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Focus: Education Research

Mexican American Studies – A Deep Look by High School Students

by Marcela Hernández, Jonas Lokensgard & Hannah Rosales

Editor's Note: In March of 2023, IDRA selected three students from a San Antonio high school for a project-based learning effort organized by the National Center for Youth Law. The students led a research project, MAS for Our Schools, to determine the status of Mexican American Studies (MAS) in their school district and how to help it grow. In this article, the three student researchers, currently high school seniors, reflect on their shared experiences in this project.

Students' Reasons for Participating

We wanted to become involved in this project for several reasons. As a team, we understood the importance of a project like MAS for Our Schools, and we were influenced by different motivating aspects toward this opportunity.

We are members of the Mexican American Studies Student Association (MASSA), a club at our school that was started and is run by students who are passionate about MAS. Our involvement in MASSA gave us a common reason for participating. And it gave us a common curiosity about the status of these studies in our schools around us.

Marcela stated, "The goal that this project presented was to spread the awareness of MAS and hopefully get that seed planted and get other schools to implement a MAS class."

There were strong connections to the sense of community that would be felt, with the succession of this project, which pushed us to sign up for the student researcher position.

Another aspect that motivated us to become involved with IDRA was the contribution a project like ours would have on our academic future.

Hannah said: "Research projects are usually done by adults, people with degrees. So, I thought having a published work and also learning from different techniques that I'm not aware of would really help me."

As first-time student researchers, we concurred that this was a special opportunity rarely offered to students our age. We experienced challenges to our work ethic and had to extend and improve our ability to collaborate and communicate.

Hannah said: "As a high school student, specifically, you're not usually doing these things. (cont. on Page 2)"



Student researchers, Hannah Rosales, Jonas Lokensgard, Marcela Hernández, with their IDRA mentors, Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, M.Ed., and Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

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You're not usually working on these kinds of projects."

Reflections on the Project

During the project, we learned how to construct a survey and interview questions from scratch. We conducted surveys and focus group interviews. We analyzed the results and arrived at conclusions about the subject of the project.

We had adult support from IDRA that gave us the freedom to create and carry out the activities. Our opinions, ideas and points of view were respected without, at the same time, abandoning us to dead-end conversations of unresolvable differences.

We had moments of doubt about the project's outreach, yet we persisted and adapted to make the best use of the data we collected and the connections we made. At the end, we collectively give gratitude for this amazing opportunity. This project affected us beyond our original imagination.

Marcela said: "It's just so surreal to see. If this didn't happen, then I wouldn't have known what I wanted to do. It clarified the path I've chosen for my college work."

Being a part of this project allowed us to have unique experiences that opened our eyes to new possibilities for our future. As a collective, we learned a lot of things that proved more difficult than once perceived, such as actively listening, facilitating interviews, interpreting data, and networking. However, these difficulties proved that persistence is key to success.

A key finding was that MAS is bigger than just a class, and many people are very passionate about it.

Hannah explained: "MAS is not just this little class that is offered at a school. It's much deeper than that. Many people feel deep connections to it and are passionate about it. And that's why there's such a push for it."

Furthermore, as part of a campus that has a successful MAS program, it is our responsibility to spread the joy and enlightenment the class evokes. Even though there are some successful classes with sufficient student enrollment, much support is needed for extending and expanding the classes to other high schools.

Challenges Student Researched Faced

We struggled to find teachers to participate in our interviews. This was a large setback because to gain insight into the experiences of being a MAS teacher, we needed to interview them. With help from our mentors, we eventually had teachers join our focus groups. But it was disheartening at first to see people unwilling to help us. If you want to help students,

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"If you want to help students, realize that the most important thing you can do is listen to them and understand what they are asking of you."

– MAS for Our Schools student researchers

Supporting Student Leadership

Get our free infographic, **5 Tips for Organizing a High School Student-Led Ethnic Studies Advocacy Group**, designed for supporting a student or team of students who are or want to be ethnic studies advocates.

<https://idra.news/5TipsEthnicStudies>



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Embedding Social-Emotional Learning into Student-Serving Programs

by Stephanie García, Ph.D.

The IDRA VisionCoders program anchors social-emotional learning at its core, centering an asset-based and valuing philosophy that IDRA has been known for since its founding 51 years ago. Others embrace this philosophy, as Laura Weaver and Mark Wilding describe, “When students feel safe and supported... they are truly ready and able to learn and to contribute in positive ways” (Elias, 2013). IDRA is now in the fourth year of this field-initiated, research-based program that is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. And we have truly witnessed this sentiment come to life.

VisionCoders is an eighth-grade computer science course developed by IDRA operating in partnership with eight schools and three school districts in San Antonio. Three embedded components in the program include

educational field trips, mentorship by STEM professionals and college students, and access to paid summer internships.

The central research question anchored in this program of study is, will the intervention, the year-long elective course called VisionCoders, improve students’ computational thinking, computer identity, and math achievement? We will collect and analyze STAAR math scores for students’ seventh and eighth-grade years, scores from the Computational Thinking Test (CTt), and students’ self-efficacy and STEM interest surveys. These will be collected from both VisionCoders and a sample of matched comparison students to compare changes in the outcomes.

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“How can I do this for the rest of my life?”

– VisionCoders student



In October 2023, IDRA held a site visit for policymakers to see our VisionCoders and Valued Youth Partnership (see Page 8) programs in action and visit with students. Guests included Texas Sen. José Menéndez and Texas Rep. Josey García along with their chiefs of staff, Pearl Cruz and Staff Pharaoh Clark, respectively. In addition, San Antonio District Director for U.S. Rep. Greg Casar, Irene Chavez Galvan joined us.



This fall, we will expand the program to 12 schools, serving almost 600 eighth-grade students in at-risk situations from school districts where fewer than 1% of students take a computer science class.

The program targets high-need students with limited computer science opportunities. And it is inspired by the needs of prekindergarten through first grade students identified amidst the COVID-19 crisis. As young students struggled to navigate and adapt to online learning, the pandemic forced schools and communities to rethink early childhood online educational resources and remote learning pedagogical practices.

VisionCoders enables students to contribute solutions – a vision in the face of unprecedented challenges – while learning valuable computer science skills and identities. Through this program, eighth-grade students learn coding skills by programming math and reading games for their elementary school buddies. This cross-age mentorship approach enables us to impact hundreds of elementary students who get to know their mentors throughout each buddy visit and to learn from them.

The VisionCoders program centers and values a social-emotional learning approach and challenges exclusionary disciplinary practices. The Office for Civil Rights reports that more than half of students who are suspended from or arrested in school are students of color (CDRC, 2024). In-grade retention (repeating a grade level) is much higher for students of color.

More than ever we need student programs like VisionCoders that increase belonging in STEM, restore school connectedness, and reinforce a positive campus culture. VisionCoders positions students who are seen as “at risk” of dropping out of school and positions them as school leaders and mentors in their school communities.

How VisionCoders Makes Students Feel Safe and Supported

Paula Johnson, Ph.D., and José Velazquez, Ph.D., explained: “The human connection within a community of learners is key to creating safe learning spaces. A positive school culture hinges upon meaningful relationships grounded on trust, mutual respect and deep

“When students feel safe and supported, when they feel valued and known, when they are given opportunities to express their authentic selves, and when they are given the skills to communicate effectively and focus well, they are truly ready and able to learn and to contribute in positive ways to the world around them.”

- Laura Weaver and Mark Wilding

regard for human dignity. Social-emotional learning plays a key role in this process” (2019).

Each summer, we hold our VisionCoders Summer Institute, which is a three-week professional development experience. The incoming school year’s cohort of teachers receives a stipend to join our professional learning community and learn how to create safe learning spaces while leaning into asset-based practices that value all students. This helps to build teacher capacity to ensure the VisionCoders classroom is a safe space for students where each feels supported by their teacher.

During the school year, we leverage industry and community partnerships to bring in guest speakers who can offer their support, provide feedback on students’ coding projects, and champion VisionCoders’ success. One VisionCoders student asked a guest speaker – a female computer science graduate student – “How can I do this for the rest of my life?” The student was truly inspired about her future and was seeking advice.

Valued and Known

When IDRA staff asked VisionCoders students during a small group discussion, “What was your favorite part of the VisionCoders program?” Simultaneously, the students responded, “Our buddies!” This brought joy instantly to the room, with their faces lit up. One student, who previously missed school often, shared that she felt excited to come to school when she had a buddy visit planned that day.

When students feel valued and feel like they are making a difference, this impacts them greatly. We have witnessed how programs like IDRA’s VisionCoders and IDRA’s 40-year Val-

ued Youth Partnership program help improve school attendance rates and decrease discipline issues due to its valuing philosophy. Given the role of personal and academic responsibility, students will learn self-discipline and develop self-esteem.

Opportunities for Student Expression

Through a project-based learning and design-thinking approach, VisionCoders students develop a digital portfolio of coding projects, including the educational math and reading games they program and tailor for their elementary buddies. As middle school students, they are designing games based on their preferences and what their buddy enjoys.

When I asked a VisionCoders student why his game focused on mermaids, he said it was because his buddy loves mermaids. His scrolling game also resembled a Mario Brothers-type game, where the mermaid scrolled through the ocean collecting objects of different shapes and colors. He expressed how he loves playing scrolling games, so he expressed himself through his creative project by taking this approach. Through our program, we believe it is important that students have meaningful opportunities to express themselves creatively and critically.

Skills to Communicate Effectively

Unlike most computer-lab or technology classes where students stare at a screen and learn material on their own, the VisionCoders program gives students multiple hands-on learning opportunities to expand their communication and social skills. This includes collaborative projects, pair-programming learn-

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(Embedding Social-Emotional Learning into Student-Serving Programs, continued from Page 5)

ing activities, student presentations, and their educational lessons with their buddies during their monthly visits. These enriching opportunities help sharpen soft skills, which are difficult even for adults, that are transferable to any college and career pathway students choose to pursue.

Opportunities for Students to Contribute in Positive Ways

Maynard & Weinstein state: “Many students misbehave because they don’t feel successful academically. If we can build their confidence, the behavior will often take care of itself” (2020). Students need to feel valued and need to be built up, and they will grow.

Throughout the VisionCoders curriculum, especially through our cross-age mentorship component, we are building students’ confidence, so they know they are special and they have something to contribute as they help their buddies. They are given a real-life issue and are asked to address it through the projects they are developing in class. The purpose-driven and meaningful projects help to coach the students and build their capacity to contribute in positive ways within their school communities.

This IDRA program’s systematic and intentional effort to build confidence and leadership in middle school students and cultivate their STEM identities has had great success. It is a unique program that embeds project-based learning, design-thinking, empathy-centered, social-emotional learning, and cross-age mentorships all in one.

If you are in Bexar County, we invite you to join IDRA’s VisionCoders program and implement it in an eighth-grade classroom in your school or district! During 2024-25, we plan to expand to 12 Title I middle school campuses. If you or someone you know in Bexar County, Texas, is interested in bringing the program to your school (at no cost) please share this article and contact me at stephanie.garcia@idra.org.

Resources

- CDRC. (2024). National Data, Civil Rights Data Collection. Office for Civil Rights. U.S. Department of Education.
- Elias, M.J. (May 9, 2013). Restoring the Soul and Skill of Educators Through Engaged Teaching. Edutopia.
- Garcia, S. (November-December 2022). VisionCoders Teens Learn Computer Science to Support Younger



The IDRA VisionCoders course, is an elective course for eighth-grade students. Participating students who are in at-risk situations become software designers who create educational games for elementary school students (their “buddies”), who they also mentor. Throughout the year, students design games based on their buddy’s learning needs.

VisionCoders students...

- ✓ Learn how to code and build games.
- ✓ Mentor and develop video games for kinder and first grade students.
- ✓ Work with mentors and industry professionals.
- ✓ Lead an end-of-year showcase.



Why VisionCoders?

- Fewer than 1% of adults in South San Antonio work in computer-related fields. But these are the fastest-growing, highest-paying, most in-demand jobs.
- Tech workers are happier with their jobs and earn the best salaries.
- Computing jobs are the #1 source of new wages.



Using asset-based approaches to STEM-Computer Science education the IDRA VisionCoders program builds-in opportunities for student inquiry and outside experiences that are exemplary practices for social-emotional learning and student engagement.

Three embedded components in the VisionCoders program include educational field trips, mentorship by STEM professionals and college students, and access to paid summer internships. IDRA trains VisionCoders teachers to teach block programming and video game design through Scratch and Code.org platforms. And we provide assistance throughout the school year.

VisionCoders is a field-initiated, research-based program funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Students do not need to purchase supplies or a computer for this course.

Learn More! <https://idra.news/IDRA.VisionCoders>

Bring VisionCoders your Title 1 Bexar County school in 2023-24!
Contact IDRA’s VisionCoders Director at stephanie.garcia@idra.org



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[@IDRAedu](#)
[idra.news/LinkedInIDRA](#)

Learn more and get this flier at <https://idra.news/IDRA.VisionCoders>

- Students – IDRA Responds to Pandemic’s Effects on Social Emotional Learning. IDRA Newsletter.
- Johnson, P. & Velazquez, J.A. (March 2019). Three Approaches for Dismantling Discriminatory Discipline in Schools. IDRA Newsletter.
- Maynard, N., & Weinstein, B. (2020). Hacking School Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility Using Restorative Justice.
- Stephanie García, Ph.D., is IDRA’s STEM and gender equity education specialist and directs the IDRA VisionCoders program. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at stephanie.garcia@idra.org.

(Mexican American Studies – A Deep Look by High School Students, continued from Page 2)

realize that the most important thing you can do is listen to them and understand what they are asking of you.

Lessons Learned

As high school students without any background in research, we understand how something like this could be overwhelming to students who may feel that they are not prepared or have the skills for the job. We felt this way, but with time as the project progressed, we learned from our project facilitators, Aurelio Montemayor and Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, and from our mistakes to create something we are proud of.

Advice to Students

Some advice we have for students interested in working on youth action research projects is to be bold and dedicated. To create work meant to inform others and make a difference, you have to be dedicated to the topic at hand.

Marcela said, “You can tell that each of us is dedicated and has so much love for this project that we put so much of our time and effort into this.”

We have put immense love and time into this project because as students, we know first-hand the power of MAS in schools and the community. Along with the passion, having thoughts of inadequacy is normal. Yet, it is important to step outside of your comfort zone. Recognize that to succeed in the project, you have to put yourself out there and maybe do some things that you usually wouldn't.

Jonas added: “Before I got involved in this project, I had decided to join the MASSA club, thinking ‘I’m going to go to a club (MASSA) in a room full of people that I do not know, and I’m going to try to have fun.’ And I mean, look where it’s gotten me. I was able to be a part of this project and meet some wonderful people.”

Putting yourself out there leads to new opportunities. In terms of a project that requires surveys and interviews, you have to get creative when you cannot find the necessary information. Due to our starting point and the challenges of teacher participation, we called meetings and gave presentations to teacher groups so that we could find willing participants to provide vital data for the project.

Resources for Ethnic Studies

Ethnic studies courses benefit all students. Culturally-sustaining curriculum has a positive impact on students’ academic and community engagement. IDRA has a number of resources and provides training and customized technical assistance that supports educators in offering ethnic studies courses in public schools.

- 🌀 **Articles and research**
- 🌀 **Videos of students testifying for ethnic studies**
- 🌀 **Webinars**
- 🌀 **IDRA training and assistance to schools**
- 🌀 **Infographics, like**
 - Ethnic Studies Can be Life Changing
 - Teaching Cultural & Ethnic Studies in Georgia
- 🌀 **Plus, IDRA’s Ethnic Studies Online Technical Assistance Toolkit** that provides educators tools and resources for implementing ethnic studies in K-12 schools. It includes a literature review, webinar sessions, articles, podcasts and other resources.

<https://idra.news/EthnicStudies>



Message to Adults

Adults are extremely valuable to students wanting to work through a project like this. Often-times because we are young, we are treated as immature kids and not young adults with valuable ideas and emotions.

Jonas said, “Having an adult who is empathetic, compassionate, and willing to help you is life-changing.”

Conclusion

Now that the project is complete, we as a collective team appreciate and deeply value our experiences. We share the sentiment that this project has deeply affected our lives, as students and as members of the community. As a team, we hope that the work we have completed will serve as the foundation needed for future similar research projects.

IDRA will publish the students’ research report in March (<https://www.idra.org/services/mas-for-our-schools>).

Resources

- IDRA. (2024). Cultural and Ethnic Studies, IDRA resource webpage. <https://idra.news/EthnicStudies>
- IDRA. (2022). IDRA Ethnic Studies – Online Technical Assistance Toolkit. <https://idra.news/EthnicStudies>
- Montemayor, A.M. (March 2023). MAS Springs Youthfully – Teacher and Student Advocacy of Mexican American Studies. IDRA Newsletter.

Marcela Hernández is a senior at John Marshall Law and Medical Services. Jonas Lokensgard and Hannah Rosales are seniors at John Marshall High School. Both schools are in Northside ISD, San Antonio. Questions and comments can be directed to their IDRA mentors. Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, M.Ed., is an IDRA research analyst (christina.muñoz@idra.org). Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed., is IDRA’s family engagement coordinator and directs IDRA Education CAFE work (aurelio.montemayor@idra.org).

IDRA Youth Advisory Board Members Study Culturally Responsive Teaching and School Discipline

By Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, M.Ed.

Four high school student researchers and alumni of IDRA's inaugural Youth Advisory Board led a research project to examine the intersections of culturally responsive education and school discipline in Texas public schools.

Manav Lund, Kennedy Moore, Josué Peralta de Jesús, and Shreya Selvaraju conducted their project, "Culturally Responsive Education and School Discipline in Texas Schools: A Mixed-Methods Case Study," by employing mixed-method research methodologies to assess student peers' perspectives through a survey and focus group interviews at high schools attended by the student researchers in central and north Texas. IDRA staff served as mentors to support the students' work.

The student researchers recruited 47 students from their respective high schools to take their online survey and recruited 16 students to voluntarily participate in three, 60-minute virtual focus group interviews.

Their study did not establish a strong causal link between culturally responsive education

and discipline outcomes at the campus level. But the survey- and interview-based research conducted across various Texas regions, including Austin, Frisco, and San Antonio, uncovered valuable insights.

The findings from their student experience survey and student focus groups reflect themes of academic and social alienation, racial profiling, discriminatory disciplinary practices and other harmful experiences students face in their schools.

Overall, students reported in focus group interviews concern for weak administrative attention to incidents of race- and identity-based discrimination. Students reported the hostile sociopolitical landscape present in the Texas education system with the rise of classroom censorship and other restrictive policies contributing to these patterns.

Findings from the survey suggest that exposure to culturally diverse curricula in the class-



Josué Peralta de Jesús
12th grade, San Antonio



Kennedy Moore
12th grade, Frisco



Manav Lund
12th grade, Austin



Shreya Selvaraju
11th grade, Austin

room and teachers' effort to create spaces for discourse on current social justice issues would lead to greater academic engagement and an overall sense of belonging in schools. By leveraging these insights, educators and policy-makers can work collectively to foster a more inclusive, equitable and supportive educational environment for all students.

IDRA will publish the students' final report in March. The students presented highlights during a research symposium held by IDRA in May 2023. The event video is online (<https://idra.news/YPARteam>).

Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, M.Ed., is an IDRA research analyst. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at christina.munoz@idra.org.

New Texas School Finance Data Maps

The Texas Constitution requires the State to provide education for all students. But the state is under-funding public education.

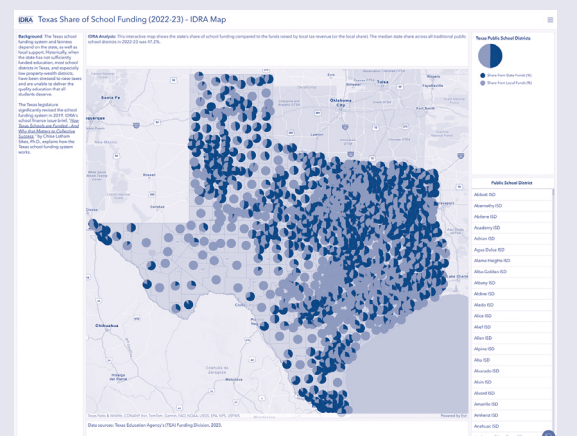
IDRA works to make school funding information accessible to communities and relevant to state policymakers. IDRA is available to provide school finance data analysis at the state or district-level to help communities and lawmakers understand how different policy proposals will impact their districts. IDRA launched in January 2021 our first Texas School Finance Dashboards. We have added new maps for 2022-23, featuring

- Texas Share of School Funding
- Texas Bilingual Education Funding
- Texas Special Education Funding

<https://idra.news/SFdata>

Go to the index for all of our Community Action Data Dashboards & Maps

<https://idra.news/DataDashboards>



Focus: Education Research

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership Turns 40! See How VYP Improves Attendance & Socio-Emotional Learning

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is a research-based, internationally-recognized dropout prevention and student leadership program that has kept 98% of its tutors in school. This program transforms student socio-emotional learning and relationships with school. It directly addresses socio-emotional factors that are essential to reconnecting and re-engaging with students.

The IDRA Valued Youth Partnership is backed by research on **socio-emotional factors and learning**. The Hemingway Measure of Adolescent Connectedness & evaluation data show:

- 61%** of VYP tutors improved sense of self oriented toward the future
- 59%** of VYP tutors improved their sense of involvement in & caring for their families
- 54%** of VYP tutors improved their sense of being productive at their school work, enjoying school more & feeling successful at school
- 66%** of VYP tutors improved reading test scores
- 57%** of VYP tutors improved math scores



Learn more!

Website: See how the program operates, its research base, and awards.

Webinar: Learn how to bring the Valued Youth Partnership to your school.

Student Essays: Read what students say about their life-changing experience.

<https://idra.news/VYP>

*achieving equal educational opportunity for every child
- strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college*