" (Female, 18)
- "Beating the drums and putting my feelings into beats, helps me feel free." (Male, 16)
- "I love the dancing; it also helps me feel OK about being a larger girl." (Female, 15)
- "Bloco is a great experience, I love performing in front of a big crowd." (Male, 17)
- "When I first started playing drums I was so scared, but now I love performing and hearing the crowd cheer." (Male, 19)
- "When I dance, I feel like I am flying." (Female, 13)

From the musical instructors:

- "I enjoy seeing the kids progress over the years and grow not only as musicians but as leaders." â *Alfred, Drum Instructor*
- "The teen dancers love to perform." â *Ericka, Dance Instructor*

Lessons Learned for Implementing Bloco

We offer several suggestions for delivering Bloco and similar cultural arts education programs in Extension.

- *Program expense and funding sources.* The Bloco concept is fairly inexpensive to implement. Its primary expenses include the drum and dance instructors, instruments, and transportation for youth. Educators interested in adopting similar arts programs in their communities can explore start-up grants, community donations, or one-time sponsorships. Currently, 4-H Bloco's funding sources include grants from the Kaiser Foundation, the National 4-H Council, Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers.
- *Family involvement.* The families of participants should be included in program activities wherever possible. Family involvement can occur through potlucks, costume construction, travel to performances, and other opportunities.
- *Musical adaptability.* To the extent possible, the instructors should be ready to adapt the artistic focus of the program to keep it exciting for youth. Teens will bring preferences for different musical styles, and some may be fairly sophisticated in their tastes. For example, they may prefer hip hop, reggae, Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, or other styles.
- *Integration with other parts of the county 4-H program.* Promoting program integration with other Extension units requires attention and leadership on the part of the Extension staff, as there may be cultural differences to bridge. In Sonoma County, Bloco has become well-accepted within the county's overall 4-H program, and Bloco receives support from the local 4-H foundation and council. As with other 4-H units, Bloco offers leadership roles for youth to serve as president, treasurer, and secretary. Bloco youth also attend the 4-H camps and events such as Sonoma's annual barbecue fundraiser.

Future Directions

The 4-H Bloco Drum and Dance program has experienced steady success since its inception in 2003, enjoying high local visibility and enthusiastic participation from youth. In 2009 it was recognized as a Program of Distinction by the National 4-H Headquarters at USDA. The program has also been introduced in the nearby city of Santa Rosa, which has a large low-income population and has experienced gang-related problems among its youth.

4-H Bloco is one example of how youth can be enthusiastically engaged in afterschool programming through culturally relevant arts education. As funding restrictions increasingly reduce school-based arts programs, 4-H and other youth programs can help to address an enormous need, especially in disadvantaged

communities, to use the arts in support of positive youth outcomes.

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