

# *IMPLEMENTING A PREVENTION CURRICULUM An Effective Researcher-Teacher Partnership*

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Researchers from social work, education, and communications worked with practicing teachers to create and implement a curriculum around four culturally grounded prevention strategies in urban southwestern schools. The project proposed to test the effectiveness of various degrees of ethnic sensitivity in school-based drug prevention curricula developed around three different models, including a Latino, a non-Latino (Euro-American), and a multicultural (Latino, Euro-American, and African American) model, based on the cultural norms of these dominant populations. Collaboration with schools to implement the curriculum and to administer pretest and posttest surveys to students was accomplished by developing a strong partnership with teachers. Significant trends in urban drug prevention education and at least four essential conclusions about conducting effective school-based research surfaced from the implementation of this study.

**The Drug Resistance Strategies Project (DRS)**, a partnership funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse through Pennsylvania State University and implemented by researchers at Arizona State University (ASU), began preparing to launch a school-based project in 1996 (Marsiglia, Holleran, & Jackson, 2000). Thirteen elementary school districts had signed the documents to participate in the 2-year DRS prevention curriculum (“keepin’ it R.E.A.L.”) for their seventh graders. The ASU team, comprised of researchers from social work, education, and communications as well as practicing teachers, had spent several years investigating background information (Bachman, Wallace, O’Malley, Johnson, Kurth, & Neighbors, 1991; Botvin, 1986) about drug prevention programs based on interstudent communications. Together, they created a curriculum around four prevention strategies to pilot in the schools: refuse, explain, avoid, and leave (R.E.A.L.).

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how participatory action research (PAR) linked teachers directly to the experimental design of this longitudinal study (Dickens & Watkins, 1999; Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Beginning with pilot studies conducted from 1989 to 1997, teachers were the pivotal element in successful development and implementation of the experimental curriculum (Collier, Ribeau, & Hecht, 1986; Collins, 1995; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Hecht, Trost, Bator, & McKinnon, 1997). The importance of PAR to the keepin' it R.E.A.L. prevention curriculum experiment emerges throughout this portrayal as the centerpiece of this researcher-teacher partnership.

### PROJECT DESIGN

The team proposed to test the effectiveness of various degrees of ethnic-specificity in school-based drug prevention (Arizona Department of Education, 1999; Lopez, 1999). We developed three different models, including a Latino, a non-Latino (Euro-American), and a multicultural (Latino, Euro-American, and African American) model, based on the cultural norms of these dominant populations in the Phoenix area (Dorr, 1982; Eigen & Siegel, 1991). We anticipated that each of the curricula would reduce drug use in experimental schools as compared to control group schools. That is, we set out to test whether the culturally grounded versions of this prevention curriculum (any of the three or all three versions) would reduce the substance use rates of students in the experimental schools while the students at the control sites continued to reflect the national trend of increased use during the middle-school years (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2000). We also hoped to prove that linking students to emotional and physical environments that contained norms familiar to them enhanced their abilities to resist alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Marsiglia & Holleran, 1999).

Further, we wanted to test whether the four R.E.A.L. strategies would work for all teens (Hecht et al., 1989; Mayers, Kail, & Watts, 1993). At that point, 45 schools and 6,250 students were involved in this part of the project, a phase scheduled to last 18 months. Project assistants trained in survey administration conducted the pretest and three posttests using an instrument based on prior research and pilot study data to guide creation of the items (Frale, 1997; Hecht & Driscoll, 1994; Hecht, Ribeau, & Sedano, 1990; Hecht, Sedano, & Ribeau, 1993). It assessed recent offers and use of alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana in addition to measuring student attitudes and

**TABLE 1**  
**Research Design for the keepin' it R.E.A.L. Program**

<i>Curriculum Version</i>	<i>Fall 1998</i>		<i>Spring 1999</i>		<i>Fall 1999</i>		<i>Spring 2000</i>	
Latino	O <sub>1</sub>		X <sub>1</sub>	O <sub>2</sub>	B	O <sub>3</sub>	B	O <sub>4</sub>
Non-Latino	O <sub>1</sub>	X <sub>2</sub>	O <sub>2</sub>	B	O <sub>3</sub>	B	O <sub>4</sub>	
Multicultural	O <sub>1</sub>	X <sub>3</sub>	O <sub>2</sub>	B	O <sub>3</sub>	B	O <sub>4</sub>	
Control	O <sub>1</sub>			O <sub>2</sub>		O <sub>3</sub>		O <sub>4</sub>

NOTE: Key: O = Observations

O<sub>1</sub> = Pretest

O<sub>2-4</sub> = Posttests

X = Treatment

X<sub>1</sub> = Latino

X<sub>2</sub> = Non-Latino

X<sub>3</sub> = Multicultural

B = Boosters

behaviors regarding the appropriateness of substance use for their age group and the strategies they used to resist offers (see Table 1).

Participating schools ranged from 29% to 100% Latino enrollment, averaging 73% Latino. All sites qualified for Title I assistance and reported achievement scores below both the state and national norms. Using a "blocked random" technique, the school sites were first grouped by degree of Latino enrollment (high, middle, low) with some consideration for a range in sizes, and then schools within each group were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

A great deal can happen between the initial proposal, federal approval, and the actual implementation. Superintendents and principals changed, other prevention programs were in place on various campuses, the newly mandated state testing program was getting all the press, and there were changes on the university team. When the curriculum was finally implemented, 35 schools participated: Eight piloting the Latino version of the curriculum, 8 teaching the non-Latino version, 8 implementing the multicultural version, and 11 serving as control sites. Fortunately, the entire implementation occurred without any changes in personnel at the schools.

At the school level, the project consisted of two phases: (a) teaching the keepin' it R.E.A.L. curriculum to seventh graders during a 10-week period in the spring of 1999 and (b) creating and delivering a follow-up keepin' it R.E.A.L. booster program of monthly activities to these same students as they moved into eighth grade during the 1999-2000 school year. Collaborating with schools to implement the 10-lesson curriculum and administer pretest and posttest surveys to students was essential. It was accomplished by developing a strong partnership with the teachers.

## BRINGING THE TEACHERS ON BOARD

At each stage of development, the research team recruited teachers from participating urban schools to assist them in reviewing, editing, and field testing both the individual lessons and the supplemental videos. Principals recruited teachers to participate in the curriculum training, and seven principals joined these teachers to learn about the goals of the project. They determined the best way to implement the lessons at their schools. The ASU team was available to the campuses to help with this phase of the grant. Finally, in the spring of 1999, a cadre of 53 teachers delivered the keepin' it R.E.A.L. curriculum to approximately 5,000 seventh graders.

The second component of the project entailed follow-up with students as they moved into the eighth grade. The research team brought together 8 teachers who had taught keepin' it R.E.A.L. to develop short cross-curricular, cross-grade-level activities. The resulting activities ranged from student-created posters and brochures to community service projects and from planting and decorating a tree with R.E.A.L. ornaments to making and producing their own public service announcements about R.E.A.L. strategies. To implement this phase, the group created 12 boosters that were distributed to 42 teachers who served as campus coordinators. The original booster ideas sparked the creativity of all teachers, producing nearly 50 additional boosters that were shared among experimental schools.

Teachers were an integral part of keepin' it R.E.A.L. From the initial focus group of teachers who gave feedback about the curriculum lessons to those who created the first round of boosters, the ASU research team collaborated with classroom teachers and sought their input in all aspects of the school-based project. To demonstrate to schools the importance of their involvement, the ASU team provided both statistical and descriptive summaries of the characteristics of the schools and neighborhoods to each school. Principals and teachers quickly understood the advantages of supporting the DRS project in their schools.

## THE NEIGHBORHOODS

Within the urban setting of the participating schools, many of the neighborhoods are home to the poor and transient as well as to students who make up the multiracial, multicultural school populations. Illustrations of gang-

related activity decorate the streets and alleys. Although this environment exhibits a degree of neglect and wear, many families attend to both the health and safety needs of their children (Brook, Whiteman, Balka, Win, & Guersen, 1998). This is illustrated by the fact that greater than 80% of the students have not used alcohol or other drugs (Holleran, 2000).

### **STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS**

Of the 35 schools participating, 2 reported student enrollment in only three categories: Black, Hispanic, and White. The remaining schools reported enrollments in ethnic categories of Asian, Alaskan/American Indian, Black, Hispanic, and White. Eleven of the schools reported a Latino enrollment of 80% or higher. Fourteen other schools reported between 51% and 79% Latino enrollments (Arizona Department of Education, 1999).

### **SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS**

Every school, both experimental and control, met or exceeded the qualification criteria for Title I assistance programs. Only one school had a “targeted assistance” plan in place; all others maintained schoolwide programming. Language acquisition issues also prevailed in the participating schools. In 3 schools, none of the students reported English as the language used at home. Seven additional schools reported that English was used at home by about 50% of their students, whereas the other 50% spoke several other languages at home. Five schools reported a 2:1 ratio of students from non-English home languages when compared to students who spoke English as the primary home language (Arizona Department of Education, 1999). It is interesting to note that school attendance rates in Arizona averaged 86.6%, whereas the attendance rates of the schools in the study reportedly were higher, ranging from 86.8% to 95%. Moreover, only 7 schools reported Stanford 9 student achievement scores at or above the 50th percentile in reading, mathematics, and/or language. The remaining 28 schools reported achievement scores that ranged from the 49th percentile to below the 20th percentile in all three academic areas (Arizona Department of Education, 1999).

## THE KEEPIN' IT R.E.A.L. CURRICULUM

Based on the demographics of the targeted students and the literature highlighting the importance of incorporating culture into prevention programs, the team focused on producing three culture-specific curricula that would be practical, innovative, easy for teachers to use, and relevant to seventh graders (Cialdini et al., 1990; Hecht & Driscoll, 1994; Hecht et al., 1997; Holleran, 2000; Phinney, 1992; Sussman, 1996). The result was a comprehensive curriculum with three different cultural groundings (Latino, non-Latino, and multicultural), each containing a total of ten 40-minute lessons, aimed at teaching and reinforcing resistance strategies as well as promoting life skills. The curriculum focused on four specific resistance strategies: refuse, explain, avoid, and leave. These strategies formed the acronym R.E.A.L. and, thus, the curriculum slogan created by the seventh-grade students, keepin' it R.E.A.L.

The four lessons of the curriculum devoted specifically to these resistance strategies were designed around videos made by students at a local Phoenix high school (Holleran, Reeves, Marsiglia, & Dustman, 2001). The videos—written, produced, and acted by these high school students—illustrated the resistance strategies in real-life situations. The real-life situations portrayed in the videos originated from stories told by students about what had worked for them (Alberts, Miller-Rassulo, & Hecht, 1991; Dorr, 1982; Eigen & Siegel, 1991; Hecht & Driscoll, 1994; Hecht et al., 1993). Spanish-language materials also accompanied the curriculum to accommodate the many Spanish-speaking students in urban Phoenix schools.

## THE CULTURAL COMPONENT

The three versions of the curriculum offer approaches that include cultural norms most salient to Latino, European American, and African American cultures (Marsiglia, Kulis, & Hecht, 2001). The cultural norms that are affirmed in the lessons are those commonly cited in specialized literature as being predominant in their respective cultures. The particular cultural norms are embedded in the framework of the lessons so teachers can teach any version of the curriculum effectively, even without familiarity with the particular culture. Lesson objectives are worded in a manner that incorporates specific norms, and examples used with the lessons and videos are consistent with them (Collier et al., 1986). The multicultural curriculum consists of four

lessons from each of the Latino and non-Latino curricula and two original lessons. The latter are based on ideas similar to the other two versions of the lessons but incorporate norms inherent in African American culture (Collier et al., 1986; Hecht et al., 1989, 1990). These norms are communalism, purpose, endurance, respect, and creativity. More specifically, communalism relates to interdependence, inclusiveness, and strong family orientation. Purpose denotes doing things for a reason and valuing hard work in achieving a goal. Endurance includes persisting in the face of adversity, whereas the value of respect includes respecting the accomplishments of others, honoring the family and elders, and taking into account the feelings of others. Last, creativity represents expression of oneself through music, dance, or other forms of expressive presentation.

The cultural norms affirmed in the non-Latino curriculum are individualism, fair game, planning and goals, directness in communication, and respect. The value of individualism affirms individual strengths, goals, and victories. Fair game denotes a preference for playing by the rules and not being singled out. Planning and goals relates to having a purpose in life to get ahead and to setting priorities accordingly. Directness in communication means stating your intention specifically, whereas respect focuses primarily on valuing others' boundaries (Collier et al., 1986; Hecht et al., 1989, 1990).

The proximity of the Southwest to the borderlands makes the incorporation of Latino values of primary importance. The Latino curriculum recognizes the centrality of family in the life of the community. Individual beliefs, opinions, or interests are not the focus of the Latino family. As a result, there is an inherent tension between the group allegiance values of Latino families and/or communities and the individual achievement expectations of the European American–designed school structure.

The cultural norms affirmed in the Latino curriculum are family orientation (*familismo*), personal treatment (*personalismo*), respect (*respeto*), niceness (*simpatia*), and action orientation. Family orientation relates not only to valuing the family and extended family as the center of social support but also to trusting the entire community network. Personal treatment implies a preference for being treated on an individual basis rather than according to categories, rules, or policy. Respect encompasses deferring to persons of status or acknowledging their position as well as avoiding humiliation of others or direct public confrontation. Niceness involves creating pleasure for others by actions and treating others with kindness and grace. Finally, action orientation places emphasis on evidence of doing what was promised (Collier et al., 1986; Hecht et al., 1989, 1990).

## COMPARING CULTURALLY BASED LESSONS

An example of the differences embedded in the cultural foundations of the curricula can be described by comparing the lesson objectives and supporting videos from Lesson 4, "Refuse." In the Latino version, the objective states that students "will say 'no' so that they are clear without humiliating others." Therefore, an offer of a cigarette might be refused with, "I really like hanging out with you, but I'm not into smoking." The video, "Breakin' Bad Habits," that accompanies this lesson shows a young Latino who is invited to participate in a break-dancing crew competition. When he discovers his crew members smoking marijuana, he says, "Thanks for letting me in your crew. I think I'm gonna to have to go [he pauses] . . . all that smoking."

In the non-Latino version, the lesson objective states that students will "say 'no' so that they say what they mean and establish their boundaries." Students are given permission to say, "No, no thank you" or "I said, no." In the accompanying video titled "School Yard Menace," an Anglo male is trying to get classmates to use inhalants. They spurn him with remarks such as, "No! Get out of here" and "That's stupid!" Although both lessons emphasize clarity of meaning and directness as the best approaches to communicating, they differ not only in the speaker's intent but also in the language chosen to reflect the intent.

## STUDENT RESPONSE TO THE CURRICULUM

Student reactions to the curriculum were gathered in postinterviews and from teacher focus group sessions following the implementation. Students overwhelmingly endorsed the videos. Both students and teachers repeatedly cited vignettes from the videos when describing how pertinent the information was to their lives and to their teaching. According to one student, the lessons explained how to react "if somebody asks you if you want to do something with them that's bad. It tells you what to say so that they don't beat you up, or something." In another instance, a student responded that "people say that it helps them and stuff." When asked whether or not he agreed, the student responded, "Oh, yeah!"

The next year, student enthusiasm carried over to booster activities as well. Students created brochures for community events that explained the R.E.A.L. strategies. They designed and sported special T-shirts on spirit days at their schools. On several campuses, students undertook mural projects that depicted the R.E.A.L. strategies in action. Schoolwide assemblies, organized

and delivered by students, focused on teaching the R.E.A.L. strategies to other grades. Throughout the implementation, school liaisons and ethnographers reported continuing excitement about the program.

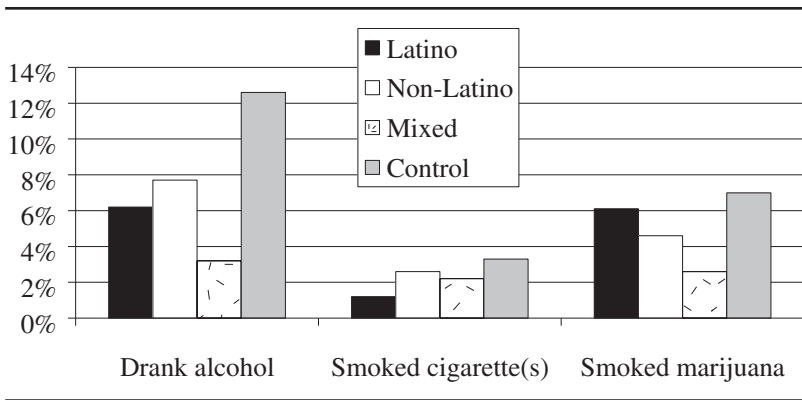
## FINDINGS

Including the natural attrition during the implementation process, more than 4,224 students (48% female and 52% male) matched across all four waves were surveyed on the subjects of their behaviors and attitudes regarding alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs. As reported by the students, 70% were Latino, 15% were White, 6% were African American, 3% were American Indian, and nearly 1% was of Asian heritage. A pretest survey data set compared student responses collected three more times over the course of 18 months—a process that followed seventh graders through their eighth-grade experience.

The findings indicated four significant trends. First, students in the experimental schools gained greater confidence in the ability to resist drugs. For example, students in the control group increased their approval (+7.5%) of alcohol use by students their age, whereas those students in the experimental schools did not increase their approval of alcohol use significantly (less than 2%). Second, the students had adopted more conservative norms both in school and at home. They reported a decrease of nearly 16% in their use of alcohol, whereas in the control group students reported an increase of slightly more than 20% in their use. Third, students in the experimental schools had reduced their use of alcohol. Finally, these students also reported less positive attitudes toward drug use.

Moreover, students in the experimental schools reported increased use of the four keepin' it R.E.A.L. strategies to resist offers of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. However, students in the control schools reported a decrease in the use of resistance strategies altogether. For example, the percentage of students in the experimental schools who used “explain” as a resistance strategy increased by nearly 3%. By contrast, students in the control schools who used explanation as a resistance strategy reported a decrease of nearly 4% in the use of that strategy. That trend was reflected in data regarding each of the four resistance strategies.

Finally, across all four waves of surveys, matched data regarding substance use indicated that all three versions of the culturally grounded interventions positively influenced the student participants' attitudes and behaviors (see Figure 1). The rate of use by students who experienced the



**Figure 1: Wave 1 to Wave 4 Changes in Percentage Using Drugs in Past 30 Days**

interventions was slowed dramatically when compared to the use rates of students in the control schools. This trend proved true for all three substances surveyed. As shown in Figure 1, both the multicultural and Latino interventions significantly affected student behavior, with the Latino intervention having the most immediate impact and the multicultural version registering the greatest longitudinal influences.

As shown in Figure 1, students in the control schools increased their use of alcohol by nearly 13% from the pretest (Wave 1) through the final posttest (Wave 4). In addition, students at control sites increased their use of alcohol significantly more than students experiencing the multicultural curriculum. This pattern of increased use by students in the control group was repeated for all substances.

## CONCLUSIONS

At least four essential conclusions for teachers and school leaders as well as for those doing research in school settings surfaced from the implementation of this study. First, the importance of partnerships—personalized relationships carefully developed between university personnel and the school personnel—cannot be overstated. Several DRS staff and graduate students were assigned to serve the liaison function between the project and specific clusters of schools, both experimental and control sites. The assignment of these school cluster liaisons to coordinate ASU research activities with schedules of classroom teachers and demands on instructional time proved

crucial to the effective delivery of the curriculum. The same connection proved invaluable when implementing both boosters and surveys. Second, teachers and principals reported that their involvement prompted an increased awareness of cross-cultural aspects of instructional delivery, especially in prevention programming, and enhanced their planning in all areas. Third, the project was able to provide substantive, relevant professional development opportunities for both teachers and administrators. Not only were the learning experiences reported as valuable but participation in the training sessions throughout the project applied toward continued certification requirements. Finally, and perhaps of greatest interest to practitioners, the project served as a vehicle to show how research can be translated to practical application both in schools and in communities.

Most students do not use drugs. This project helped us to develop knowledge about effective resistance strategies that students used and to infuse them into the DRS curriculum. Most important, the success of this school-based research project was driven by partnering with teachers—by involving them in all aspects of project development and implementation and by keepin' it real within the context of their teaching environments.

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