Four in Ten: Spanish-Speaking Youth and Early School Leaving in Toronto

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Four in Ten:

Spanish-Speaking Youth and Early School Leaving in Toronto
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Among all students who begin high school in the Toronto District School Board, approximately 23% do not complete it at the end of five years. Among Spanish-speaking youth, this rate is almost 40%. A few months ago, a network of local organizations launched a call to students, parents, teachers, youth and anyone concerned with this situation to share their perspectives regarding two main questions:

1) Why do 40% of Latino/a youth not complete high school in Toronto public schools?

2) What is being done -or can be done- about it?

The invitation was open, without any restrictions by age, nationality, birthplace, migratory status, or any other condition. Contributions were welcome in Spanish, English or Portuguese. In a short time, we were pleased to receive many texts (some in Spanish, others in English) that represented a wide spectrum of the Spanish-speaking community in Toronto. To support accessibility to all texts, we translated all contributions so the book is available in both English and Spanish. The contributions included in this volume identify several factors that are relevant to explaining early school leaving and retention patterns, and particularly the 40 percent dropout rate of Spanish-speaking students in Toronto's high schools. Among them are the following, in no particular order:

• The individual features of adolescents; their motivation; aspirations and self-esteem; their cognitive abilities and learning styles; the quality of their diet; their engagement with the curriculum; and the characteristics of their neighborhood and their peer groups. These factors become more powerful in the case of new immigrants due to additional language and cultural challenges.

• The economic, political, social and cultural context of the Canadian fabric; and the unequal status of some immigrant and ethnic minorities (among them the Hispanic community) in these structures, including dynamics of exclusion, marginalization, discrimination and exploitation. Some contributions made references to the relatively high proportion of Spanish-Speaking students who have to work long hours in low-paying jobs to help their family's economic survival.
• The characteristics of the educational system; the quality and relevance of the curricula; the psychological and pedagogical support mechanisms; the profile of teachers; school authorities and staff (especially their capacity to deal with diverse students); the role of parent associations; as well as the relations between teachers and students (e.g. hidden curriculum) and between peers.

• The characteristics of the student’s family including the socio-economic and educational background of the parents; their financial resources; their expectations and values; their involvement; emotional and practical support of their children’s educational process; and their knowledge of the school culture and of organizations that assist students who are falling behind in their academic work.

Both in the analysis of the situation and in the proposals for solutions, you will find in these 36 texts many coincidences but also a few disagreements. This is healthy because, as the saying goes, when everybody thinks alike, nobody thinks very much. Moreover, since the reality of school abandonment is perceived in different ways by different social actors (teachers, students, community activists, parents, etc.), it makes sense to learn more about the different perspectives to gain a broader view of a problem that is complex and rooted in a variety of causes. We invite you to read these 36 short articles, and we encourage you to take part in the many current and upcoming initiatives carried out by a variety of groups, organizations and institutions to address this issue.

Last but not least, we want to thank all the partner organizations that helped to make this project a reality: Asociación Salvadoreña Canadiense; Association of Hispanic Canadian Teachers; Association of Spanish Speaking Seniors; Canadian Hispanic Congress; Casa Maíz; Casa Salvador Allende; Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean, York University; Correo Canadiense; Diario El Popular; Escuela Pioneros de la Paz; Guatemala Community Network; Grupo Mujer; Factor Hispano; Latin American Research, Education and Development (LARED); Latin American Studies (LAS/University of Toronto); Red de Estudios sobre Latinoamericanos en Canadá (RELAC); and Transformative Learning Centre, OISE/UT.
Introductory Essay

The educational experience of Spanish-Speaking youth: The Brown Report and the forty percent question

Daniel Schugurensky
Transformative Learning Centre, OISE/ University of Toronto

Toronto is one of the most multicultural cities in the world, to the extent that approximately half of its residents were not born in Canada. Such diversity is reflected in the public schools of this city, where almost half of the students come from over 150 different countries, and in some schools the proportion of “new Canadians” is as high as 80 to 95 percent.

This wonderful societal and educational mosaic in which so many different ethnic and linguistic groups co-exist peacefully is a source of pride and has attracted well-deserved international admiration. In theory, such a mosaic should be an egalitarian and horizontal fabric in which all groups have similar opportunities for success and all groups enjoy similar access to the benefits of this affluent society. This is a reasonable expectation, because in democratic societies there should be little correlation between socioeconomic and ethnocultural origin, on the one hand, and economic and educational achievement, on the other.

However, when we scratch the surface, it is possible to observe that this mosaic is not a horizontal one. As noted by sociologist John Porter in 1966, Canada resembles a vertical mosaic, that is, a social structure in which ethnic and linguistic groups have unequal shares of status and power. This situation has persisted over time. For instance, in the report Ethno-racial Inequality in the City of Toronto based on the 1996 Canadian census, Michael Ornstein noted that the incidence of family poverty for Latin American ethno-racial groups in Toronto was 41.4 percent, for Africans, Blacks and Caribbeans 44.6 percent, and for Arabs and West Asians 45.2 percent – all roughly three times the 14.4 percent of groups of European origin. Ryerson University’s political scientist Edward Grace Galabuzi reviewed more recent census data in his book, Canada’s Economic Apartheid: The Social Exclusion of Radicalized Groups in the New Century published in 2006, and also arrived at the same conclusion, that the vertical mosaic is still a reality in the 21st century.

In the educational system, this reality is reflected in the so-called achievement
gap, which refers to the differences in academic achievement between students from different ethnic and socio-economic groups. An example of this can be found in Canada's largest school board, the Toronto District School Board. Indeed, a comprehensive study coordinated by Dr. Robert Brown for the TDSB informs us that different groups of students have different dropout rates.

The official title of the TDSB publication is *The TDSB Grade 9 Cohort Study: A Five-Year Analysis, 2000-2005*, but in educational circles it is known as ‘The Brown Report’. According to the data from this research, the average dropout rate in Toronto high schools is 23 percent. Among Spanish-speaking people, the dropout rate is almost 40 percent, that is, almost twice as much as the average. This sets off alarm bells in our community, because it means that for every 100 Spanish-speaking students who enter high school every year, 40 will face enormous challenges during their youth and adulthood to fully integrate into the economic, social, political and cultural life of this country. Given the significant growth of the Spanish-speaking population in the last decades, we are talking about large numbers of Latin American-Canadian youth who will be condemned to a life of low-paid, low-skilled jobs if they are fortunate, and to long cycles of unemployment and underemployment if they are not able to be hired in the small percentage of jobs that do not require high school completion.

Indeed, available information from other jurisdictions warns us about the difficult situations faced by many young people who have not completed high school. For instance, recent research coordinated by Professor Russell Rum Berger at the University of California found that one in three students who dropped out of 10th grade in 2004 in the state of California were doing nothing four years later: neither attending school nor working. Moreover, the study found that although roughly half of the dropouts went back to finish high school, 90 percent had either never enrolled in college or had enrolled and subsequently dropped out. Many of these youngsters feel frustrated by the limited prospects in their lives and engage in dangerous activities. For instance, a recent study carried out by the Ministry of Social Development of the Province of Buenos Aires notes that 35% of young people between the ages of 15 and 20 who live in the suburbs -and who do not study or work- think that they will be “dead” in five years.

Back to the Brown Report, several issues arise that have implications for educational policies and actions. First, school dropout is not something that occurs overnight. It is a slow process of disengagement with academic activities that takes several years. In fact, the Brown Report found that the vast majority of at-risk students are clearly identifiable in the first year of high school. Among them are students who had achieved fewer than seven credits by the end of year
Moreover, the Brown Report notes that a large proportion of at-risk students can be identified in elementary school. This is corroborated by the findings of a recent TDSB study coordinated by Janet O'Reilly and Maria Yau entitled “2008 Parent Census, Kindergarten-Grade 6: System Overview and Detailed Findings” and published in February 2009. This research, among other things, reveals that among third graders only 37% of students of Latin American origin completed the reading test satisfactorily, 20 points below the 57% average of students who passed the test. This 37% of children of Latin American origin who encounter academic problems in primary schools today cannot be isolated from the 40% of Latin American teenagers who do not finish secondary school. In fact, we know that families that have less resources, possibilities or inclinations to encourage learning and to support their children’s physical, mental, and emotional development from an early age, are less likely to witness their children's success later in school. We also know that there is a positive correlation between familiarity with reading in the early years and school achievement. This suggests that waiting until high school to take action may not be the most effective way to start addressing this issue, and raises the need of more and better early intervention programs.

Second, confirming what we already know from prior research on this topic, there is a clear connection between economic factors and school achievement. Indeed, although the Brown Report did not include a specific question on family income, it found that the dropout rate among students from lower income neighbourhoods is three times higher than among those living in higher income neighborhoods. This suggests that educational programs need to be complemented with other support programs that address basic economic needs of students and their families. Likewise, we need to know more about the situation of students who have to work in order to help their families, and the best ways to assist them to keep up with school assignments and to complete their studies.

Third, and this adds a nuance to the previous point, family income is not always the only variable (and sometimes is not even the key variable) to explain school dropout rates in immigrant and ethnic communities. For instance, the Brown Report found that Portuguese-speaking students have the highest dropout rate (42.5 percent) and Romanian-speaking students have the lowest dropout rate (10.8 percent). The fact that the dropout rate of Portuguese-speaking students is four times higher than the Romanian-speaking students is somewhat puzzling,
and cannot be explained by economic factors alone. Indeed, the Portuguese community has been in Canada for several generations now and is not four times poorer than the Romanian community.

Another example can be found in the TDSB study on elementary schools coordinated by O'Reilly and Yau mentioned above. According to this study, students of East Asian origins (China, Japan, Korea) have the highest academic achievement, and students of Latin American origin are among those with the lowest levels of achievement. However, and to some extent surprisingly, the family income in both communities is relatively similar. This suggests that there are other factors at play that deserve further investigation, and that programs aimed at improving school retention have to pay attention to the particular cultures of different ethnic communities, including the educational expectations and aspirations prevailing in those communities.

In this regard, another surprising finding of this study was that Latin American parents expressed the highest degree of satisfaction with the school: when asked if school provides the education that their children need most of the time, 87% of Latin American parents said yes. East Asian parents, at 57%, expressed the lowest satisfaction with schools. It is somewhat paradoxical that the ethnic community with the highest school performance is the one that is least satisfied with the work done by schools (it seems to expect much more from them), whereas the community with one of the lowest levels of achievement is the one with the highest level of satisfaction. Moreover, 75% of Latin American parents believe that the amount of homework assigned is appropriate, but only half of East Asian parents believe so. Likewise, almost 40% of East Asian parents (compared to only 14% of Latin American parents) think that schools give too little homework. This suggests that different communities have different perspectives and expectations about the role of schools and of studying.

Fourth, although low academic achievement is certainly a key factor leading to dropout, it is important to remember that is not the only factor. In Canada, over 30 percent of all high school dropouts had A or B averages before leaving.

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1 A recent study of the Interamerican Development Bank that included 140 countries (24 from Latin America) provides some light on this paradox of expectations. The study found that most Latin Americans are satisfied with their education systems because they value school discipline, safety and infrastructure over the academic performance of their children. Low parental expectations and demands to education are related to the limited (and poor quality) schooling received, and the lack of information and citizenship education about what is what should be expected of a good education system. This creates a vicious circle that reproduces poverty and inequality.
school, and 22 percent of students say that they left because they were bored at school and did not find it challenging enough. This may apply to a portion of the 40% of Spanish-speaking students who leave school, and calls for promoting conditions that foster motivation and excitement about school among the full range of teenagers, including those who have acceptable levels of academic achievement.

Fifth, we should remember that dropout is not a permanent condition. The Brown Report tells us that about 25 percent of students who dropped out during the 5-year period of the study had returned at least once to Ontario educational institutions. These youth faced particular challenges during their high school years but seemed eager to overcome them and complete their secondary education. It is important to know more about them and to support them in their efforts to succeed. Of course, it is as important to know more about the 75 percent of students who do not come back and assist them with support and opportunities to improve their lives, including the possibilities of academic and skills upgrading through adult education programs, and access to higher education institutions through transitional programs.

As noted above, many of the findings of the Brown Report confirm what we already know from prior literature on this topic. For instance, we know that the issue of school dropout is a complex one, and that it is the outcome of a constellation of predisposing and precipitating factors. In this constellation of factors, we should not underestimate the importance of economic factors, because the poor are faced with choices with which people with more resources are unfamiliar. For instance, low income parents know that attending a meeting with their children’s teacher is important, but sometimes this could mean not going to their second job and foregoing half a day's wages. However, though economic variables play a key role in this constellation, in some circumstances the particular characteristics, expectations and aspirations of teenagers and their families, students’ own academic self concept, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in each community and school system are as important.

In the case of allophone immigrant children and youth (those whose mother tongue is neither English nor French), issues of uprooting, alienation, and lack of familiarity with a new society, a new school culture and a new language magnify this problem; often leading to lower achievement rates and higher dropout rates. Indeed, as noted in a recent communication of the Canadian Coalition for Immigrant Children and Youth, ESL students have lower academic performance, although this problem is often masked by high performance in subjects like math and sciences among students from China, Taiwan and Korea. For instance, 67% of the 2,391 ESL students who took a
recent Ontario’s Grade 10 literacy test failed. Likewise, in many Canadian school districts the dropout rates for ESL learners is more than double the high-school average. For instance, an eight-year Calgary study found a dropout rate of 74 per cent among ESL students. Moreover, ESL students have a lower participation rate in French immersion and gifted programs. Among Spanish-Speaking students in the TDSB (the group that brings together this collection), only 54% passed the Grade 10 literacy test, making this the second lowest group in term of performance, below the other 20 linguistic groups.

Sometimes, students who are failing academically deal with their feelings of frustration and marginalization by giving up altogether or by finding a new sense of belonging through youth gangs, which only exacerbates the problem. Among these students, those who immigrate to Canada as teenagers are in a particularly vulnerable situation. Tony Carrigan, the administrator of the Richmond School District in British Columbia, observed that many of these kids (some of whom never held a pencil before) are placed in high schools without adequate support and few complete their diploma or even gain fluency in English. He added that these adolescents are at immediate risk of falling through the cracks, and all the things that go with that, including a life in a language ghetto, frustrating poorly paid jobs, and the lure of crime or gang life (The Vancouver Sun, April 5, 2008).

In the same vein, Barbara Burnaby, the coordinator of the Canadian Coalition for Immigrant Children and Youth, argues that immigrant children and youth are a rapidly growing group with significant barriers to their integration into Canadian society as a result of education gaps, family poverty, poor prospects for employment, and discrimination in the community. She warns that the social, economic and political consequences of ignoring the needs of immigrant children and youth creates risks, on the one hand, of foregoing their potential contribution to this country and, on the other, of allowing the growth of a sizeable group of distressed and disaffected citizens.

The Brown Report called our attention to some problematic situations in the Toronto District School Board, and this is very important because only a good understanding of our reality can help us to find effective ways to improve it. However, we need to point out that educational inequalities and relatively high dropout rates among disadvantaged groups can be found in many educational systems all around the world, and not only in the TDSB. For instance, a recent study conducted by Dr. Steve Strand from Warwick University in England that tracked 15,000 pupils through their education concluded that certain ethnic groups are held back by low teachers’ expectations and by institutional racism. Moreover, in many other countries (including most Latin American countries), educational inequalities are often dramatic, with a segmented system that offers
a high quality education to some groups and a poor quality education to poor
and marginalized populations.

Although educational inequalities are not unique to Toronto, the merit of the
TDSB is that, despite its accomplishments, it had the courage to take the
initiative to conduct a thorough study on this issue, share its findings with the
community, and pledged to do something about it. In fact, Gerry Connelly, the
TDSB director of education, recently recognized that “the status quo for too
many of our students is not working.” In response to this challenge, she made a
commitment to put together an action plan to address the underachievement of
marginalized students that will specify targets and actions to break this cycle
over the next five years in order to raise the bar and close the gaps in student
achievement.

Fortunately, the TDSB has already launched several innovative programs to deal
with this, including the “Inner City Model School” initiative (which supports
particularly disadvantaged students and their parents in low-income
neighborhoods) and the “Africentric School” initiative, which is guided by the
special requirements of Afro-Canadian students. For these and other efforts, the
Toronto District School Board won the first place in the 2008 edition of the
Carl Bertelsmann Prize, which honours exemplary work in fostering integration
and promoting equal opportunity in education. We want to take this
opportunity to congratulate the TDSB for this award, and we wish the Board
the best in these and similar other initiatives, which are commendable and
undoubtedly will receive support and suggestions from parents and society,
particularly from the most affected community groups.

Indeed, this is already happening. For example, at a recent deputation to the
TDSB (June 9, 2008) the Ethnocultural Community Network made several
specific recommendations that are relevant to Spanish-speaking students.
Among them are the allocation of additional resources to organize parents’
forums to discuss and elaborate proposals for new programs and initiatives, the
provision of orientation programs and psycho-educational services in multiple
languages to promote involvement and support from parents, the opening of
alternative international language focus schools where different languages are
introduced at the elementary level and extended language programs (10 credits
in the target language) continue in high school, and the establishment of April as
“Hispanic Heritage Month”.

Beyond these and other recommendations that could be taken up by the TDSB
and other public institutions, several local organizations have already undertaken
a variety of steps. Among them are the activities of Escuela Pioneros de la Paz,
the annual conferences organized by the Spanish Speaking Education Network (SSEN), the Latino Project of OISE, and the tutoring projects carried out by volunteers of OLAS (Organization of Latin American Students) from York University, Ryerson University and the University of Toronto in collaboration with the Centre for the Spanish-speaking People, by volunteers of the Pathways to Education Program, and by volunteers of On Your Mark Tutoring Program. This program has offered academic assistance to students of Portuguese-speaking descent for several years, and this year—with financial support from the two education boards of Toronto—has expanded into the Spanish-speaking community.

To conclude, I would like to make three points. First, education plays a contradictory role: it promotes upward social mobility but at the same time reproduces social inequalities. This tension occurs because schools have the mandate of promoting equality of educational opportunity but operate in social systems characterized by inequality. Educational systems all over the world must carry out their daily activities in the context of this permanent tension. The TDSB is not an exception. Secondly, high school completion is not the magic bullet that opens all the avenues for happiness and success. However, it opens the range of opportunities and options. At least here in Toronto today, dropout youth must face many closed doors and a series of additional challenges in their lives.

Last but not least, I am very happy to see that different institutions and groups are making efforts and developing programs and activities to reduce the 40 percent dropout rate of the Latino/a students in Toronto high schools and to improve their educational experience. We believe that the contributions included in this publication provide additional insights for understanding this issue and more suggestions for addressing it. We hope that they are useful to all those interested in making a positive difference in the lives of the Spanish-speaking youth in this city.
Spanish-speaking youth and early school leaving in Toronto: Towards improving the family culture

Maria Eugenia Angel

Young Offenders officer in Colombia and Mexico
Author of the book “My Parents, My Children”

The governments and institutions cannot be left without blame. There are no arguments that, implicitly or explicitly, suggest a disinterest in the full development of all human beings. However, in order to be able to do something regarding early school leaving, the least viable path is to confront the monster of the system. I think that to understand and confront this problem effectively, we must approach it from the perspective of the family culture.

It is true that it is not easy to decide to emigrate, to leave the familiar for the foreign, and to transform that decision into action. Sometimes economic conditions, spousal relations, psychological issues or family situations generate vulnerable situation. In these less than ideal conditions we arrive to a new country to face many unimaginable situations that will have to be endured with what little we have left of a fragile enthusiasm and grief for what we have left behind. Our mind, heart and pocket try to adapt to this new life.

In this process, we are often unaware of what our children are feeling. They are without a doubt living through similar grieves, fears and anxieties while testing their own capacity to survive.

If the right thing was done with the children before immigration, perhaps they will emerge from this not only lively but also strengthened through the experience. If the emotional foundations were weak when they arrived, the rest of the foundations of the individual, including the intellectual, will collapse. In front of our eyes, a child will appear that we never imagined or wanted and who is impossible to manage.

This situation is compounded by seven problems:

1. The lack of affinity with the new culture that they have to face, lacking the tools to integrate and to communicate in the dominant language.
2. The lack of human sensitivity of many Anglo-Saxon teachers.
3. The limited training of teachers to help them understand the difficult process faced by foreign students.
4. The limited time and tranquility that parents have to understand and support their children.
5. The fact that children take on the role of tutors for their parents as they learn the language quicker.
6. The fact that children lose the attention of their parents and must begin to handle an unknown independence.
7. That fact that a consumerist system absorbs young people that arrive somewhat numb and find a wide world that offers them the power to work and spend on what they always wanted but could never have. In Canada not only can they work, capitalism quietly incites them to do so, the government turns a deaf ear and a blind eye to payments received in cash, workers and drivers who are underage and risk their lives on the roofs of new homes they help to build, etc.

In this context, one question arises: if I were a young Latino/a in Canada, what motivation would I have to finish my high school education and begin a career?

-If my parents, instead of involving themselves in the new culture, retreat further and further into themselves.

-If nothing attracts me except the prospect of owning material things and entertainment or in the best of cases the prospect of improving my family’s condition working at any job.

-If my parents are not aware of when I do or don’t go to school because they work and don’t attend parent-teacher conferences because they can’t communicate with my teachers and are afraid to even attempt it because they might receive bad news.

-If my parents are always tired and upset about working so much in a job they don’t enjoy or never thought they would have to do and with little time for reprieve?

-If my parents are always threatening to separate and then get back together?

-If I feel rejected by my peers, experience difficulties of all kinds with little or no help from those in authority.

-If I come home to an empty house without many comforts to cook for myself when in my country there was the warmth of a home, a warm meal, my cousins...
and friends who laughed at what I said but now don’t understand the jokes I tell.

- If they think I am dumb because I don’t achieve but I can speak another language full of frustration and confusion.

- If the people closest to me never say that this is a great country with endless possibilities, but say exactly the opposite all the time.

- If no one encourages me, watches over me or motivates me to use the internet for better things besides chatting, to excel in athletics so I can receive an athletic scholarship for university, or shows me where to go to enjoy healthy and safe activities.

Our children are the result of our work with them. It is not the child who has to confront her/his difficult situation, but the parents who have to re-evaluate the process of childrearing, understand it and learn to manage it.

There should be a clear correlation between the education of parents and that of the next generation. We have to recognize that the children of parents who are not professionals are at a disadvantage and for this same reason require our attention. Unfortunately, the majority of our Hispanic-Canadian community cannot do more than damage control while trying to bear as best they can the day-to-day. There is no room for them to make future plans for themselves, and much less their children.

If the welfare of the next generation depends on that of the current one and this one depends on the previous one’s, then the previous generation must wake up and do something for the current one so that they next one can be better. How can this be done? It can be done by educating parents and by nurturing professionals. Although the youth are the problem, they are certainly not the cause of the problem nor are they responsible for solving it.
Addressing the dropout rate of Spanish-speaking students: Key issues and recommendations for policy-makers

Luz Bascuñán
Education Advocate and Former School Trustee

The high dropout rate of students belonging to various linguistic communities – including children and youth in the Spanish-speaking community – poses great challenges to policy makers. For starters the amalgamation of the school boards in Ontario’s major urban centers, and particularly in Toronto, resulted in the destruction of an elaborate, though effective, structure of parent and community consultation in the decision-making process. Thus, when the Toronto District School Board received Dr. Robert Brown’s report locating Spanish-speaking students as the third group most likely to drop out from secondary schools, the TDSB found itself without a recognized parent involvement structure to speak with on the issue and effectively guide the Board in the discussion.²

There is an important qualifying aspect in the policy-making discussion: the poor education attainment of the Spanish-speaking students is not a secondary school only issue, nor is it a problem exclusive to Toronto schools. What is it then that makes our children less successful in school? Why is it that Spanish-speaking children (like their counterparts in the Portuguese-language group) are more often placed in special education classes? Why is it that more Spanish-speaking students, like children of Black parents, rank higher in the number of school suspensions and expulsions? Thus, where do we look for a cause: is it the children or is it the system?

The presence of contextual factors which may help to understand these questions are addressed in other articles in this publication, without ignoring these factors I would like to center the dropout problem within the context of

² I would like to acknowledge trustees Chris Bolton, Irene Atkinson and Maria Rodriguez, who have worked with the Spanish-speaking community and are committed to supporting the education of our children.
the education system and provide some examples for policy changes at the local school level, the District Board level and Ministry of Education level.

**Issue 1: The hiring system**

A cursory look at who are our children’s teachers shows a disproportionate majority of white, middle class, Canadian born professionals, despite the fact that a sizeable number of qualified teachers who have been trained in Spanish-speaking countries are considered not “certified” and as such are unable to teach in our schools. This results in a lack of role models for our students and the absence of a teacher in the classroom who can share and understand the culture of the student and can communicate with the parent.

**Policy Recommendations**

Boards of Education must establish hiring policies that create an opportunity for foreign trained teachers to be recognized as valuable resources and establish clear guidelines for schools to select those teachers, especially in schools with high density of Spanish-speaking students.

The Ministry of Education must develop a mechanism to influence the process of Teacher Certification – that reflects the needs of the community, including providing clear directions, goals and timetables to the College of Teachers (the provincial entity responsible for certification of foreign trained teachers). The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, together with Faculties of Education, must develop approaches to attract more Spanish-speaking students (as well as other under-represented groups) to the teaching profession.

**Issue 2. The status of the Spanish language in our schools**

In 1977, the Ministry of Education mandated the creation of Heritage Language Programs to support the cultural and linguistic development of children’s home language and culture. In 1983, the former Toronto Board of Education- in an innovative approach largely supported by parents in the community- established the Integrated-Extended Model for Heritage Language Instruction. This move was based on research pointing to the academic merits of first language maintenance in the development of a second or third language acquisition. Despite this knowledge, home language use and development have become more problematic for the Board.

The current discussion about the elimination of the program reinforces the concern of members of the community that the program does not have the institutional and formal status it should. While the future of the program is raised in discussions year after year in boardrooms and schools, our children
observe the implicit cues in the debate and quickly develop the idea that their home language has no educational value. The final result is that parents and children will not share a language, in which they can communicate about important issues, including education issues.

**Policy Recommendations**

School Boards and their staff need to become aware of research supporting home language maintenance and development and the need to identify home language as a valuable asset. School Boards should make every effort to enhance language programs and resources, particularly around the Spanish Integrated Extended Day Program.

At the secondary school level, Spanish as an International Language should be offered on a citywide basis, Boards of Education must make the teaching positions for these programs available to trained Spanish-speaking educators. The Ministry of Education must provide adequate funding and resources for programs involving first language development and enrichment (as the Spanish Integrated Day Program).

### Issue 3. School Curriculum

The “hidden curriculum” that permeates schools and influences who succeeds and who doesn’t has been widely addressed in the educational literature. The academic program that students must complete in order to receive their OSSD (Ontario Secondary School Diploma) is determined by the Ontario the Ministry of Education, the program is perceived by members of marginalized communities as Eurocentric and out of sync with the modern reality of our children and their families to the extent that our children do not see themselves reflected in the matters that school teaches them.

**Policy Recommendations**

The Ministry of Education must allow flexibility for school boards and schools to introduce credit courses in areas that reflect the reality and the interest of the student population including Spanish-speaking students. The School Boards must develop program strategies that focus on students not on curriculum matter only, programming should be flexible so students can use areas related to the Latin American culture and the Spanish language as part of their OSSD requirements.

### Issue 4. Lack of formal structures for parent and community involvement
At the School Board level, the abolition of parent committees has created a vacuum for parental and community input. At the local school level, parent councils have failed to attract new immigrant parents. Thus, decisions have fallen into the hands of a small parental elite “who speak the language” and know how to navigate the system. As a result, Spanish-speaking parents become marginalized in the decision-making process at the local school level.

**Policy Recommendations**

School Boards must recreate the former structures that allowed parent and community involvement at the Board level. School Boards must create provisions to encourage parent groups for specific ethnic and language groups to become more effectively involved in their children’s education. This includes hiring well-trained school community workers to help to facilitate the process of engagement. School Boards must create guidelines for parent representation that represent the linguistic and cultural diversity of the student population at all levels of decision-making.

In conclusion, the Brown report may constitute the “tip of the iceberg” in the critical issues pertaining to the education of Spanish-speaking students. There is an urgent need to address the problem and identify solutions that are sustainable and will become embedded in the education system from curriculum to staffing to parent involvement. This will require the Board to urgently establish collaborative partnerships with the community, parents and students to bring forward specific recommendations for policy changes and implementation strategies.
School dropout among Spanish-speaking students: causes and solutions

Patricio Bascuñán

Member of CUPE 4400, Educator (TDSB, George Brown College)

The level of school dropout among Spanish-speaking youth (almost 40%) is unacceptably high. Our task is to identify the causes of this phenomenon and some possible solutions. I will address first the causes, organized in five broad categories, and then I will propose ten solutions.

CAUSES

Broadly speaking, the causes can be grouped into five categories:

1. Poverty

This is a fundamental cause. The low incomes of many in our community result in a lack of resources for many families and unfortunate consequences for children. The lack of job and training opportunities for the parents of these children exacerbates the conditions of poverty.

It is not uncommon for children from low-income families to not wear the latest brands and suffer blows to their self-esteem, or not have access to a computer or the Internet and feel like outcasts and apologize for having to handwrite their school assignments. These conditions negatively affect their self-esteem and have implications for their academic achievement.

2. Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

It is important to distinguish between those students born outside of Canada and those born in Canada. The former face two disadvantages: limited knowledge of English and limited familiarity with Canadian culture.

For example, a new immigrant child may not understand the Canadian approach to multiplication and division, which might be different from her/his country of origin, although there may be different ways of arriving at the same result. In
Latin America one billion is one million times one million. In Canada one billion is one thousand millions. Spanish-speaking students born in Canada will understand the concept of one billion, students born in another country will understand it as well, but it will be mathematically different. Here we observe a cultural and linguistic barrier that prevents students from understanding the instruction of their teachers. This is a challenge that does not have a short-term solution and which can leave indelible marks on students’ lives.

In general, children who do not speak English as their first language are placed in special education programs because it appears that they face challenges in their learning abilities. Schools schedule an evaluation conference or IPRC (Identification and Placement Review Committee), but parents often do not attend it because of language barriers. After this meeting, students are removed from their regular classes to receive Special Education support and are labeled as students with learning challenges.

The cultural burden of immigrants is great. For example, in their drawings many children depict mountain ranges that they do not see in Toronto but which were part of the landscape of their home nation. The landscapes depicted by children who have arrived from countries who have survived civil war are filled with airplanes and helicopters dropping their deadly cargo or paramilitary troops killing or kidnapping. The cultural shock experienced by some and the violence lived by others are both traumatic factors that have an influence on educational development.

Additionally, the cultural barrier between children and parents is heightened during the settlement period, since the cultural values and practices that parents bring with them often clash with those of their children. For instance, domestic violence, often found in Latin American homes as a result of the prescribed gender and parent/child roles that exist within a family, is no longer acceptable once in Canada. This particular difference has resulted in parents being incarcerated accused of abuse by their children who understand that parents cannot harm their children in discipline. All of these issues, create large cultural and communication gaps between the two parties, it generates ruptures and inter-family violence and ultimately affects the emotional development of children and consequently their scholastic achievement.

3. Curriculum and Educators

The curriculum in the Canadian education system is a Eurocentric, closed off to diversity and creates cultural barriers between the curriculum and the lived realities of students. To leap from Bolivar to Queen Victoria, from the Mayans to the Algonquin, from the Creole to the Métis or from the quetzal to the bear
is to take gigantic steps in time and space. The fusion of both curriculum and lived reality in the context of a historic timeline will lead to academic success.

Current teacher training leads to instructional practices that alienate students from school life. Educators need to be trained in a diverse and inclusive curriculum that is in as much as possible bilingual. Failure to do this will lead to a further breakdown in communication between students and schools, students and communities and students and teachers and exacerbate the challenges of Spanish-speaking students.

4. Funding

Traditionally, the politics of the TDSB and the province have acted as obstacles for programs that might ameliorate the problem of early school leaving. For example, reluctance to fund programs like ESL (English as a Second Language) and International Languages (IL), as well as the elimination of Community Liaisons, have deepened the causes of early school leaving. These programs, which have lacked adequate funding since more than a decade ago, are vital for newly arrived parents and children. Without these services and programs, parents will continue to depend on their children to communicate with teachers or to translate school communication.

On the other hand, the lack of Spanish language classes for children born in Canada to Spanish-speaking parents creates communication gaps between parents and children and parents and schools. Community Liaisons were veritable bridges between communities and the TDSB and these two parties created Liaison Committees that were effective instruments to communicate the concerns of parents and communities. Today, those Liaisons and Committees are virtually non-existent.

5. Spanish-speaking Parents Association

The absence of this parental association has created a great vacuum. If we are discussing early school leaving in our community and parents are not participating in constructing solutions then this problem will simply continue to worsen. This link in the educational process must be reactivated because when it was active it played an important role in connecting the TDSB and the community.
POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Without taking into account systemic elements outside of our reach, there are some solutions within the education system that we propose. I summarize them in the following ten:

1. Sufficient funding for personnel and programs that work to decrease early school dropout.
2. Recruitment of teachers from the Spanish-speaking community.
3. Educate teachers for diversity.
4. Training bilingual teachers.
5. Curriculum changes.
7. Target the political and funding decision-making levels in education (TDSB, Provincial Government, Federal Government).
8. Work with those individuals in policy-making and administrative positions (Superintendents).
9. Professional bilingual support for parents and students (community liaisons, social workers, psychologists, etc.).
10. Develop a strategy that includes collaborates with the whole community (parents, schools, students, teachers).
Latin American students in the TDSB: Research findings and recommendations

Judith K. Bernhard
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At 39%, the dropout rate of Spanish-speaking high school students in Toronto is almost twice the average for English-speaking students. In order to address the problem, it is necessary to understand that this process does not suddenly appear but is a slow process evident in the early years of schooling.

My focus, in this piece, will be on the disadvantages experienced by the Latin American group of students rather than overt discrimination against us. In Canada, the fight against overt and blatant discrimination has been won. However, other forms of systemic disadvantage are harder to explain, though they still involve identifiable acts and clear negative outcomes.

My contribution to the debate about the reasons for the high dropout rate among Latin American students derives mainly from research that our team at Ryerson University has conducted over the last 15 years. In ethnographic research studies, we have gone to great lengths to interview Latin American families in their own language, to gain their trust and talk about issues that matter to them. We have focused on their experiences with the educational system. The examples that follow are offered to illustrate how educational and other institutions, staffed by those with the best of intentions, may systematically disadvantage certain groups and yield poor outcomes for them.

There are background issues concerning language status, identity, and role models. English is the dominant language in Ontario, and public officials at the highest levels of government and education often speak no other foreign language. A search by country of birth for federal MPs reveals only one Spanish-speaking person. None of Ontario’s MPPs or cabinet members belongs to the Latin American community. In the list of top paid CEOs for 2005, there is only one Spanish surname. Spanish, it might be said, has an inferior status and this seems to apply in most of the upper reaches of the business world as well. Latin American students, then, see few role models, even among their teachers.
Many parents have working class jobs, with few opportunities for upward social mobility. Although many of these parents are highly skilled professionals with university degrees in their own countries, their children often face challenges in the Canadian educational system. When Latin American students succeed, it is often at the expense of their language and culture. They feel pressure to associate exclusively with Anglo Canadians, to assimilate rapidly, and so on. Besides these general points, our studies have identified specific school practices that act as systemic barriers leading to continued disadvantage.

1. **Home language issues**

   In trying to explain Latin American children’s underachievement, teachers often mentioned the use of Spanish at home. We did not find any teachers who explicitly said it is bad for parents to speak Spanish their children but we did encounter many teachers who expressed reservations about the effects of Spanish-only home environments. Parents often picked up on these implicit cues and began to speak to their children in English instead.

   After a short time, parents and children no longer shared a language in which they could communicate about important issues such as respect for others and the meaning of an education. Parents did not immediately realize that by relaxing the use of Spanish at home, they were losing authority and the ability to guide their children regarding important life issues. Often as a result of switching to English, Hispanic families lose ‘cultural capital,’ including recognized resources, education, and experiences that might help their children.

2. **Communication problems**

   Educators tend to use jargon and specialized terms that are often not understood by parents. Words and phrases such as “withdrawal,” “special education,” “below grade level functioning in English,” and “reading clinic” were puzzling to parents we interviewed. Parents did not know how to interpret their children’s report cards and were confused and completely unaware of their child’s achievement deficits. In general, interactions with school personnel were scarce and brief, and translators, where used, did not solve the problem.

3. **Teachers’ perceptions of parents**

   Latin American parents were commonly labeled as passive or uninterested. Teachers routinely informed us that Latin American parents were not involved, did not come to meetings, and could not be mobilized to help in their children’s schooling. This was often given as an explanation for the children’s poor performance. Yet the parents noted that teachers spoke as “experts” and so they
did not feel in a position to make their views known. Although parents made extensive efforts to find someone to translate the memos sent home from school, they did not respond since they believed they were being informed of decisions already made that required no further action. The teachers labeled their behaviour as “parental passivity” or “lack of concern.” However, our interviews with parents, including professionals, found very high aspirations for their children.

4. Trauma, family separation and precarious legal status

Many Latin American families migrate to Canada because political violence or economic devastation has interrupted their normal family lives. During the migration process, children were often left behind and the unexpectedly long separation from their mothers had a devastating effect on the parent-child bond. Separation periods were often long, and mothers slowly began to relinquish their decision-making capacity to grandparents, fathers, or other relatives remaining in the home countries. By the time of reunification in Canada, the children, when they arrived, were often angry and no longer considered the mother as a figure of authority. Mothers living in this situation, feeling a great deal of shame and guilt, were reluctant to confide in anyone. In most cases, teachers did not know about these traumatic experiences and attributed the children’s aggression to the incapacity of parents. They were also not aware of the children exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress or living with less-than-full legal status. Teachers and social service providers were unaware or ill equipped to work with families with this complexity of issues.

Recommendations

To be in full accord with the official multiculturalism act and education policies, we need to go much further to remedy continuing systemic disadvantages. Our research team has investigated a number of approaches to involving parents and improving outcomes and thus the following recommendations are proposed:

A. There must be support for educators to develop skills in dealing with so-called ethnic families. Teachers need to be encouraged in reflective practice and learn how to build relationships with families that are founded on trust, mutual respect, and open communication. It is best that teachers make the default assumption that parents are interested and that the issue is ways to involve them. It is essential that there be clear two-way communication and that teachers make placement processes transparent.
B. Teachers need to understand the cultural capital of Latin American families and communities. Teachers need a positive view of what each culture and each family’s history can contribute to the child’s development and identity. Teachers also need to become aware of research supporting the retention of the home language in the home as a valuable asset. In simple terms, teachers need to revise their expectations of so-called ethnic students and change their ideas about the plight of “desperate, ignorant or impoverished immigrant groups.” Teachers need to make respectful inquiries about family history and not simply make assumptions about where the parents are living and the circumstances under which they fled their countries or immigrated to Canada.

C. Despite legal provisions for parent councils, much more has to be done to encourage parent groups from specific ethnicities and language groups, particularly Latin Americans. We recently completed a project funded by the Parents Reaching Out Grant of the Ministry of Education called Parenting circles: Preparing minority parents to support school success. Among the processes that we initiated were parents writing books for and about their children and learning about the educational system. Parents supported one another and were helped to become more effectively involved in their children’s education.

There are still many questions that remain to be empirically investigated, such as the effects of poverty reduction strategies, and the differences between the experiences of first, one-and-one-half, and second-generation immigrants. The migration patterns that lead to trauma and extended family separations also need further study.

It is clear that educators are in an ideal position to act as advocates for the families. They are often trusted and looked up to by Latin American families and can be a positive force in facilitating the adaptation process and helping to cushion the resettlement period.
School dropout among the children of Latin American immigrants

Gerardo Betancourt
Community Educator, Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples, Toronto

The school dropout rates among Latin American students are obviously higher than those of other social groups. This situation has a multi-factorial origin and can be explained through a number of different perspectives. In Latin America, the problem of early school leaving is profoundly linked to a series of factors, including the economic conditions of the students, educational policies in their countries of origin, students’ social status, parents’ educational level, students’ position within the family, students’ gender, environment (rural/urban), and access to educational and cultural institutions.

Therefore, from the beginning have their academic lives. Latin American students have predetermined their path and extent of their education. Without a doubt, education in Latin American societies continues to embrace the idea of acting as an agent of social mobility. We all want to have a lawyer, an engineer or doctor in our family. Education is a desired element, almost mystical, that in the minds of many continues to be the difference between a life of misery or comfort. In practice, however, education is neither a guaranteed escape from misery nor an entrance into comfort. Nevertheless, the notion of “poor but with a professional degree” appears to be the tie that binds family dynamic as children develop. The socialization process is carried out by this unique and “legitimate” agent- the school- with the blessing of families and communities or at least without their resistance.

To believe that because we are now in Canada, access to educational development is automatic is part of the fallacy that explains the problem. Schools, higher education institutions and public universities exist, yet access to these and permanence in these are delimited by the same rules that affect
Hispanic immigrants in their countries of origin plus the challenges imposed on them as a result of their position as immigrants (what I would call the “conditioning origin”). As a father pointed out at a meeting of the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples:

“to think that my children will go to university is my dream, but they will have to apply for a student loan, we are newcomers to this country and the savings we have must be used for survival at least until I can position myself in something similar to what I did in my country”.

As Hispanic immigrants, we defined in relation to our environment and the level of development we achieve in our new conditions as immigrants. Therefore, those immigrants that have been living in Canada for several years and have achieved a certain level of stability have greater opportunities to provide a buffer for their children that allows them to complete their secondary schooling and in large part go on to begin post-secondary studies. This process works inversely for new immigrants and if their children immigrate of secondary school age they will encounter significant challenges.

Firstly, regarding language barriers, the older they are, the longer they will require in order to adapt to their new educational conditions. Secondly, if these children arrive as adolescents and their parents are working towards attaining stability in their new home, it is almost certain that these young people will trade their scholastic pursuits to enter the labor market in light of economic pressures that often result in marginality.

For Hispanic immigrants who have settled in Canada for many years, the dynamic has two main consequences. First, for those families that have been in Canada for many years but have not been able to surpass the level of meeting basic necessities, the fate of their immigrant children will likely be working at a very young age. Despite having been educated for the most part in Canada and being fluent in English, these students still have to deal with the major obstacle of postsecondary studies and the large investment that they represent which may be out of reach of their families, leaving them with the dilemma of incurring student loans or entering the workforce.

Second, and perhaps more important, is the educational level of the parents and their attitude towards education. The higher the level of education immigrant parents have achieved, the higher the social expectations that will function to encourage, support and facilitate the education of their children. This is easy to prove as hundreds of investigations have determined that the level of education of parents appears to be the *sine qua non*. Growing up surrounded by expectations, parents’ diplomas on the wall and siblings, cousins and other
family members successfully completing educational trajectories, success in education becomes so normal that it is finally internalized. It becomes the norm and those that abandon their studies become the exception and are perceived as failures, slackers or perhaps those who had to face some unforeseen situation such as illness or unplanned pregnancy.

In this context, one interesting question to explore would be how much the immigrant status in fact affects early school leaving. In other words, at what point does being a child of immigrants affect the educational possibilities that normalize the statement: “a significant percentage of Latino students will not finish their schooling”. The statistics are there, along with the empty classrooms with empty desks. Where are the young Latinas/os? Are they in universities and colleges or in their final year of high school? Are they working in a fast food restaurant, a call centre, a clothing store or selling mobile phones at a shopping mall kiosk? Might they have turned to delinquency and become part of a street gang?

The answer to all of these questions is not found only in the classroom or the culture of school. We have to use a holistic perspective that will allow us to magnify and explain the determining and contextual factors that influence the academic success of Latinos in Canada. Further information on the influence of the family environment, the relationship between the past life (prior to emigration) and the present and the conditions of immigration are particularly important for future study and in order to develop policies and programs that benefit the future of our young people.
Humiliation and schooling

Leonarda Carranza
Doctoral student, OISE/University of Toronto

One teacher in high school had every student stand in front of the class while the rest of the class shared what we thought they would be when they grew up. When it was my turn I went up and all the kids said things like businessman and entrepreneur, and I remember feeling happy. The teacher then turned to the class and said: “No, I think Jose’s going to be a mechanic.” I stood motionless. And I remember the entire class going really quiet. I knew it bothered her that the class thought so highly of me. She needed me to know that she didn’t think I would ever achieve those things.

José, Lawrence Heights Community, Toronto

I fell into the topic of humiliation and schooling after watching the movie “Muffins for Granny.” In the film racialized violence is repeatedly performed on a child through the use of humiliation. The filmmaker, Nadia McLaren makes a disquieting connection between humiliation, racialized violence, and the residential school system.

In this film, humiliation becomes a technology of violence that effectively constructs racial hierarchy. After watching the film, I couldn’t stop thinking about the horror of humiliation, the destruction, the racialized violence and most importantly the thread. What else was it connected to? What was it producing? I thought about my own experiences in school.

I grew up in a housing project in North Toronto. Although I transferred schools in grade 10 I still had contact with most of the kids I grew up with. I watched most of them transition out of school and into low paying jobs. Daily forms of humiliation marked those early years of learning. I wondered about our experience in school and the role humiliation played in the way we grew to see ourselves.

In 2006, I began interviewing Latina/o youth outside of the school system. Since then, I have heard, remembered, and documented various forms of school
related violence that have little to do with peer bullying and instead signal a deeper relationship between humiliation, race, and schooling. Interview after interview revealed horrible moments of humiliation. Examples ranged from vicious verbal abuse to physical threats.

At first I thought that what I needed to do was write about these experiences so that others could hear them. I thought about compiling the most extreme cases of humiliation in order to make the racialized violence visible. But the more I spoke about humiliation in schooling the more I realized that people were not surprised.

I realized that we all know that humiliation happens in schools. But somehow, we trivialize, naturalize, and render necessary the violence in humiliation, and make it a part of the way we teach. Examined from the lens of humiliation, disengagement might begin to appear as a withdrawal from an unsafe environment.

At the structural level humiliation takes place within the lived experience of surveillance and the mark of criminality that characterizes the experience of racialized student’s in school. Humiliation lies in the language of security that demands that racialized bodies be searched, stopped, ordered, and consistently checked. It hides in the language of responsibility and discipline and is authorized to restrict the freedom to move, to go to the washroom, to eat, and to speak. These experiences of humiliation drastically cement the border of belonging and unbelonging in schools and mark how we come to see and understand who we are in the world.

To assume that there exists one answer to the question of why 40% of Latino youth in Toronto do not finish school overlooks the complexity of the issue. I don’t presume to have the answer. What my research allows is an engagement with race and violence at the structural level. Looking at the technique of humiliation demands a more careful look at students’ demand for respect and equal treatment.

It also demands a critical understanding of disengagement and its relationship to structural school violence. Often humiliation as an everyday occurrence in schooling is dismissed as something that builds character. Therefore, the psychological and emotional trauma that humiliation produces is naturalized. Humiliation teaches the lesson of who’s who in society, who resides in the respectable space, and who falls into the degenerate. In the film “Muffins for Granny” humiliation was used to mark the border between the racialized other and normal white student.
Humiliation taught Native students who was normal and who was deviant. The Latino/a youth that I interviewed expressed a similar pedagogical experience. Through humiliation they learned about themselves and their place in the school system. Even when they had a slight awareness of the violence they still inadvertently learned to internalize negative views of themselves from the acts of humiliation. My hope is that with more information about the connections and the pervasiveness of humiliation in schools it might present a different way to interpret and respond to disengagement.
What is Keeping Latino/a Students Out of School? Some Possible Explanations

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There are many factors that need to be discussed in order to fully understand the high incidence of school dropout of Latino/a students. Among these factors are: (a) overt and covert racism within the school system, (b) processes of family acculturation, (c) intense parent-child conflict during adolescence and consequent challenges in value transmission, and (d) resource availability for immigrant families.

Canada is widely known for its policy on multiculturalism and as a welcoming nation for those escaping the horrors of war (Smolynec, 2007). Some would argue that Canada’s multicultural policy is just an illusion (Bannerji, 2000). However, racism exists and it is embedded in the social fabric of Canadian society (Caidi & Allard, 2005). Racism may be overt to the extent in which teachers and other school staff may be obvious in their attitudes and/or behaviours toward Latino/a students such as open displays of aggression and/or fear about Latino/a youth’s “difference.”

Racism may also manifest itself covertly as indifference. The use of labeling and/or negative stereotypes to explain certain teachers’ indifference becomes very common. This is evident in comments like this: “h/she will not amount to much anyway,” or “h/she is a gang member.” Hence, there is a lack of support regarding the academic needs of Latino/a students. These spoken and/or unspoken negative messages are often perceived and internalized by the students.

The outcomes of this process may vary. Some students may be recruited into ethnic shame. They may hesitate to ask for help when in need, especially to a teacher that students perceive as hostile toward them. Many will fall behind academically and the end result is frequently that Latino/a students, feeling frustrated and helpless, will drop out of school prematurely.
It has been argued that the changes an individual goes through due to acculturation (Berry, 1992) are often negotiated within the context of family (Carranza, 2001). Therefore, if we look at Latino/a youth in the context of the family unit we will need to consider the fact that an individual, along with all family members, are going through their cultural transition into Canadian society. For example, in Canada women tend to find employment much faster than men.

This may be due to the fact that Latina women are more ready and willing to sacrifice their dreams and aspirations for the welfare of the family (Falicov, 1999). Women may expect that their partners contribute to the household activities equally, and at the same time they expect to contribute to the decision-making process of the family. A shift to a more egalitarian relationship tends to occur. The end result may be that the Latino/a youth might not have the full parental support needed in order to navigate the hazards that acculturation entails, i.e., facing racism at school.

In Latino families, all family members are obligated to share responsibility for the family’s adaptation and survival from one generation to the next. Values such as respect, obedience and virginity for women tend to prevail among Latino families (Carranza, 2007). Latino/a youth struggle with the challenge of living between two worlds, that is, the settlement country’s way of life and their parents’ way of life (Garcia-Preto, 1998).

These tensions tend to create a substantive amount of stress on Latino/a youth. Young people, in comparison to adults, have not achieved their full cognitive development to assist them in navigating the many challenges that exist in growing up in a context with which their parents are not familiar. They are still going through their developmental process of adolescence.

Adolescence is a period when awareness of identities and belonging increases (Herman, 2004). Adolescence can be disturbing for both youth and their families as various tensions and dilemmas emerge in new and sometimes unexpected ways (Arnett, 1999). Thus, established family patterns may shift under the influence of cognitive, biological, and social changes of this life stage (Cotterell, 1996). Adolescents live their lives and develop within several social settings: family, peers, and school (Bloom, 1990).

The development of a positive and coherent identity is considered a fundamental task of the adolescent stage of life (Erikson, 1968). For Latino/a youth this task involves the development of a positive ethnic and racial identity. Ethnic identity is also related to our perception of how others view us as ethnic beings. For example, if I perceive that others always imagine me as being a
school dropout because I am Latino/a, my ethnic pride may be weak although I may actually be a high school leader.

The availability and access to resources by Latino parents also plays an important factor in the premature school dropout of Latino/students. Most Latino parents have come to Canada in search of a better future for their children. This may mean growing up free from warfare and/or escaping the pervasive poverty that exists in most Latin American countries. Hence, obtaining higher education and in turn ser alguien [to be somebody] are significant aspects of the acculturation plans for their children (Carranza, 2007).

These plans become almost unreachable when parents are not aware of the services available to assist them during difficult times. Moreover, some of the existing services are not sensitive to the needs of Latino parents. Both Latino parents and youth find themselves frustrated and isolated, parents because they see their children’s bleak future, Latino/a youth because of the overt racism they encounter within the school system as well as growing up between two worlds. Most importantly, the adults around him/her (e.g., teachers, parents, service providers, policy makers, etc.) that are supposed to guide and protect them have let them down.

References


A Question of Attitude

Anabelle Chacon Castro

Association of Hispanic-Canadian Professors

Quantifying the degree of early school leaving is a complicated task. As the TDSB study led by Robert Brown mentions: the concept can be understood with a broad range of interpretations—there are those students that leave school altogether, those who leave temporarily and those who fall behind in their studies. The Brown report indicates that approximately 23% of students that begin grade 9 do not satisfactorily complete—because of leaving or falling behind—grade 12 at the end of 4 years. This proportion is almost double for Spanish-speaking students, at approximately 40%.

Five are the most common reasons explaining Spanish-speaking youth’s propensity for early school leaving: lack of familiarity with the dominant language, learning challenges, family characteristics, economic resources, and attitude.

1. Language

Knowing the dominant language (English) has always been considered a fundamental key to success or failure in schooling, this is obviously undeniable, but what happens to students of Asian heritage whose first language is completely different from English, the two languages don’t share the same alphabet or structural grammar. Yet, these students are ranked second among those groups whose students successfully complete their secondary school studies making their dropout rate very low according to the aforementioned report.

2. Learning Challenges

These limit the normal development within school contexts, but they are not a factor exclusive to our community. Children and youth of other cultures, races and languages are equally affected by learning disabilities such as dyslexia, hyperactivity, attention deficit disorder, etc.
3. **Family Characteristics**

Hispanic families are considered to come from poorly educated countries. According to a January 2008 report by the Organization of Ibero-American States, the average rate of illiteracy is 8% and the average rate of basic education completion is 31%. But what about the Punjabi community whose members originate mostly from India? This a nation that, according to the 2001 census, has an illiteracy rate of 76% for men and 54% for women, but here in Canada this community is the most successful in terms of completing their secondary school studies.

4. **Economic resources**

The statistics show that our community is at an economic disadvantage in comparison to other groups. This is not exclusive to the Hispanic community and neither can it be used as a reason to justify early school leaving among our students. As a counter-example to this premise, one can consider the school in Scarborough that achieved the highest educational standards in Toronto and where the average annual family income was $12,000.

5. **Attitude**

Hispanic youth is more prone to early school leaving due to the problem of “attitude”. The dictionary defines attitude as a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person's behavior. This premise is difficult to debate and it could be the explanation of our ills, since it is a combination of things that may be acting to limit our community and the failure of our students would only be a reflection of what is happening internally.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the factors that we want to use to explain this tendency to leave school early are things that present themselves in other communities as well. In spite of these, these groups achieve success in terms of successfully completing their schooling.

Therefore, we have to look only to the attitude in our community and project to our children a positive one so that they will feel proud of speaking Spanish and will successfully engage in the education system.
Whenever school dropouts are discussed, a multitude of causes and factors are addressed. Among them are learning challenges, lack of English language skills, family characteristics, and economic conditions among others. These are often mentioned without acknowledging that they are a factor in almost every ethnic minority group’s experiences.

Therefore, I believe that the problem can be explained through the lens of attitude. Attitude can be understood as a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person’s behavior. In this sense, following U.S. researcher Gordon Allport, attitude can be considered as a social motivator.

In simpler terms, attitude is that way in which we face like and it composed of three fundamental components: cognitive, affective and behavioral. One requires a collection of knowledge, emotional strength and appropriate behaviour. In order to achieve of change of attitude among our youth and to avoid the problem of early school leaving we need to strengthen these three aspects recognizing that the best place to do this is within the family unit. How can we expect that our children take an interest in school if we ourselves do not assign it the value it merits?

The cognitive aspect must be addressed from a very early age and encouragement to read is an excellent approach. How do we expect our children to love literature if there are no books at home, if we don’t read the newspaper or if we never visit the library? Our Latin America is rich in history and traditions that are important to transmit to our children, not only so they will know their roots but also to impart to them the contributions that our culture has made to the world.

The affective aspect is fundamental in the changing of attitudes because if one has a positive self esteem one will feel capable to face any challenges,
this same positivity will emerge in the face of adversity. In order to improve the affective aspect we need to praise our children when they do well, this encourages them and lets them know their value. I always recall the words of a friend: “There is no small victory or big failure.”

The behavioral aspect is the complementary aspect to shift in attitude. As Hispanics we are known for being affectionate, but this needs to be demonstrated with respect that leads us to develop a certain conduct. The simple act of greeting signals a sign of respect towards others and if we respect others we will earn their respect as well.

We need to work on these three areas in our homes with our children. They will need it for their academic success. We need to re-evaluate ourselves as individuals, families and communities. We are an ethnic group rich in diversity, culture and history. Our language is the third most spoken in the world, behind Chinese and English, as well as being the most expanding one.

In closing, our countries are known the world over. Few people have not hear or danced to our music, or spoken the word “amigo.” We need to realize that we are as capable as any other community.
The story of an adolescent

Mirna Concha  
Heritage Network

Tania was 14 years old when she arrived in Toronto in August of 2004. It was the first time that she had left her country of origin. She left behind friends, family, culture, environment and language. She had had some marginal exposure to English but did not speak the language. In Chile, she was at the top of her class. Loved, accepted and acknowledged by her peers, Tania belonged to the Scout troop in her city.

She was a born leader with the emotional support of a large extended family, typical of our Latin American culture. In the first week of September—having only arrived days earlier—Tania had to write an exam to determine her capacity in a language she could not understand and ultimately her future, her career and the path she would take to get there, be that university studies, a short postsecondary career or direct incorporation into the labor force.

At that moment, as she was entering adolescence, her new environment weighed on her like a ton of bricks. Everything was new. A new “coming into the world”. Naked as on the day of her physical birth, unprotected, lacking tools and armor and this time about to begin high school, the most challenging educational stage for Canadian students where everything around them tests their being and values, often forcing them to adopt personal characteristics and behaviors as defenses mechanisms in order to be accepted and survive.

At this stage of life she lived in an unwelcoming, distant and cold system—so different from our Latino culture—where children at 14 are considered adults and provided with all the freedoms for which they are grossly unprepared all the while enduring the natural upheaval of the transition from elementary school. A system that lacks the support of culturally representative, adequately prepared guidance counselors who might be able to identify with the problems that our young people encounter and listen to their concerns and anxieties.

The pressure and stress on Tania begin to build up slowly. Isolation, loneliness were shortly followed by a diagnosis of chronic depression. Every member of
the family struggled to enter into their new environment. Miscommunication and problems related to settlement in a new country were not absent. Tania soon began to engage in self-injury by cutting and was taken to the hospital a number of times—on one occasion—she was admitted to the psychiatric ward for 72 hours, as a precautionary measure.

Tania could no longer endure her internal pain, her loneliness, her anxiety and she felt she needed to free her mind and body somehow. Encounters with Emergency Services that the family had previously only seen on television became a shocking and painful reality: Tania was removed from her home in a straitjacket, amidst a nervous breakdown, one of the many episodes that marked her family life.

As for drugs—so accessible in young people’s environments and massively consumed in secondary schools—Tania was a captive “client”. Then came the alcohol and late nights, pain, uncertainty and tears not knowing what she was doing, where or with whom.

The act of immigration in search of a better future was doubtful now and the young girl who in Chile seemed to have a bright future with a university career was now lost in an unknown world, in a difficult stage of life, a time of definitions, self mutations of body and mind, questioning and criticism where the accumulated burdens of growing up and life itself begin to bloom, to be questioned, to hurt, to be rationalized, to be assumed. In short, it is the cruelest entrance towards maturity.

The Canadian economic system includes the income of children’s labor as soon as they are old enough to deliver neighborhood newspapers. Jobs in fast food restaurants and clothing retail shops are available to young people from the age of 15, coincidently the same age at which they are beginning secondary school studies and only one year away from being able to be independent legally, by a law that guarantees their independence and disarms parents of their authority.

Making money becomes the most relevant challenge. The “reward” depends on a tempting “help wanted” notice available in abundance. A paycheque arrives every two weeks and gives “liberty” and “independence” that our Latin American culture does not consider. Everything is new and enticing for our young people, more importantly, it is at this stage where the exploration of the world begins.

For Tania, abandoning her secondary school studies was a logical and obvious consequence that went hand-in-hand with her leaving her home. Many years have passed. One episode involving drugs and alcohol was the final blow to the
family with the parents facing their own challenges of settlement. Unlike other youth, Tania survived.

With dedication, love, patience, dialogue, empathy, tolerance and acknowledgement, today, at 17 years of age (but with many more years of lived experiences) she has accepted alternative medical treatments. She is not avoiding her pain and suffering, she is healing her social, she has redrawn her path, recovered her self-esteem. She has stopped using drugs and alcohol. Tania is reconciling with herself, her environment, accepting her individuality in the birth of her new identity that emerges out of facing suffering, loneliness and the darkest parts of life.

At almost 18, Tania returned to her home. Today, she is working in a fast food restaurant and is determined to return to her high school studies.
Academic expectations of Spanish speaking students are particularly lower in math and science courses than in other areas. Many teachers and guidance counselors do not encourage students in this community to excel or to do well in these subjects, nor in the later school years to select these courses, particularly at the university bound level. Some students not only would enjoy and do well in these courses but may find an attractive career path that would encourage them to stay in school and pursue higher education.

Newcomer families and parents are too busy with immediate needs of employment, language, and adaptation, to engage in following up with the new school system. To do so can take many years. Understanding the support system, the potential biases, the deadlines and the orientation students are getting is complex and often requires sophisticated language. Students thus miss opportunities for personal help and guidance, and this increases the risk of interacting with the school's authorities through disciplinary situations or by accepting less than average standard from all parts involved. Students whose interests and best subjects are in the areas of Math and Science, once discouraged, will find their links to school weakened and then broken.

Among those students that stay in school many miss out in opportunities to attend higher education because of lack of understanding of the registration process, required courses, deadlines, and the options for scholarships, and with it the opportunity for a rewarding post secondary career.

Individualized help and tutoring can have excellent results when done regularly and by well trained volunteers who believe in their students’ ability to learn. A good example is what JUMP Math tutoring is achieving with inner city students in Toronto. Developed by John Mighton, the author of “The Myth of Ability: Nurturing Mathematical Talent in Every Child”.

Ana Csillag
Mathematics and physics teacher, Toronto District School Board
Best results are achieved with early support in Mathematics. This guarantees a solid foundation that empowers students to have the option of succeeding and continuing to study Math and Sciences, enjoying these subjects and finding a connection to school through them. In my teaching in the Toronto Board often times I got students who did not trust their own abilities, because one or several former teachers had given them negative feedback, or had lacked constructive attention.

Often, that feedback had focused on the mistakes students had made, instead of praising the progress, or the creative thinking in an unexpected answer that could have been a legitimate option (even if not under the circumstances at hand). Both in Science and in Mathematics, once students’ individual needs were attended to, gaps were bridged, and their assertiveness in finding solutions was encouraged, they just blossomed, becoming good students in the subject.

I found a similarity in the insecurity some young women had in the past with Mathematics and Science with some of our Spanish Speaking students. In both cases empowering and support can make a very positive change, training for teachers and guidance counselors has been done for the first group at the TDSB, but not enough for the Spanish Speaking population, and other new immigrants who then disengage from the educational system here.

Individual tutoring for Spanish Speaking students is being addressed in the City by different programs, such as the Program “On your Mark” from Working Women Community Centre, with a very good organization and success, and by the OLAS groups (Organization of Latin American Students) at the universities of Toronto, Ryerson, and York. All of them work with volunteers from universities and high school. Still, many more volunteers are needed to attend to the large number of students who need, but are not getting this help. The JUMP Math Program is willing to give support to Spanish Speaking students tutoring. There is interest in a group of Spanish Speaking professionals, students and members of the TDSB to work on reaching out to more students through tutoring. This is great need for remedial help.

However, a real solution would require other measures as well, such us teaching curriculum that involves the cultures of the students, and training teachers and guidance counselors on the specific needs of these students, which includes familiarizing teachers and guidance counselors with the strengths, the potential and the needs of these students, both in terms in content and teaching methodology. It is also imperative to work with parents to listen to the needs expressed by students and to address them together. This would result not only in raising the expectations of all those involved –students, parents, school- but also in the real improvement in performance of this student population.
The high school dropout rate is a long-standing, widely used indicator of educational outcomes among youth. Latino youth who drop out of school clearly face an array of disadvantages such as lower English proficiency, poverty (limited family income and home resources) and a disregard for education.

In general, research shows that on average it takes 5-10 years for students to reach the average grade level proficiency of their English-speaking peers. Recently arrived immigrants, who have never been enrolled in English-speaking schools, have very limited spoken English abilities. The challenge of learning the English language is a factor that can contribute to failure, lack of pride and self-confidence, and discouragement.

Spanish-speaking students are twice as likely to abandon high school because of socio-economic status as well. In general, poor youth that live in run down areas are mainly concerned with meeting their immediate survival needs rather than achieving delayed intellectual outcomes. As a result, educational efforts are overlooked or abandoned.

Furthermore, poor Latino youth, who are contaminated with the ills of poverty, are more vulnerable to peer pressure and thus become involved in illegal activities such as gangs and violence, as a way to restore ‘power’ relations. Consequently, Latino youth’s intellectual capacity is neglected and is instead replaced with: low morale, insecurity, disrespect, and hopelessness. Education becomes irrelevant, and the desire to complete high school is severely curtailed.

Another factor that contributes to dropout rates is the disregard for education on the part of some parents, community members and popular Latino media. The first and second generation of Latino-Canadian parents, like parents from other immigrant communities, had a lower level of high school completion rates. Many parents only emphasize working, getting married and having children and thus further education is dismissed.
Moreover, popular Latin media demonstrates that the Latin community prefers to communicate through music without culture rather than literature. In this view, Latino youth choose to focus their efforts toward finding employment and imitating the icons of popular media. Therefore, at the grassroots level there is an intrinsically cultural neglect of education and lack of support for those who choose to pursue it.

What can be done about it? As a first step, there is a need to initiate dialogue with the Latino community. In particular, parents and teachers need to identify the needs of the youth in the Latino community. More specifically, we need to know more about the processes of student learning, teaching practices, the roles of the counselors, teachers and parents, and student’s understanding of their responsibilities.

There is a need to encourage and initiate conversations on the meaning and importance of education within the Latino community, along with, the identification of educational resources for Latino youth. I am confident that school counselors could play a key role in communicating opportunities for programs and funding for enriching educational experiences to students and parents.

To restore Latino youth’s confidence, it is imperative to commit time to and support the development of English language academic skills by building a community of teaching and learning through supporting and facilitating language learning workshops. Perhaps, 1-2 hours of second language support per day in a well-established ESL program.

Additionally, providing incentives or rewards for high achievement and completion and establishing a mentorship program within schools targeted to Latino students are all channels through which Latino students can be supported. To complement this, the development of native language literacy should also be fostered and cultivated. The development of a bilingual or two-way immersion curriculum would be advantageous.

Equally important is raising the profile of education within the Latino youth community. This could be achieved by reaching out to the media to promote education, to support educational events, such as workshops and seminars on any related issues affecting youth in the Latino community.

We need to convey the critical “value” of education. Through these means, successful members of the Latino community could be invited to share their stories as encouragement for current students and emphasize the benefits and importance of education for the betterment of the Latino community.
In addition, teachers need to be trained to be able to understand, cope, and effectively support minority students. Teachers have the ability to identify needs, incite learning, create a supportive environment, build relationships, motivate students and bridge the gaps of discomfort and discouragement.

Participation and cooperation of the entire Latino community is vital. There is a need to bring together Latino parents, professors, teachers, counselors, school officials, students, and the media, to promote educational efforts and endorse educational opportunities for our Latino youth in Toronto.
Sowing Education Will Produce an Abundant Harvest

Mirian Delgado
Ecuadorian-Canadian mother of 4 school-age children

We live in Canada since 1985. We are originally from Ecuador. I have 4 children: three girls and one boy. When we arrived in Canada, we encountered a language barrier. Our children arrived young and learned the language quickly. As a mother, I also learned English with the intention of being able to communicate with my children. My son was successful in primary school and attended Central Technical School in Toronto for secondary school. Here he had a lot of problems stemming from the fear of gangs. In his second year of high school, he transferred to Bishop Morocco Catholic Secondary School where he encountered many of his friends from elementary school.

When my son turned 14, he began to work part-time in order to keep busy during his free time. As he started making money, he began to go out with his friends more since he thought this was the way to enjoy life. It was in grade 12 that he stopped going to classes. When I noticed his absenteeism he had already missed one month of school. I took immediate action and began to communicate more with him and keep a closer eye on him as well as expressing my concerns to the guidance counselor at school.

In spite of this, the phone rang off the hook-his friends calling for him. I tried to help him to raise his self esteem, I enrolled him in a Martial Arts Academy, but it was all in vain as he kept meeting up with these same friends until the day that he turned 18. That day some neighbors called the police to report that some young men were drinking and smoking marijuana in the park. The police found some money (from his job) and a knife in my son's backpack. The ensuing battle in court practically destroyed him and since that moment he wanted nothing to do with schooling.

He later returned to school and he was given a second chance to complete grade 12, but this was all in vain. Again, the vicious cycle of his friends and marijuana was stronger than his will power and he finally quit his studies again and
continued working. My son observed that making money in construction would give him more opportunities to be with women and feed his habit.

I tried to help him to see that without a career or schooling he was nothing. I told him that a career was a tool that he could carry with him all his life, that he should work hard to achieve his dreams, and that the decisions that he made today would have repercussions tomorrow. But this was all in vain. My son sunk deeper into his vice and made more and more mistaken choices.

If Hispanic youth tend to associate with others of the same ethnic group and in these spaces share that which comes easy—such as vices—they will enter into a vicious cycle which many adults find themselves in as well. If there is no guidance or programming at school where they can work on their self esteem, learn to be leaders, join with other Hispanic youth to build a better future for themselves then it will be more difficult for them to identify their vices exacerbated by the lack of education leading them to be social burdens. There is a lack of programs that teach youth about their roots and how their culture can enrich the fabric of Canadian society. There are very intelligent youth (my son is the most intelligent of all my children, a true genius in mathematics and the arts) but without great effort or clear goals these qualities go to waste. Young people begin to destroy themselves and their families, since a child going astray affects the whole family unit.

The struggle to help a child succeed is a parent’s along since there is rarely support from the school. There are no focused guidance departments or psychologists, no programs that work jointly with at-risk youth, no system that cooperates with families, schools and students. This lack of support from the school setting makes that young people focus on socializing and other activities without anyone demanding anything more, losing their values and self respect, running into problems with the law easily and succumbing to widespread vices. Everything these young people might have contributed to society is lost. Unfortunately, Hispanic youth became yet another group to add to the pile.

Additionally, when one does want to intervene, the police are reluctant to help using the argument that the youth have reached the age of majority. There needs to be a chance in our governments that will increase contributions to educational programs beginning at grade 7, working with young people at 12 years of age. Working with them at this critical stage of adolescence so that they can be aware of negative influences and can choose the right things, develop strong character and determination to say “no” when they have to, get involved in athletics, music, arts, conferences and develop new skills and abilities in leadership.
Everything that young people learn and all the decisions that they make today will determine their success tomorrow. This is why it is important to help them to focus on who they want to be and support them as they work diligently to make it a reality. As human beings, we have the obligation to give the best of ourselves to help your children prepare themselves as the best parents and professionals in whatever path they choose. We must insist that young people understand that education is an investment that brings the best returns and that we must invest in education continually throughout life as we grow because this allows us to construct and live in a better world.
Changing the statistics of school dropout among Hispanic youth

Mirian Delgado
Ecuadorian-Canadian mother of four school-age children

To reduce the high rate of early school leaving among Hispanic students we need to work collaboratively with parents, schools and youth.

Parents

As parents, we should recognize that early school leaving is a social problem that we are all responsible for improving. As adults, we need to educate ourselves as parents, demonstrate our authority and earn the respect of our children, not for working and providing for them but rather for the quality time that we spend with them and the security, protection and love that we give to them. The majority of parents work long hours and we have little time left to spend time and talk with our children.

Education begins at home. We need to teach our children that even in our absence, we expect them to complete their scholarly and family duties and emphasize that when mom or dad are working they must use good judgment as responsible individuals knowing that all decisions have consequences.

Our obligation is to show that we are behind them and that their main source of support is their family. Of primary importance is honest and sincere communication that is free of judgment in spite of the mistakes that they might make. I do not mean to say that children should not feel responsible if they break the law or fail to meet one of their commitments.

We need to be involved in their activities as parents: know who their friends are, where they hang out, pay attention to their grade and be in touch with their school. Similarly, we need to teach them self-control and discipline in terms of what they watch on television and what they view on the Internet. It is important that they feel that they are educating themselves today in order to be
better human beings tomorrow and that they develop a high level of self-esteem as Hispanic youth.

Schools

Several things need to change in schools and in our government in order to change the current situation. School budgets have been cut, but not our taxes. For this reason, we must demand that the government budget greater amounts for education in order to implement participatory programs in athletics, the arts, science, conferences, music and dance.

Schools should have an in-house psychologist that serves students. If the problems that students are facing can't be resolved as home, professional help is a necessity. Often, it is necessary to support the student through family counseling that includes the participation of all family members. Schools should work collaboratively with parents, and teachers should communicate any absences and behavioral changes to parents.

Young people spend most of their day at school, and this time should be the most productive for them. It should be quality time where teachers seek to teach from heart-to-heart, so that both parties are clear that a teacher’s success is determined by students’ learning. Schools need to work with parents to ensure that young people reach their goals and persevere in attaining their dreams.

Hispanic Students

It is essential that Hispanic students understand that the most important thing they have is their studies. They need to know that their efforts and achievements will be rewarded and that they can study in whatever area they want.

They need to understand that abandoning their studies will only lead to hardship and that only through overcoming challenges today will they have the tools that will serve them their whole life as education is necessary in all areas of work.

They should be conscious that having a career can open many doors and lead to success in life, that education is the best investment they can make, and that they need to work hard to make their dreams a reality.

They also need to know that education will help to make them feel content with themselves because a lack of education will often lead them to make irreparable mistakes. A good education, however, will open up their understanding and improve communication with their families and the rest of society.
Having a career in the area of their choice is the root of a tree from which they will harvest and eat from for many years to come. Hispanic youth need to press on and dream, dream big dreams and work hard to reach them and overcome the barrier of education. It will not be easy but it is possible, it will require effort, perseverance and the desire in their heart to achieve.
Initial Findings and Future Goals of Proyecto Latino: Inquiring into the Experiences of Latino/a Students in Toronto’s Public High Schools

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The troubling statistics that inspired this book present educators with the challenge of how to engage students of Latin American heritage in order to improve their success in schools. Addressing this challenge is not only about identifying gaps, but also about understanding the dynamics that shape Latino/a student engagement and developing strategies for enhancing students’ experience. This challenge is compounded by a lack of research on the experiences of Latino/a students in the context of either Toronto schools in particular or Canadian schools more generally. This is in contrast to the wealth of research on the experiences of Latinos/as in US schools, which has evolved for several decades (Díaz-Soto, 2007). Yet, whether this research might help us to better understand the experiences of Latinos/as in the Canadian context has not been explored.

The political, cultural, and economic conditions that define the context of immigration significantly affect the ways in which different groups of immigrants and subsequent generations experience migration (Zhou, 1997). There are significant variations in the patterns of migration, historical presence, and the contemporary demographics of Latinos/as in Canada (Goldring, 2006). In order to develop strategies for improving student engagement and academic success, it is imperative to develop a more nuanced understanding of the particular experiences of Latinos/as in Canadian schools. Indeed, it is crucial to explore how Latino/a students themselves experience and make meaning of their schooling experiences.
Proyecto Latino

With this conviction, a group of researchers at the Centre for Urban Schooling at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, in collaboration with the Office of Student and Community Equity of the Toronto District School Board, initiated “Proyecto Latino.” This research explores how Latino/a students explain the factors that influence their experiences in schools. We are exploring how Latino/a students define student engagement and what they identify as ways to improve their own educational experience and support their achievement and success.

In Spring 2009, approximately sixty students from six high schools across Toronto provided their perspectives on their schooling experiences and academic engagement through focus groups and interviews. The study participants brought a wide range of experiences, including differences in generational status, linguistic ability, socio-economic class, and academic success. They identified with a range of countries of origin, and a number of participants were Canadian-born.

While the student participants in ‘Proyecto Latino’ represented a wide range of experiences, there are several crosscutting themes emerging from our data analysis that are related to issues of academic engagement and success. The following excerpts from student interviews address three of these themes: language barriers, racism and stereotypes, and supportive adult relationships at school. These initial findings begin to offer some insight into how students explain the social and academic challenges that impact their schooling experiences.

Language Barriers

Participants described how limited English language skills presented a major challenge, whether for themselves or for other Spanish-speaking students. In particular, students identified experiences with teachers who were unsupportive of their English language learning needs, hindering their academic engagement. One student described (translated from Spanish by the authors) how such negative classroom experiences lowered her scholastic confidence and led her to stop attending some of her classes:

*I like to participate a lot...I am always talking...I had some opinion about the topic that the teacher was discussing in class and*
I wanted to talk about it, right? I couldn’t keep back the desire to say something about it because I express my thoughts a lot. So, I was saying what I thought, but she didn’t understand me and kept saying: “We don’t understand you. What are you saying? … I keep repeating myself and she says: “No, no, we don’t understand you.” I feel bad. I don’t feel like coming to school. In fact, I don’t come to school in the morning anymore. I only go to my ESL class.

This student, like many others in the study, faced the triple burden of adjusting to a new environment, learning new content, while at the same time learning a new language. The negative attitudes engendered by her teacher exacerbated her language barriers even further, alienating her from the classroom. It is crucial to better understand how students experience language barriers and identify the supports they need for improving their language skills.

Racism and Stereotypes

Students identified racism as an overt and ever-present reality in their schools. As one student recounts in the excerpt below, some teachers make explicitly racialized comments that denigrate students and their experience:

So she was saying she didn’t like Latinos, and she’s a [...] teacher? And so when she would say things like, ”I don’t like Latinos,” would she say this out loud to students? When she was in the hallways and we were there in the hallway, sitting… she was like, she passed and she was like, ”Oh man, what a lot of Latinos, I hate Latinos!”

Such openly xenophobic remarks are a tremendous barrier to students’ ability to engage their school environment. Some students reported that although they were not directly victims of racism, they encountered many instances in which others had inaccurate and negative preconceptions about Latino/as:

People think that every Spanish guy or anything like that is going into like, gardening, or is going to be a janitor…But, if they like, say something like that, it’s probably, obviously a stereotype, right?

Stereotypes of sloth, low intelligence, and futures in menial occupations can be detrimental to the academic motivation and aspiration of Latino/a students. These deficit views do not necessarily translate into
academic disengagement (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2001). It is important, in fact, to probe further into the ways in which academically successful Latino/a youths confront and cope with racism and stereotypes at school.

**Supportive Adult Relationships at School**

The most consistent theme across the data so far has to do with how student participants describe the importance of supportive adult relationships in schools. One student pointed out that while caring and supportive teachers positively influenced her engagement with school, apathetic and impatient educators encouraged negative attitudes towards her education:

*It's just the fact that he cared and he tried. That really went a long way, ... if somebody doesn't understand, emphasizing, that, you know, that you don't feel stupid for raising up your hand and getting the class behind. And they stayed up. I remember a teacher who stayed until 6 talking to me, which was, like, not a lot of teachers do. There was another guidance counselor who just looked at her watch while counseling. And that was like, “You really don’t want to hear me do you?” That’s the reason why I didn’t talk to her. The one that I talked to never looked at her watch. It’s just little things like that.*

This suggests the importance of positive relationships with teachers and other adults in the school. Adult relations are crucial for fomenting an emotionally and academically supportive environment, and the lack of such supportive relationships may compromise students’ engagement with their schooling (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, and Martin, 2009). It is therefore crucial to better understand how these relationships evolve.

**Plans for Future Research**

Participants in this study expressed a great deal of interest in continuing to engage the important questions that emerged during focus groups and a desire to conduct their own research into their own experiences and those of their peers in Toronto schools. With a commitment from the TDSB equity officers, we plan to extend the exploratory research we began last year through the development of a participatory action research project that will engage the student participants as collaborators in a research study of the experiences of Latino/a students in schools. This exciting project will continue to explore the ways in which language
barriers, racism and stereotypes, and relationships with adults shape the experiences of students. Our hope is that this work will result in student-developed initiatives and frameworks for addressing the needs of Latino/a students in Toronto schools, with potential implications for students across Canada.

References


The meaning of *Latinidad* in Toronto’s Public high schools
and its impact on student engagement and success

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Latino/a students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) are among the lowest achievers in core school subjects such as mathematics, English, and science (Brown & Sinay, 2008). Moreover, 40 percent of the Latino/a students in TDSB high schools do not graduate (Brown, 2006). How do these troubling research findings fit into the internal and external identity construction of Latino/a youths as students (Fergus, 2009)? In other words, how does the *Latino-ness* or *latinidad* of these students impact the ways in which they perceive themselves as students and how others perceive them as students? Given that “schools participate in negotiating the meanings students attach to identity, the ways in which teachers and schools handle power and convey ethnically and racially relevant meanings become relevant to the conceptualization of students’ [beliefs and] behaviours” (Davidson, 1996:5).

Of course, Latino/a student identity is particularly complex because of the many cultural, ethno-linguistic and social negotiations involved, but as Gaztambide-Fernández and Guerrero (2009) point out, the resulting multilayered interactions with educators and peers influence their academic engagement and educational outcomes. Indeed, a closer look at how the school setting shapes the complex Latino/a experience would provide educators and policy-makers a better understanding of their educational needs and perhaps pave the way for the development of strategies to promote higher levels of student engagement and success among Latino/a youths (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009).

Why look at *latinidad* in conjunction with issues of academic engagement in the quest to ameliorate the precarious educational situation facing many Latino/a youths in Toronto’s public schools? According to Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001), focusing solely on academic outcomes overlooks that processes that produce them, which are the daily participatory activities in the school such as
attending classes, completing assignments, and interacting with educators and peers. It is the entire composite of schooling activities and the reasons behind them that work in tandem over a period of time to shape the educational outcomes of students. No matter how one looks at it, the ethno-linguistic background of Latino/a students cannot be ignored in this composite, as it impacts the ways in which others interact with them and in how they react to such interactions.

Various studies point to the prevalence of educators to group both immigrant and native-born Latino/as into one coherent pan-group of underachievers (e.g. Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). In the Toronto context, many of these misinformed educators are white, middle class professionals born in Canada who have based their perceptions of Latino/ as on the distorted and stereotypical images perpetrated by the mass media (Luz Bascuñan, this volume). While the media has the propensity to depict Latinos as dangerous and uneducated gangster criminals, Latinas are often represented as doltish and hypersexualized beings (Simmons & Carrillos, 1999).

Some educators then internalize these stereotypical messages and adopt a deficit frame of thinking that essentializes Latino/a youths with attributes of inability and laxity (Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens, 2005). The combination of such deficit thinking and the Eurocentric teacher education programs that many of these educators graduate from result in a disconnection from a meaningful comprehension of the educational needs of their Latino/a students, both immigrant and Canadian-born (Simmons et. al., 2000).

The resulting disconnect then presents Latino/a youths with the “quandaries and paradoxes of prejudice, paternalism, or personal dissonance, and their effects on identity” (Quiroz, 2001: 335). How do these Latino/a youths understand and enact their latinidad as students, especially in the face of the predominant stereotypes that situate them into one coherent pan-Latino group of underachievers? How do these students confront and navigate the resulting educational challenges associated with their latinidad?

As one student states in an interview for “Proyecto Latino”, a joint OISE/University of Toronto and TDSB study, the deficit thinking of some of her teachers created a negative atmosphere that adversely impacted the ways that she thought about and behaved towards her schooling:

Like, just a number at that school. Like, like, basically just a student. There was nothing there and I just didn’t like the atmosphere. I didn’t like the treatment. In ESL, the teachers just, they just treated us like we were stupid and they have no respect for anybody. Like, yeah, they
This student, like others interviewed in “Proyecto Latino”, highlights the ways in which her latinidad was disparaged through the negative teacher reactions to her ESL status and ethno-linguistic background. As Ferguson, Tilleczek, Boydell, & Rummens point out, “negative school climate clearly plays an important role in determining school behaviour, both social and emotional, as well as academic performance” (2005:69). If educators and policy-makers are to work towards ameliorating the educational experiences of Latino/a youths in Toronto, it is essential to obtain a better understanding of the identity and academic engagement processes that shape their academic outcomes.

While there is no straightforward answer to the helping more Latino/a youths succeed in school, what is certainly needed is a disruption of the “dominant configuration of latinidad” (Chávez, 2009:165) so that educators and students can develop and maintain positive and collaborative relationships in the school setting. These relationships would then help Latino/a youths to successfully navigate the complex identity processes that come with their latinidad and work their way to augmented levels of scholastic engagement and academic success.

References


Early School Leaving: The Consequence of an Ignored Social Reality

Susana Jimenez
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This damaging and complex reality requires strategic actions that allow for the development of favorable conditions in the various contexts that affect the performance and academic achievement of children and youth in our community. In this brief text, I will address this question by examining three areas: parents, young people and schools.

Parents

Many parents in the Hispanic community have to face the inequalities that exist in the labor market. Employers often only extend temporary work or part-time positions at minimum wage and without benefits. Frequent unemployment and limited income causes tension within the family. Without a doubt, this situation affects the emotional stability that children need in order to be engaged and motivated academically.

Employers and the Canadian government do not trust those parents who arrive in Toronto with university degrees from other countries. They place obstacles in their path, including difficult accreditation processes for their educational diplomas and the typical demand for “Canadian experience”. This acts to frustrate and marginalize these parents who have to turn to lesser work for survival such as loading boxes and arranging merchandise in supermarkets and stores. Although loans are available to fund re-validation studies, parents cannot take advantage of these because of the uncertainty of being able to repay the loan since their first economic priority is always supporting their children.

Young People

As a result of their parents’ immigrant experience of feeling rejected in their new society, young people adopt the same attitude of alienation, making this rejection their own. They do not feel welcomed or accepted and understand the message of the situation as being “you are not from here: I don’t know you and don’t trust you”. This damages their self-esteem, diverting their attention from
their studies and affecting their academic performance. Their self-confidence is worsened when the children do not speak English.

The message that young people receive is clear: you are not Canadian either and the sooner your find a job the sooner you will gain that Canadian experience that you need to be accepted. Our immigrant young people arrive in a consumerist society in which owing a cellular phone or iPod means being accepted or not by their peer group. If parents cannot provide these “identifiers”, young people scramble to find a job as soon as they are able in order to purchase these apparent “necessities”.

They perceive that attending university or college as impossible. Their parents do not have the economic means to finance these studies and neither do they. Many of them refuse to graduate with student debts amounting to $20,000 to $40,000. Why work hard to complete their high school diploma if they’re not even planning on continuing their studies? From this perspective, it is better to stop wasting time y find a job once and for all.

Schools

Many teachers focus solely on covering the curriculum and do only the minimum that is required of them, nothing else. Schools should ensure that teachers are authentically interested in the success of each and every student.

Young people are full of energy and need to participate in some physical activity in order to be able to focus on their students. As such, Physical Education classes should be required for students at least two days per week, but unfortunately, this is not the case. Although there are extracurricular athletic activities, this is not enough. The only remaining option is to join a community recreational activity, but this is usually too costly for low-income families.

What can be done to remedy this situation?

Spanish-speaking families are known for the strong affective ties among members and rich small group dynamic. In order to help the children we need to help the parents, since working with youth exclusively has limited success. Anti-discrimination programs need to be strengthened since Hispanics are unfairly labeled. There are employers that offer them less prestigious positions and lower pay as compared to other groups.

Sports, as a fundamental factor, should be offered free of charge so that youth can be full-time students. Employers should not be allowed to hire youth that have not completed high school on a full-time basis, but only on a part-time basis to allow them to complete their schooling. For instance, they could hire...
them to work a maximum of 18 hours per week if they are keeping up with their education.

If parents had a well-paying, stable job, children would have less to worry about. It is said that the only difference between immigrant adults and Canadian-born adults is that immigrants do not have the right to vote. This is a false statement. If Canadian-born adults and immigrants were considered the same by the government and the labor market, we would not be dealing with the challenges that we are facing today.
In order to know the reasons why teenagers drop out of school, we must take a look at adolescence and the effects that it has on behaviour. The major determinants in this phenomenon include the familial and social environment in terms of the emotional, economic and social causes. It would be pointless to approach the issue of secondary school dropout without addressing the physical and emotional changes that adolescents experience and the manner in which such changes affect teen behaviour. The analysis of such physiological and emotive changes is best left to the experts in the field.

Nonetheless, we do know that the numerous personal and social changes that teenagers undergo in conjunction with a lack of clear rules and values systems result in mistaken ideologies that may interfere with their emotional stability. While there are numerous factors involved in secondary school dropout, there are some elements that play more substantial roles than others. Whatever the case may be, it is certainly a combination of such factors that contribute to and effectuate school dropout.

The percentage of students who drop out is lower if they are second generation Canadians or if they have arrived in Canada before the age of ten. While these students do not face language barriers and adapt to the Canadian society with relative ease, the former does not mean that language and adaptation issues will be determinants. The family environment is the most crucial aspect to consider when regarding the issue of school dropout.

Family circumstances consisting of negative parental behaviour such as drug abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence, or even the lack of parent-child time, engender negative and direct effects on the behaviour of the children involved. Family disintegration is traumatic for anyone at regardless of what stage of life he or she is in.
However, such a break in family structure is especially distressing for adolescents since they are at the stage in their lives when their emotional ties play major roles in their education and identity. Parental separation is not the only element related to family disintegration, incidental effects such as the negative influence of one or both parents can also be involved. Parents may not become involved with their children’s academic activities either because they lack the time or adequate language skills.

As a result, they lose touch with their children’s everyday life. However, once they realize that there is something wrong with their children and then attempt to intervene, it is already too late. In short, familial affection is a definitive factor in consideration of adolescent behaviour. Aside from place, age, and social condition, humans do require affection in order to carry on with their lives. The absence of affection, then, generates low self-esteem and a lack of interest in success, which in turn leads to the loss of motivation.

In their inherent rebellion, adolescents want to identify themselves in a manner that is distinct from their family. They do not accept imposed limits or restrictions on their freedom and wish to attain an independent identity. If these adolescents are unable to fulfill their expectations, they begin to view school as the hindrance to their liberty. In the best-case scenario, they drop out of school and find a job that frees them from school and family pressure. In other cases, however, the circumstances are quite perturbing. These teens connect with other youths who are involved in illicit drug use and other illegal activities and thus embark on a path from which in many cases there is no return.

The income of the majority of immigrant families is low and is not enough to cover basic necessities. While roughly 60 percent goes to rent, the 40 percent that remains is not enough to allow a family to live with dignity and decorum. Adolescents do not want to live in such conditions of poverty, which may even be worse than those they experienced in their home countries. We should also consider the materialism and the subversion of values that the mass media has propagated. Nowadays one’s worth is based on the brand names of items such as t-shirts or shoes. As a result, many teenagers prefer to work whether it is to contribute to the family expenses or to cover their own wants and needs.

The Canadian education system is based on meritocratic competition. Some Latino teenagers comment that they feel discouraged by the high grades that are especially attained by their Chinese peers. For example, one student gave up on his intentions to apply for a secondary school mathematics, science and technology program because he felt discouraged by the competition from his peers. He felt that his 85 percent average was too low in comparison to the 90 percent and higher averages of other students. Such feelings of competition do
not motivate students to strive towards and beyond such high averages. Instead, they demoralize students and lead them to lose confidence in themselves to the point that they give up on potential programs without even attempting to try out for them. If teachers were abandon the promotion of competition and instead follow the Finnish educational model of solidarity and collective success, dropout rates would decrease substantially.

Within the family circle, it is clear that what adolescents need is affection, understanding, solidarity, and harmony. What is needed from the government is the widespread promotion of an education that is more formative than instructive as well teacher education programs that provide teacher candidates with comprehensive technical and humanistic training. The selection criteria for those in the teaching profession should be more stringent while teachers, parents, and students should be able to participate in the decision making for education programs. Furthermore, the government should implement reforms in the education system through approaches that include the adaptation of the best best models of education used in other countries.
All kinds of families, all kinds of students
Making room for the Latino immigrant experience in education

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The published data regarding Spanish-speaking students and early school leaving in the TDSB is alarming for many reasons, many of which are addressed in this volume. As a first generation immigrant from Latin America educated in Canada and a teacher within the public system, this figure raised many questions for me, and propelled me into further academic study at the graduate level. As I went through the public school system in a suburb of Toronto, I was keenly aware of the scarcity of Latina/o students in the academic, university-bound streams of schooling. As a student and later a teacher, my ideas about the causes of this situation and potential solutions have focused on the relationship between home and school.

As other contributors in this volume point out, the issue of early school leaving is a complex one with a plethora of causes that interact differently for every individual student. We must also look beyond our Torontonian or even Canadian context and see the larger global political and economic forces that continue to commodify education and dehumanize its potentially transformative nature. We must also identify the cracks in the Canadian multicultural mosaic that this issue brings to the surface. In order to contribute to the whole solution, individuals and groups must address all these areas.

The home-school relationship is a complex one and has been the subject of educational research, particularly in the last 30 years. Homes and schools are the main influencing agents in the lives of students, and the collaboration between these two institutions can contribute to an effective and equitable education. Several authors in this book discuss the gap that exists between these two sites and the actors within them. It appears that an ever-expanding rift exists between home and school. As students enter higher grades, the rift grows bigger. The
question emerges: how do we encourage a collaborative relationship between parents and teachers/administrators?

In 2006, the Ontario Ministry of Education put forth the first-ever Parent Involvement Policy. This policy acknowledged the importance of parental involvement to quality education and included additional funding to support parent involvement initiatives, particularly those that engaged parents who faced challenges to being involved. The policy documents asserted that parent involvement was to be a new measure of accountability in the education system.

While this appears to be a worthy goal, one problematic assumption is that parent involvement has only a few quantifiable dimensions that when enacted will ensure strong and productive home-school relationships. This is not the case. The Toronto District School Board recently released a Parent Census that surveyed parents with students enrolled in its schools. This census covered a number of areas, and the questions on parent involvement are particularly interesting. The census concluded that parents of Latin American students were involved in their children’s schooling at the same rates as White parents.

It should be noted, however, that the census defined parent involvement around a limited set of activities: participating in parent-teacher interviews, speaking with teachers, attending school events and meetings, and volunteering at the school. The census did not report about the quality of these interactions or about their effects on the overall educational experience of the students or their parents.

There appears to be some dissonance between the experiences of parents in the elementary panel as noted by this census and what other studies (the Brown Report) reported about the educational experience of Latinos in Toronto. Parent involvement is noted as a key element in the prevention of early school leaving. What is occurring among Latino parents in Toronto, who appear to be involved at the same levels and in the same capacities as other parents, yet their children are not reaping the benefits of this involvement?

The TDSB Parent Census also reported on parents’ self-reports of overall satisfaction with the school system. When desegregated by ethnic origin, all parents reported begin satisfied with their children’s schooling at least 80% of the time. Latin American parents reported overall satisfaction 87% of the time. It seems contradictory that parents of students who have a 4 in 10 chance of not completing their high school education would feel satisfied with the schooling system 87% of the time. How can we understand these discrepancies?

Firstly, we must recognize that these reports are limited in what they can say about the real lived situations that they attempt to portray. The Brown report and the Parent Census only tell the numerical part of the story. They alert us to a troubling
situation but there is more that needs to be investigated in order to begin to approach solutions. We need to engage in qualitative studies on the school experiences of Latino students and their families. This research needs to include both the public school board and the Catholic board (where many of our students are being educated as well). This work needs to begin from the experiences and knowledge of Latino parents, students and families and work to include these into the way we do school in Toronto.

Secondly, we must acknowledge the diversity that exists within the Latino experience in Toronto. While there is a wealth of scholarship on Latinos in the United States, we should use this work as a launching point but work to define our own Canadian work. As we do that we must recognize the diversity in country of origin, race, class, culture that exists among the Latino community and that informs the experience of individuals and families. Acknowledging this diversity does not mean denying shared elements among all the different expressions of Latino lived experience in Canada, nor does it eliminate the need for the Latino community to unite for the aims of social justice.

This leads to the third point: we must come together politically to advocate for better education for our children, no matter our experience. Only through engaging with the educational system at the political level will we be able to see changes which will serve to improve education for all Latino children, but most importantly for those most vulnerable through no fault of their own.

In conclusion, we must work together to educate each other as we navigate through the school system and pool our creative resources to make our voices heard within the education system. While the educational situation we are currently facing as students, parents and educators seems bleak, we must not give up hope because hope is what drives us to continue laboring together for a brighter future for our children and youth no matter the obstacles.
Reflections on school dropout

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In addressing the issue of school dropout it is necessary to adopt a holistic and impartial perspective that considers its many contributing factors. The adoption of such a mindset will result in a comprehensive solution that will incite the relevant parties to become more aware of the issue and work towards responsibility and action. The dropout phenomenon that can be observed in Canada is a reflection of the situation in Latin America, in that the dropout rate has increased despite efforts to curtail it. The problem is that the root causes are not dealt with, resulting in the youths “expelling” themselves or even being expelled by their school’s administrators.

According to UNESCO, roughly 70 percent of students in Latin America complete secondary school. This figure coincides to a certain degree with the situation in Toronto, in which 40 percent of Latino students do not obtain their secondary school diplomas. Although the factors that influence school dropout are similar in both Latin America and Toronto, it must be kept in mind that there are also circumstances that are particular to each region. In consideration of the numerous elements that play a part in the dropout process, I will refer to socio-economic and extracurricular issues as well as the internal workings of the school system and the manner in which they affect youth.

Socio-economic factors

Socio-economic factors encompass much of the life of students. For instance, the economic conditions of families and the communities in which they live can influence the manners in which they are viewed and described. Several components come into play, such as whether the youngsters live with one or both parents. Other factors to consider are the nature of the interrelations between youths and their family members – are they cordial or are they hostile and violent? Other circumstances to consider are the education level of the parents, whether they are bilingual or not, integration into Canadian society, and of course, the family’s economic situation.
If youth live in a hostile and violent home, they will seek to leave as soon as they can do so. They will search for a job and not pay much attention to their schooling. School will thus become a low priority for them, since they lack a secure study area in which they can receive the moral support that they need. If parents do not possess a high level of education, they will be limited in their ability to provide academic support for their children.

The situation becomes more complicated if one or both parents do not speak English, since they will seldom be able to help their children with homework and decision making tasks such as choosing courses. These students will then feel helpless when they do not understand their schoolwork. Consequently, they may opt for the easiest solution, which is to drop out of school.

A particular phenomenon that requires further research deals with the children of immigrants who have not been able to practice their professions in Canada. Due to their dismay at the inability of their parents have been unable to exercise their professions despite all their hard work, these students often tend not to complete secondary school and pursue post-secondary studies. Instead of investing their time, money, and effort in school, they enter the work force with their minimal training.

Children in poor families have the tendency to work as soon as they are legally able to do so. As such, they can obtain whatever their families cannot provide for them. Such a disposition to work is especially prevalent in cases where there is significant peer pressure to have the funds for things such as clothing, cell phones, food, and parties. The system of employment in Canada allows youths to enter early into the workforce and influences them to abandon their future goals of a better life through education and training.

Living in a dangerous neighbourhood affects youths in two ways. One way is when they leave their communities, since such an action may translate to leaving their families and therefore their schools. Another way is through becoming part of a gang, which often leads to the drug and criminal activity that will likely influence them to drop out of school. One last issue that I would like to mention in this section is teen pregnancy. In this type of situation, teen girls are often kicked out of their homes and then tend to drop out of school.

School factors

School factors refer to the education system. Parents and students, especially those who have recently immigrated to Canada, require a clear understanding of the secondary school structure, which is different from that of Latin American countries. An example of the differences between the two systems is the way in
which school subjects are laid out. While in Latin America they are determined for the students, in Toronto the students have more of a choice. As they advance through high school the number of compulsory courses decreases while the number of elective courses increases.

Another difference lies in the levels of courses, which can be academic, applied, or essential. While taking courses at their chosen level, students may realize that their coursework is too difficult for them. On the other hand, students who take essential level courses may become bored when they find that the work is too easy for them.

Youth are given a great deal of responsibilities in making decisions related to their education. Although I feel that this is important, I do not believe that they are mature enough to assume such responsibilities. Parents should be involved to a higher degree in their children’s decision-making processes. This is already a demand from parents who do wish to play an active role in the academic lives of their children.

Teachers will not be able to get to know their students if there are too many of them in each class. Such a lack of personal interaction does little to motivate students, especially if they are experiencing family problems like those previously mentioned in this paper.

Immigrant students who start school in Canada in either Grade 9 or 10 and who have very limited English language skills have to work especially hard to catch up to the level of their peers. These circumstances can demoralize these students and influence them to drop out of school. If there is positive support from teachers and classmates in this type of situation, however, these immigrant students will succeed. But if these youths do not receive the help of their parents and teachers when they face discrimination and ridicule, they will likely leave school.

Finally, it is important to research the pedagogical approaches used in our schools to find out if they are appropriate for a multicultural population. To sum things up, the high school dropout is a complex problem that does not have an easy or magic solution. However, there are viable answers that do require the serious attention and action of parents, youth, their communities, and representatives of the educational system.
Reflections on Hispanic School Abandonment in Toronto

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The 2007 study led by Dr. Robert Brown for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) called our attention to a serious problem that affects Canadian society at large, and the Spanish-speaking community in particular. We are referring to the so-called “dropping out” or early school leaving. In the case of Spanish-speakers, what is alarming is that 40 percent of students leave high school before graduating. This rate is among the highest in comparison to cultural groups in the country.

Before starting our reflections on the alarming educational gap highlighted in the Brown Report and attempting to analyze its causes, effects and possible solutions, it is important to consider the connotations of the term deserción, which is commonly in Spanish used to refer to the phenomenon of early school leaving, and has a different meaning that the English term dropout.

Historically, the concept deserción has military origins. It means abandoning the duties of combat, or an assigned post or charge. The deserter can be of any rank. In the case of new recruits, the individual becomes a fugitive-someone who is running from the law. As such, the deserter had the right to legal representation and in certain cases could be pardoned.

In this sense, when we speak metaphorically of “deserción”, it is useful to ask ourselves: What rank do we assign to primary school children, or to youth enrolled in secondary schools and in high schools? At what point does early school leaving begin and what are its true causes? What battles are Hispanic children and youth fighting? Who is defending them and what is the punishment that is handed down for this supposed desertion?

There has been much discussion on the topic of early school leaving in Toronto, but little of this has touched on the responsibility of the government—federal, provincial and municipal (school district)—and their immigration and educational policies. Similarly scarcely discussed has been the responsibility of political and social institutions that have direct involvement in these matters. While it is true that Canada has designed development plans on education and immigration issues which focus on the settlement of new immigrants, it is also true that the implementation of these plans has been neither effective nor inclusive. This appears to be the case particularly for the Hispanic community. Undoubtedly, there have been regime changes and a deep cultural discontinuity that negatively affect the possibility of synergy among diverse traditions and visions of the world.

As John Porter indicated in 1966, in Canada there is a “vertical mosaic”⁴ that overshadows multiculturalism. This mode of relation reflects the power and status inequalities that exist in the social structure within which various ethnic and linguistic groups from hundreds of countries are immersed. Forty years later, Edward Grace Galabuzi, political scientist from Ryerson University, in his book *Canada’s Economic Apartheid: The Social Exclusion of Racialized Groups in the New Century* (2006) concludes that in spite of apparent globalization and cosmopolitanism, this vertical mosaic endures in the 21st century.

It is unacceptable, from any perspective, to hold students exclusively responsible for abandoning school. This situation is simply a symptom and not the cause of the problem. To attribute early school leaving to a lack of interest, poor attitude and even hormonal changes is a spurious and tendentious affirmation. So is placing responsibility solely and exclusively on the Hispanic family. If we recall Latin American history, the problematic sociopolitical situation, the unending civil wars that have abruptly generated exile and displacement, then perhaps we can understand that along with the Hispanic family immigrate the fears, the pain

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of losses, and the traumas generated by war and forced displacement. Translating all these factors into the Canadian social context, along with cultural shock, results in an overwhelming social and emotional burden. There is also a strong stereotypical caricature of what is “Latino” or “Hispanic” that sometimes becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Unfortunately, these internal and external burdens are trans-generational.

Perhaps it is necessary to challenge a common assumption: we need to recognize that there are not bad students. Children and young people are not apathetic. On the contrary, young minds are the most intrepid, curious and thirsty for knowledge. The education system, the lack of engagement and encouragement from teachers to students and the socio-economic and cultural contexts are responsible, for, in large measure, the loss of interest in schooling and prevent the growth of that critical conscience to which Paulo Freire referred. In this case, as Ivan Illich would argue, schooling acts as an impediment to education.

In terms of the contribution of the Hispanic family to the development of students, this frequently occurs at the emotional level and not necessarily at the cognitive level, although with little effectiveness. The language difficulties or barriers that affect both young people and parents alike complicate this further. The settlement worker on behalf of the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration should enter the scene and work in an active and effective way at the school level. This presence should be the link that builds that bridge of communication between students, teachers, parents and administrators within the education system. Unfortunately, these workers do not exist in all Toronto schools and very few are Spanish-speaking. This lack makes the situation even more difficult and traumatic for immigrant families, who sometimes are forced to relocate to districts with a high ethnic concentration, which only feeds into the type of segregation in the vertical mosaic referred to by Gabaluzi.

According to the UNESCO Follow-up Report on Education in the World, 2009 in 2015 there will be more than 30 million children with no access to schooling and 700 million illiterate adults due to the social and political indifference of

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governments and lethargic educational strategies. The aforementioned report points out that education continues to be built upon unacceptable inequalities based on ethnic origin, sex and place of residence. In 2006, this situation translated into 75 million children (55 percent of them girls) lacking access to schooling and 776 million illiterate adults (two-thirds of whom were women).

From the above argument it can be established that early school leaving is the shared responsibility of the federal government, provincial authorities, school boards, all social and political sectors, teachers, administrators and parents. The solution will not be produced in isolation.

Without attempting to make prophecies, we argue that if we want to avoid a catastrophic implosion in the cultural and educational systems, similar to the current debacle of the global economic and financial system, it is imperative to analyze, clearly and critically, the causes and factors of early school leaving. This will allow for an understanding of the magnitude of the problem as a whole.

More importantly, however, is the construction of a broad range of political solutions articulated at both the macro and micro levels that clearly address this problem. This means avoiding solutions that are not based on an understanding of the dropout issue, or a priori answers to poorly formulated questions.

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Facing failed multiculturalism: 
The Hispanic issue in the school system

Katalina Pattison

Canadian Council for the Americas, British Columbia

When analyzing the reasons why Spanish-speaking students have a higher propensity to drop out of high school, it is first necessary to take a close look at the definition of ‘Spanish-speaking’. What I outline in this article is based on the presumption that the mother tongue of the students in question is Spanish and that their second language is either English or French, whether they be an immigrant or a student who has grown up in Canada, but in a Spanish-speaking home. Although Canada is a country that prides itself on its multiculturalism, there are instances in which this ideology does not extend to the academic and socio-economic problems that affect minority communities.

Let us assume that a Spanish-speaking person has very limited experience with Canadian culture and language. Now, as a Canadian-born Anglophone, imagine yourself in their shoes:

Imagine that you are an eight-year-old Canadian who moves to a Latin American country. You have had very limited academic schooling or language training in Spanish. You can appreciate then that the students are very different from those in Canada, since they do not understand your culture, language, national identity, or history. Some of them cannot even place Canada on a world map. Their customs are different from yours and may even frighten you, and the limited Spanish you do know is insufficient to communicate your thoughts or comprehend the strange reality in which you find yourself.

School becomes quite difficult. The teachers speak quickly and expect you to comprehend new and foreign concepts taught in literature, science, and math just as quickly as the native-speaking students. You cannot afford to pay for extra Spanish classes that would help you to better understand the lessons taught at school while your parents feel
powerless to help you. As the days go by, you become increasingly
demoralized. You used to dream of a better life here, but now your
diillusionment awakes you to a harsh reality.

Aside from missing your relatives and the many holidays celebrated in
Canada, you find yourself facing stereotypes about Canadians that
strip away and dishonour your identity. The society that you are part
of is divided into various social classes and you belong to the lowest
one because of your status as an “immigrant” or “foreigner”. If the
negative stereotypes are not enough to make you feel rejected, the
country’s statistics will, because they predict a dire economic future
for you.

This example is not the only possible scenario, as there is a myriad of situations
that a Spanish-speaking person can experience as an immigrant to Canada.
However, perhaps there are English or French-speaking Canadians who still
have difficulties imagining themselves in such a situation in which they face
negative stereotyping associated with their educational background and
economic potential. It is this precise mentality that contributes to academic
failure. I would even go as far as to say there are some people who
erroneously and ignorantly label Spanish-speaking people as being less capable,
when in fact, a person who speaks more than one language is actually more
capable.

The problems and solutions are multifaceted and form an integral part of the
multicultural issue, but there are many things that we can do to help alleviate the
academic difficulties that Spanish-speaking people face. We could start by an
investment in compassion, education and settlement services for immigrants. A
recent survey conducted by the Canadian Foundation for the Americas
(Fundación Canadiense para las Américas – FOCAL) reveals that the majority
of Canadians do not believe that they have much in common with the goals and
values of Latin America, or they feel that they do not know enough about Latin
America to make any comparisons with Canada. On the academic side, an
increased investment in free language services would greatly help alleviate
language difficulties at school. Such aid would help minorities face a system that
could do better to evaluate their international academic credentials with greater
fairness and less bureaucracy.

Moreover, we cannot deny the importance of educating Canadians about social
differences, scholastic language difficulties, and cultural stereotypes. Children are
very impressionable, if they continuously see the internal ignorance of the
school system and its lack of resources for minorities, they will learn that society
views them as less capable and will actually end up believing such fallacies. This in turn creates a devastating and vicious cycle that poisons the lives of minority communities. Let's hope that Canadians wake up to the abundance of dynamic perspectives that Spanish-speaking people have to offer and prevent the intellectual talent among Latin Americans and Canadians alike from escaping through the discriminatory cracks in the system.
Between Success and Failure: Latin American Youth in Toronto

Victor Reano
University of Toronto

The Transformative Learning Centre and the Latin American Research, Education and Development of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (LARED OISE/UT) asked the general community of Toronto to comment on why recent studies report a high percentage of Spanish-speaking students who abandon high school at twice the rate of their peers. This brief essay argues that such students experience a social and economic struggle at the personal level that hinders their ability to succeed in high school.

With this preamble in mind and because the answer to the question can have a broad scope, the focus of this analysis will center on the Spanish-speaking students who move to Canada in their teenage years. The argument develops on two aspects of the students’ lives affecting the outcome of their high school experience: the quality of family life and the diversity of Latin America’s demographics.

A dysfunctional home has a direct and negative impact on the student’s life regardless of nationality, age, gender, social or economical status. I expect that an analysis of the statistical data on this topic will show a high occurrence of disadvantaged single-parent homes, a high incidence of social problems such as spousal abuse, parent abandonment and divorce, alcoholism and high unemployment tied with a chronic dependence on the Canadian welfare system.

The presence of these conditions at home leads to raising children with negligible expectations to succeed at school because they lack a strong family foundation, such as caring and responsible parents to act as role models. Furthermore, it is my opinion that in such broken homes, the Internet and television often act as proxy parents, which is counterproductive because this consumer technology was not designed to replace the role of a responsible parent.
Additionally, the issue of poverty on the home front opens up a special narrative in the discussion of early leaving students in Toronto high schools. It is my prediction that empirical data in this area would show a high incidence of Spanish-speaking students working part-time to assist with the economical survival of their families. These jobs, often low-paying, cause fatigue and lack of focus that can distract students from their educational responsibilities.

I am not suggesting that every Spanish-speaking student is expected to fail in high school because of poverty issues. I am suggesting, instead, that poverty acts as a catalyst for failure when the student lives in a dysfunctional home. A separate but related narrative, also dealing with the earning capacity of the young students, emerges regarding students who get immersed in Toronto’s world of vice, such as drug trafficking, robbery and use of illicit weapons among other crimes. These activities, sometimes economically lucrative, significantly accelerate their detachment and eventual expulsion from Toronto’s schools.

In my opinion, the social, economic, political and cultural reality of the various Latin American countries varies significantly despite the perceived commonalities in language and culture. I consider using the term “Latina/o” to group these high school students flawed since it gives the false perception of finding common conclusions, often bordering on grandiose generalities, under the larger Latin American umbrella. It is widely known that the standards and quality of education in Latin America vary significantly among regions and countries.

Furthermore, the gap between the high school systems of Canada and Latin America is wide and it is continually expanding, thus making it challenging for newcomers to meet the demanding academic standards of Toronto’s high schools. Consequently, the success or failure of the Spanish-speaking students who move to Canada in their teenage years is closely tied to the structures and systems of the Latin American country of origin. This situation is further compounded by the cultural shock the Spanish-speaking students face when they move from Latin America’s schools to the educational reality of a G8 country.

In summary, both the challenges at home in Canada and the personal baggage the subjects bring from their Latin American realities tend to coalesce into creating an environment fostering failure in Toronto’s high schools. The long-range implication of this situation might be the immersion of the failed students into an atmosphere of alienation that possibly accompanies them in adult life and merits further study.
In our respective capacities as Program Coordinator and Tutor/Youth Advocate for the Youth Program at the Centre for Spanish Speaking Peoples, we have had the opportunity to work with Latino youth in various capacities and as a result have directly observed the challenges that those students from the Latin American community face in completing high school. Although the causes are complex and many interdependent factors exist, the following article will briefly outline some of the most influential forces that in our opinion are pushing Latino youth out of school. It is important to stress that the ways these factors are perceived, manifested and experienced may differ for each individual.

One problematic reality that exists is the prevalence of educators and counselors categorizing Latino youth as underachievers. The attitude they express conveys to the impressionable youth that they are incapable of reaching certain goals, including post-secondary education. Accordingly, Latino students are frequently streamed into lower academic options and discouraged from pursuing challenging directions. The simple categorization of College, University/College and University courses reflecting apparent future directions restricts Latino youths’ academic mobility and does not account for the complex situations that many of them face.

Many are also watched with suspicion and pathologized, or criminalized, by educators and the general school system. This has become easier with the blatant stigmatization present in common media forms. Furthermore, educators often do not come from the same community or even physically resemble Latino youth. The lack of diversity among teachers also means that there are few role models to counteract systemic discrimination or to act as advocates on behalf of Latino students.

Newcomers to Canada are particularly vulnerable to academic misguidance due to their unfamiliarity with the education system. The language barrier
compounds the problem by restricting interaction between the school, the family and the student. There is a lack of understanding from educators of the particular situations newcomer families face. What is more, in recent years due to cuts in funding, extracurricular activities and ESL resources have become increasingly limited.

Ethno-specific services are almost non-existent while the present extracurricular services are usually irrelevant to the needs of many Latino youth. For example, despite the positive intentions of after-school tutoring, the service excludes students that hold part-time employment or have to return home to take care of their siblings.

Denied equal opportunity as well as access to services that meet the specific needs of their communities, Latino youth find their world being increasingly shaped by prejudices and structural limitations. Few overcome the challenges, others unable to break away from stereotypes, begin to believe in them. At the end, many students, tired of trying and convinced of their ineptness, drop out.

Solutions to this problem are just as complex as the causes. At a macro level, it is important to address the external factors that are affecting Latino youth’s environment, including issues of poverty and social inequality. Thus, large networks of support are warranted not only for the youth, but also their families. This means bolstering community agencies, social workers, ethno-specific services as well as the school board’s resources, activities and language classes.

Nonetheless, how do we challenge the prejudices that have inculcated a lack of confidence in our Latino youth? Firstly, we believe the curriculum needs to be challenged. Much of what is taught does not relate to the Latino community’s realities and does not address the identity crisis suffered by most first and second generation Latino youth.

Where do we come from? Why are we here? How do we fit into this multicultural society? These questions remain unanswered and the avenues for self-expression remain constrained. Without addressing these issues, the realities of Latino youth will remain unrecognized and the prejudices holding them back will continue unchallenged.
Failure of the students or failure of the teaching model?

Olivia Rojas
Artist/Public Speaker/Community Activist

There are several reasons why so many youth from Latin America who live in Canada do not complete high school. A few of these reasons are as follows:

- Parents of Latin American youth have very little control over the educational policies of the schools that their children attend.
- Parents have very little influence over the financial policies of school divisions.
- Parents of Latin American youth do not have easy access to information that would allow them to understand the educational system and therefore effectively advocate for their children.
- Youth have very little understanding of the educational system to advocate for themselves.
- An educational system inaccessible for Latin American youth because of social, cultural, language and other barriers.
- The changing demographics within Ontario have not been appropriately measured because of lack of accurate data therefore, the educational system has failed to ensure adequate support structures to accommodate the needs of students from unique populations.
- Many of these youth come from low-income families and are forced/lured to work out of real need or needs imposed by a consumer society.

These are just a few of the reasons that could explain Latin American students early school leaving in Toronto. There are many other reasons that I could provide; however, I believe it is important to ask students directly to express their reasons for leaving high school early without completing. Could it be their decision is a choice to resist being part of the mainstream?

The rejection perhaps of a system that does not represent them, that violently suppresses any question they may have, any doubt, any criticism that challenges any part of the society? Maybe their attempt to create an alter-culture is sending us a message that we refuse to listen to, a message to which we respond with criticism, judgment, indifference, and ultimately fear.
Latin American youths’ rejection of an oppressive system, which could become a political movement, becomes instead a nuisance and a liability because of our own inability to offer a positive alternative.

In my experience working with youth, young people did not speak about the educational crisis and the barriers they encountered as their problem. Instead, as one very articulate young person told me, “it is not important to me that the educational system doesn’t want me because I don’t want it. It seems to me that it is your problem and I haven’t asked you to solve it for me, but offer me an alternative and I’ll bring others so we can start a dialogue.” I am sure that this young person would have been an excellent learner in the right environment, yet he was considered a “trouble maker”, a “drop out”, etc.

Neil Postman, in his book *Teaching As A Subversive Activity*, asserts that school, after all, is the one institution in our society that is inflicted on everybody, and what happens in school makes a difference, for good or for ill. Yet, at present what we have is the imposition of a system that does not fit present realities and accommodate to the uniqueness of individuals.

In a rapidly changing world in which youth are dealing with wars, racism, parenting, and deadly diseases on top of the violence they face in the streets, with peers, with the police, the classroom is only offering them information that is obsolete, questionable and in disrepute. Instead of the failure of the students, why not speak, of the failure of the teaching model, teachers’ lack of power to influence positive change, their failure to protest, their failure to rebel against an oppressive system, their declining desire to have new, powerful, daring ideas to change the educational system.

However, I would like to ask: why not point to ourselves, who are timid to speak openly and disturb the status quo, afraid to become unpopular, or endanger our jobs and credibility? We are becoming passive observers of our youth in an unfair relationship of power with teachers and the larger educational system.

Latin American youth can show us the way to accountability. To admit the responsibility that our complacency with the status quo has made “school” what it is: irrelevant, obsolete, suppressing creativity and independence, alienating, arrogant, manipulating of fear and oppressive. To speak of why Latina/o youth don’t succeed academically in school -a qualitative problem- in quantitative terms will not solve the educational crisis that young Latin Americans have been exposed to.
If we recall, the first school program that the Mike Harris government vanished from the system was media literacy. This should send a signal to us about how education can be manipulated and become a tool to create passive consumers.

As Paulo Freire pointed out, “education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression”. The idea of going through school with the empty promise of a job, disconnected from the reality of the world, from personal, specific experience, as if that reality were static is futile. We are not validating the worth of our younger generation. We are rejecting their human resource capacity that could mean our survival.

Neil Postman states that “education as the art of healing the mind is in its infancy.” He spoke as well of the end of education. In my opinion, education as it has been is ending... or should end.

As a mother and a grandmother, as an artist and an activist, I believe that our children need an education that will inspire them, that will help them to construct cultural meaning and allow for various forms of thinking to be evoked, developed, and refined. Ultimately, I believe that they need an educational system that will stir in them the ability to relate to this world with respect and caring, an educational system that cherishes their soul.
Ten factors that can improve the school attainment of minority students

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Toronto/Catholic District School Boards

The topic of school dropout among Latino/a students is very relevant to the present situation in Canada and specifically to Toronto, where over 50% of the student body comes from immigrant homes. It has been widely documented that minority immigrant students from certain ethnic backgrounds tend to attain lower levels of school achievement. A recent study on the topic is the 2006 report by Dr. R. Brown, based on a cohort of high school students in the Toronto District School Board. While some groups do as well or better than the average, others have been traditionally lagging behind. In this five-year study comparing students from different ethnic backgrounds, students of Latin-American origin showed almost a 40% dropout rate (average is 23%). We also know from other studies that students of Latin-American origin are underrepresented in higher education. What helps some to succeed but is lacking for other groups, hence hindering their school progress? Below I focus on just ten of the most mentioned factors.

1. Family demographics

Monoparental homes, adolescent single mothers and abusive or unstable family units tend to foster lower school expectations, and offer lower levels of emotional support. Family cohesion and ongoing lifelong commitment tends to better promote school achievement. For example, the average rate of teenage mothers is about 5%, but the proportion of teenage mothers is close to 20% in certain areas of Toronto (NW, SW and NE) with a high proportion of Caribbean, Latin American immigrant and Aboriginal residents. This high percentage of young single mothers is similar to the one registered in Aboriginal Communities, Central America and the Caribbean, but higher than in other Latin American countries (10%). These urban areas in which “children have
children” fall within the districts where higher levels of poverty and underachievement is reported. Since the early 1960s, statistics show that children of adolescent mothers and single mothers have triple the rate of poverty than those from two parent homes.

2. Parental involvement in children’s education

In some studies this is quoted as a significant factor that can account for over 23% of the school progress made by students. Three dimensions are particularly relevant: school-based involvement, home-based involvement and parent-school relationships. Parents’ characteristics seem to play a very significant role, such as level of education, economic and social background and attitudes towards integration in the immigrant context.

3. Cooperation between parents and community support organizations

Ethnic groups that foster intra-group cohesion and advocacy and provide the links to facilitate a smoother integration using their own associations and social networks seem to foster higher expectations and promote higher school achievement among its younger members.

4. Motivation and self-esteem

The belief in one’s self worth, the motivation and desire to keep on trying to learn, and the promotion of resilience when faced with obstacles have been noted as the activating force in learning. Positive motivation propels learning. For example, several memory studies have demonstrated that what is learned in a positive environment is retained longer and used more frequently.

5. Cognitive abilities and learning styles

Students coming from other cultural settings (rural or urban) experience difficulties adjusting to the new methodology of schoolwork. In some cases, their learning styles have been conditioned to methods (like rote memorization) that are unusual in Canada.

6. Community and advocacy support

The social perception or country image that the ethnic group has in the immigrant community can have an impact on the ability of the collective to present advocacy for its members. If the group is perceived as positive that improves the “expectations” about its members, and co-operation with different entities is made easier.
7. **Raising of cultural awareness**

Students gain a much stronger sense of identity through reconnecting with their roots. By promoting the use of not only the official languages but also of their mother tongues, along with knowledge about their history and their historical ethnic evolution, students gain academic and strong emotional attachments that will support them for life.

8. **On-going parental support**

Parents often benefit from on-going support (parenting courses, parenting support groups). Research points to the importance of helping parents even more in the case of additional disadvantages. Forgoing ongoing alliances and helping students by helping parents more intensively seems to affect school achievement very significantly.

9. **Early learning, tutoring and after school activities**

A myriad of programs addresses the need to prepare (early learning programs) or reinforce schoolwork through after school tutorials, mentoring, music, sport and craft programs. All seem to foster more engaging learning situations that help students to acquire skills and build character and confidence in their abilities.

10. **Nutrition and neighborhood**

Balanced nutrition and proper rest is key for everyone’s health but is especially important for young people. From poor prenatal care and nutrition for babies (which results in poorer neurological growth) to obesity or eating disorders, nutrition affects learning, as do living conditions. Neighborhoods with social disorder, such as delinquency, social assistance dependency, lack of public transportation access and drug related issues, have correlations with poor peer relationships and lack of positive role models.
Crisis in the Latin American Community

Jessica Sanchez
York University Student

The diversity one can encounter exploring the city of Toronto is an enlightening privilege. The degree of multiculturalism is unique and rarely found elsewhere than in Toronto's social dynamics. It is a composition of multiple backgrounds and communities joined together to form a mosaic of colorful cultures that give life to this grand city. Throughout the year various cultural demonstrations take place, exhibiting their heritage, art, cuisine, beliefs, ancestry and overall expressing their story as a community.

These communities, who now find a home in Toronto, take a stand integrating themselves into their new society in an effective manner: socially, politically and economically but still preserving and maintaining a unity amongst its members. Unfortunately, the Latin American Community in Toronto fails to provide a strong, organized and influential presence in this mosaic. Our community lacks a strong foundation and unity which is imperative for not only survival but for evolution, growth and the opportunity to make a positive impact upon the minds of our future generations. This missing element instigates division amongst our own kind, debilitating the community as a whole.

A study led by Robert Brown et al. for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) that was published in 2006 reveals that approximately 20% of students who enter grade 9 do not complete their schooling. Furthermore, 40% of Spanish speaking students drop out and remain without a high school diploma. The doubling in numbers amongst Latina/o youth cannot be ignored and certainly cannot be viewed as coincidental. Instead it should be taken as an indication that the problem does not lay within the youth, but rather in the community as a whole. The drop out rate almost twice the average among Latina/o students is a direct sign of lack of strength, unity, and structure within the Latino community in Toronto.

The low level of unity amongst Latinas/os has impaired the educational advancement of this rapidly growing community. The main debilitating factor is that, as a community, we focus on marking the differences between our diverse nationalities, Mexicans vs. Colombians, Peruvians vs. Salvadorians, Ecuadorians
vs. Bolivians, etc., and ignore the problem our youth currently face. It is imperative that we eradicate these nationalistic notions which rather than unifying and building our community within the Canadian mosaic, instead promote division within our own community. Our presence cannot be blurred or tainted, for as a community we have much to offer.

The continuation of weakened ties among community members, will simply fortify the already existing stereotypes of Latinos. North American portrayal of Latinas/os is disturbing and heart breaking, the endless representation as gardeners, maids, pool boys, drug dealers and gangsters needs to be overcome. This cannot continue to be the image that we abide by in our newfound home. Failing to contest these social constructs indicates passively that we validate them as our identity, which in turn will augment the drop out rates of Latino youths. The message delivered to Latino/a youth by this passivity is the toleration, acceptance and promotion of mediocrity, conformity and failure.

The high dropout rate among Latina/o students is a community crisis that has overtaken and contributed to the unacceptable number of Latino high school dropouts. Our younger generation admires the wrong models of Latinas/os, and as a community we are responsible for changing this. Perhaps providing an immediate counter for all the misconceived and erroneous representations of Latinos worldwide is a vast task to undertake, but locally it is urgent that we stand up and make an impact.

The fragile state of the Latino community in Toronto is taking a toll on future development. Resources, role models, programs, motivation, mentorship program, guidelines and cultural pride are pivotal for the growth, productivity and increasing accomplishment of Latina/o youth. The logic behind strengthening a community in crisis is the trickle down effect it will have. As a united people it will embed within each individual the necessity to build upon a community identity, which calls for a strong and stimulated mind, so that it in turn the individual can contribute to the whole.

Ultimately, this will make a positive impact among the mosaic of cultures that exist in Canada. A stimulated and creative mind can only be achieved through education and the unified community will be the model that will provide resources and nurture this development. Youths in turn, will have access to an identity that can be adapted and utilized to advance as individuals. The ties between all Latinas/os, from every nationality must be notably strong, incapacitating the entrance of division, negativity and conformity. In the end advancing together as one while marking our presence in the city of Toronto will minimize the severity of our young people’s current state of educational failure.
A Community Worker’s Reflections on Latin American Youth in Toronto

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My experience working with youths dates back to 1987, the year when a group of about 200 local students began going to the Bob Abate Community Recreation Centre as a place to unwind after a long and hard day at school. Because of the language barriers that these youngsters experienced, they faced difficulties in freely communicating with the Centre’s staff.

The knowledge that I have acquired as a community worker and as a father of four children between the ages of 5 and 18 years has given me a great deal of insight into the major problems that affect our youths. I will expand on these major problems, which I believe to be related to the social context and the family, throughout the remainder of this article.

A recent Canadian statistical report indicates that physical violence among youths has increased since 2005. Furthermore, 12 percent of female students have been accused of violent acts. Experts point out that times have changed with respect to gender roles. While in previous years females would fight using words, they now physically fight like their males counterparts using punches. Young females are now aspiring to take on the role as the strongest member of their peer groups and even have the support of both males and females.

Adolescents have become arrogant beings who are defiant, rebellious, disobedient, and insensitive. They live in an electronic world that is full of lies and where competition, sex, alcohol, drugs, and exhibitionism reign supreme. Gone are the hobbies and pastimes that youths frequently used to engage in to build their character and knowledge. Instead, things such as nightclubs, excessive pornography, alcohol, the Internet, and television have become the main sources of enjoyment for today’s adolescents. These are things that they will seek no matter the cost, even if they have to resort to prostitution to obtain them.
In the past, music gave people a means to recreate their dearest memories. Now, it takes its teenaged listeners to a dreamlike ecstasy, which can then disconnect them from reality. In combination with drugs, this musically abstracted experience transports youths into an unreal and dangerous world of irresponsibility and unconsciousness. The negative and materialistic values that the mass media often promotes have resulted in a great increase in consumerism among adolescents.

As a result, they have become increasingly competitive in their quest for the best name brands, since possessing and showing them off grants them an identity and a (false) sense of security for others to see. Those who try to distance themselves from such materialism are subjected to peer pressure, ridicule, disapproval, and even rejection. As such, they live with great sadness, disillusionment, and depression, which in turn greatly contribute to the increase in youth violence and their withdrawal from school.

Because of family breakdown, many of today’s youths lack a father figure. The instability that this family situation creates makes adolescents more susceptible to the negative influence of others. Many teens choose to wander through malls, parks, and around train tracks and other such places in the hours after school. I do not know of many sport or cultural programs that are offered between 3:30 PM and 6:00 PM, such programs would help to reduce idleness. Additionally, peers with bad intentions will offer some of the newly recruited Macdonald’s meal, joints and that fake sense of security or belonging. Such factors subjugate these youngsters into destructive cycles in which major problems like substance abuse, obsession with name brand clothing and shoes and easy money abound.

As I reflect on this problem that has yet to find a solution, I ask myself the following questions: Are our children a reflection of a society that has lost its values? Or are they the product of the neglect from time-crunched parents and teachers? With a great deal of sadness, we see that two different and parallel worlds have been created. They are, however, by a deep abyss in which the comprehension between adolescents and their parents and teachers has for the most part ceased to exist. Adults have become focused on their roles as mere economic providers who are excessively dedicated to their jobs either for reasons of making ends meet or for attaining higher standards of living. Whatever the case may be, these adults are permissive accomplices to material comfort.

It is now time to understand and react to this situation. Through the advocacy of education and parental care, youths and the City of Toronto will have a better
future. There is a pressing need at this time to restore parent-child relationships with love and comprehension so that the children could get ahead in life. Even though they may not realize it, youngsters do need their parents and do yearn to share their concerns, doubts, and needs with them.

Using my previous comments as a foundation, I can almost unmistakably state that we should reveal such issues in order to raise awareness among ourselves as parents and among teachers, many of whom are not of Latin American origin. As such, we can work together to find a greater understanding of our Hispanic idiosyncrasies as well as more possibilities for their development. Let us widely disseminate the knowledge of our customs, needs, and national identities so that they may play important roles in the lives of our youths and in our community.

In sum, the mothers and fathers that work to support their families need to act so that their efforts do not become reduced in the face of social or familial dysfunction. This is of critical importance because youths become affected by such negative factors and then become detached from their education, which in turn leads to the troublesome dropout rate of 40 percent.
The school experience of Latin American youth in Canada: the three dimensions of the 40%

Daniel Schugurensky
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Educational researchers know how difficult it is to assess accurately retention and dropout rates in a particular school district. This is a complicated task, because it is not always easy to distinguish those students who leave school on more or less permanent basis from those who move to another town or those who only leave school temporarily but return the following year. One of the most reliable strategies to analyze this information is the cohort method, which consists of observing a generation of students since it enters the first level of a cycle until the moment of expected completion. This method was used in a recent study conducted by the Toronto District School Board and coordinated by Robert Brown. The report of this longitudinal study, entitled “The TDSB Grade 9 Cohort Study: A Five-Year Analysis, 2000-2005,” provides us with valuable information about those students who entered the ninth degree in the year 2000, when they had between 13 and 15 years.

After discounting those students who moved to another school district (because often there is little information on their subsequent performance), the Report Brown identified three groups: 60% graduated at the end of 2005, 8% had not graduated but was still attending the last grade, and 23% had left school without graduating or requesting a transfer to another district. If this dropout rate of 23% seems high for a society with abundant economic resources (Canada is one of the richest countries of the world and in the last years its economic performance was the best among the G8 countries), then it is alarming that among Spanish-speaking students the dropout rate is almost 40%. This means that for every 100 Spanish-speaking teenagers who start high school every year, 40 will not complete it, and will have to face several challenges in their adult life. One of them will related to the difficulties to enter the formal job market, because many companies only hire people with high school completed, even for low-skilled jobs.
Why is the rate of early school leaving of our youth twice the average? We know that it is not an issue of talent, because the birthplace or the first language of a person has little relation with intelligence. The reasons that prompt each one of these students to leave school are unique, diverse and complex. However, taking into account school and societal factors, they can be grouped in three categories external, internal, and relational.

**External factors** are usually beyond the control of teachers and schools, and include economic, social, cultural, family and psychological variables. The economic situation of the family of the student is an important variable. The Brown Report indicates that dropout rates among Toronto students from poor families are three times higher than those of students from wealthier families. In many cases, economic difficulties are related to nutritional deficiencies, to scarcity of other resources (e.g. books, computers), to limited contact with parents (who sometimes hold two or three jobs to survive) and to the need to work during adolescence, which can lead to absenteeism, to delays in the fulfillment of assignments, to the low performance in exams, and eventually to early school leaving. In many of these families, parents’ and children's educational aspirations and expectations of tend to be lower than in families with higher income and educational levels.

Particularly important in the case of our community it is the migratory dimension, which affects both generation 1.5 (those who migrate during childhood and adolescence) and the second generation (children of Latin American born in Canada). The former must make a simultaneous transition to a different society, a new language, and an unfamiliar educational system (with its own curriculum and school culture) and this transit can be uncomplicated or traumatic. The latter often face the typical conflicts of the adolescence with the added complication of serious identity crises. In many occasions, both groups experience discrimination and racism, and the problems are much more severe multiply in immigrant families immigrants without legal status. Finally, we should not underestimate the impact of consumerism. Sometimes teenagers begin to work not so much because of urgent economic necessities but to purchase consumer goods that generate pleasure or social prestige, and evidently those hours spent in the workplace compete with hours dedicated to study.

**Internal factors** include the official curriculum, textbooks, teachers’ characteristics, extracurricular activities, support services, the hidden curriculum, and peer interaction. Generally, children of Latin American origin do not tend to see themselves reflected in the curriculum or in the
profile of the teachers, and this can generate alienation, absence of role models, erosion of the self-esteem and lack of interest for the contents. Extracurricular activities and support services include classes of English, tutoring and other mechanisms aimed at promoting equality of educative opportunities for those students who are left behind by different reasons. The less support structures are in place, the higher the possibilities that students who are already in difficulties abandon their studies.

The hidden curriculum consists of a set of social dynamics that take place within schools and include not only the transmission of values, norms and beliefs, but also differentiated interactions - many times unconscious- between teachers and students. An example of this is the Pygmalion effect, which refers to the relationship between teacher’s expectations and student achievement, like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Then, if Spanish-speaking students perceive signals -explicit or subtle- that the school does not expect high academic success from them, sooner or later they accept that message. These messages that reflect expectations are also present in peer relations, which sometimes include dynamics of segregation or self-marginalization of minority groups.

**Relational factors** have to do with spaces and dynamics of interaction between the school and the community. Generally -often unintentionally- teachers and school administrators tend to privilege relations with middle-class parents who have a cultural capital similar to theirs, and who can express themselves in English without difficulty. If the communication channels between the school and Spanish-speaking parents are few and limited, if parents do not feel welcomed by the school, do not feel part of the school community and have problems to understand the modus operandi of the system, they will be the less able to support their children in their school work, to mediate in cases of conflicts with teachers, or to engage with the system when their children are labeled as slow learners or as having behavioral problems.

In closing, the amount and variety of factors associated with the high dropout rate of Spanish speaking students suggests that simplistic intervention strategies may not be very successful. Hence, both in terms of understanding the educational experience of our youth and in terms of proposing solutions, it is pertinent to distinguish between external, internal and relational factors. Since the problem is multidimensional, we recommend that the design of intervention strategies consider the three dimensions simultaneously.
A school integrated into the community: 
An alternative to address the issue of school dropout

José Francisco Serrano
Retired professor with an interest in the education of children and youth around the world

The issue of the almost 40% dropout rate among Hispanic youth in Toronto public schools was the catalyst for OISE’s open call to the community for short papers analyzing some of the causes and possible solutions to such an alarming problem.

It is true that school dropout among children and youth has multiple causes that could be examined at the individual and social level, therefore, in order to address this issue it is important to consider it holistically, attending to its different dimensions simultaneously. Regarding the case that we are dealing with in this book—the Spanish-speaking population in Canada—we can point out three main causes:

1. Family conditions such as poverty, underemployment, marginalization, authoritarianism and submission, and limited linguistic and cultural adaptation, which together contribute to the reproduction of dysfunctional communication patterns and the loss of motivation to enjoy the pleasures of being, thinking, learning and relating openly to others in a healthy way.

2. The conditions of the school system, where only a minority of teaching and administrative staff are of Hispanic heritage. This results in a cultural and linguistic gap, and hence the school’s capacity to interact with Spanish-speaking parents is limited, and this means that the communication between school and parents (an essential element for the education of children and youth) is insufficient.

3. Apparently, Canada does not have enough government representatives prepared to understand certain aspects of the multiethnic and multicultural reality of this country, as well as its political, geographic and economic relationships with Latin America. These situations inhibit the capacity of the education system to create the quantity and quality of programs that are...
needed to integrate successfully those minority groups that are most marginalized.

For these reasons, the Hispanic community - and particularly the segment of the community that works in the education system - faces a complex problem. I would like to address my final reflections to this sector of the community.

Latin Americans in Canada understand the reasons that led many people to migrate: we come in search of basic conditions for survival that have been lost in many Latin American countries. There are now 35 million Hispanics residing in the United States and in Canada it is estimated that there are approximately 750,000 Spanish-speaking people.

In many cases, individuals who migrate from Latin America only have their labor as capital. From early childhood they have learned that the factory, the field and the informal economy are the places to earn their sustenance. The school is perceived as a valuable and hopeful institution, but in many regions it is seen as too distant, not only because of economic priorities but sometimes also geographically as well.

In this context, it is possible to understand the psyche of our Hispanic community in Canada, and this is the first issue that we need to attend to. Those opinions that make reference to attitudinal dispositions as key factors in early school leaving are worth considering, since there are other immigrant communities facing equal or greater poverty economic and linguistic challenges who nevertheless are more successful at completing their studies in Canada.

We need to understand that a positive attitude is the expression of a good education full of affection, pleasant emotions for being acknowledged, accepted and treated respectfully in daily interactions. This is not achieved overnight, and it does not start on the first day of school: it is the product of a project that conceives education as a formation process towards autonomy that begins at birth. That is education in the broadest sense as postulated by the great Latin American educator Paulo Freire, who used this inclusive notion in one of his great works, *Education as the Practice of Freedom*.

Therefore, if we are to achieve an effective intervention strategy for the Hispanic community, or any other party interested in addressing the problem of school dropouts, we need a program of community development connected closely to school life where teachers and parents together develop effective actions to share with the larger community. Such program would allow to bring together the existing community knowledge about child and youth development, and to formulate intervention strategies that contribute to the development of attitudinal changes among parents and teachers in their relationships with youth,
so that their psychological needs are attended to in accordance to basic principles of love and respect.

The way is long, but even in the context of discouraging conditions we need to undertake what has been started. We need to seek the integration of the Hispanic and Canadian populations according to the Bolivarian philosophy. In this educational model, schools become sites of historical, linguistic and cultural sharing guided by the principles of liberty, security, prosperity and equality as essential human rights. This is the philosophy that should guide a program of community development that proudly implements its orientation toward multiculturalism.
Why do 40% of Latino students fail to complete secondary school? If I wanted to answer this question from a professional point of view, as a sociologist, I would have to point to the existing evidence that doesn’t lead to any conclusive reasons. Although we can speculate on the topic, we would need to pursue a rigorous academic study that still doesn’t exist. Therefore, I think that the most valuable contribution that I can make to this discussion is from the position of a mother with a daughter in the school system and as a recent immigrant.

Two years ago my daughter enrolled in kindergarten at a TDSB school. There is no moment more exciting for a young family then to see a child begin school. In our family, the event was so great that we searched first for the school that we thought best and then moved to a home in the neighborhood the school served. We wanted to ensure that our daughter would have a good educational experience.

I began to search other that dream school and others referred me to four possibilities in the area where we were looking at moving to. I called these schools to see if I could meet with an administrator or the teacher to get some information. I was denied a meeting at all of them. Two of the schools nicely directed me to their websites. One of them told me that meetings and tours for new students only took place at the beginning of the school year but only if my daughter was already enrolled at that school.

This got my attention. How could I choose a school if I couldn’t talk to the teachers, administrators or even visit the school property? My husband and I went to the one that at least offered us a tour. The day came, the principal lead a short tour of no more the half an hour without even asking the names of the parents or making significant eye contact with us. At the end of the visit, she sent the parents off in a flurry without even the chance for questions. I didn’t
feel particularly welcome in this school community, but I tried to remain enthusiastic.

A few weeks later, the beginning of the school year, I noticed that they teacher was harsh in her conversations with parents and that she stood at the door as if to guard that no parent would stray into the classroom. We exchanged very few words in that first year. My daughter was happy with her teacher. Although I would have preferred a better relationship with her and more communication about the academic expectations and my daughter’s progress, there was never really the space for this. Consequently, when in the second year I found that the teacher had a similar attitude to the previous one, I did not even attempt to build a close relationship with her.

At some later point, I decided to attend the Parent Council meetings. At these meetings I discovered that teachers and administrators complained about the low representation and participation of certain “communities”, among these Spanish-speaking parents. In their view, the school had tried everything to draw in the parents of this community such as providing translators and celebrating their special holidays. Personally, the answer to this great mystery was commonsense: Latinos know that one does not go uninvited.

I am not generalizing my experience since I know that in many schools there is a genuine appreciation for Latino students and their families. I just want to highlight that the commitment to and faith in the school system of students and their parents is nurtured through the lived experiences of the first early year of schooling, day after day. I think that any mother would share the enthusiasm and pride that come with seeing her children in school. Parents express the trust and confidence that they have in the education system in only enrolling their children and preparing them to go each day.

The task of administrators and teachers is to reciprocate parents’ good faith and make them feel welcome in their child’s schooling throughout the course of their time. This is not accomplished with a few events and the offer of translators. Everyday lived experiences are what determine in large part the commitment that is built between parents and schools. This commitment depends on finding a partner equally committed to our children, the work of educating them and cultivating the desire to learn within them.

On the other hand, future educational plans are constructed according to the possibility for success that a student and her/his family can anticipate. If the parents and students do not feel valued at school, they may become disillusioned and this may distort their perception and the possibilities of success. This distortion can act as a factor that facilitates a young person’s
decision to leave the school system. Furthermore, these students’ personal and family lives might include the economic circumstances of many Latino families in Toronto (economic insecurity, discrimination in the labor and housing markets and social isolation).

We know that families that experience poverty make decisions thinking about the short term since there are immediate needs to be met. Investing in education in the long term requires planning and investing over a long time. In order for Latino families to support their children in completing secondary school they need to emphasize that schooling really is a tool that can improve their quality of life.

In closing, I do not intend to attribute the high dropout rate among Latinos to the poor communication that exists between schools and parents. This is a complex issue. However, I do think that greater efforts to bridge the relationship with Latino families would increase their satisfaction with their children’s experience of schooling and contribute to a higher graduation rate.
It’s Time to Wake-Up

Johanna Venegas
Bachelor of Mathematics, Master’s in Information Technology in Education

The concern that exists among educational experts and community members about the high dropout rate of Spanish speaking people shows a new stage in the adaptation process of the Latino community in Toronto. The causes, the problem and its solution are key factors in the development of activities and projects devoted to academic excellence and the strengthening of our language and culture among our children.

We could say that the causes of this problem are rooted in existing educational, social, economic and family conditions. That is to say, all of the internal and external factors that influence the individual. Nevertheless, through my experience as a mathematics teacher, I have had the opportunity to share the lives and experiences of Hispanic youth in volunteering to work with newcomers and more established immigrants through the Toronto Catholic District School Board. In speaking with them, listening to their concerns, understanding their challenges, seeing them at times sad at others happy, and discovering with them their strengths and skills, I have come to the conclusion that, among all the aforementioned causes, the main factor is that our children are not prepared to be here.

Many of our young people face great difficulties in adapting to a new and different school reality that is unfamiliar to them. These challenges are exacerbated by the lack of academic habits. As a teacher, I have observed differences between the Ontario Mathematics Curriculum and the one in my country of origin. The operations are executed differently and the model is directed to problem based learning where the students are required to find different solution strategies and explain their logic and justifying their use. This is why it is so important to clearly understand the concepts, the definitions, and their respective applications to problems.

There are three main perspectives in addressing this issue, which relate to different stages in the immigration process. Parents and their children who are
beginning to plan their process of immigration in their countries of origin form a first group. This is a phase that all families go through: the parents decide to immigrate and attend to the details of settlement in the new society. This happens without including the children in the conversation or preparing them for their new life. It is important to talk to them, inspire confidence to share their ideas, recognize what their challenges are whether academic or social so that this reality can be faced with consistent room for improvement.

Families that are newcomers to Canada and are beginning a crucial stage in the immigration process form a second group. This phase involves the integration of their children into the schooling process, the choice of where their children will go to school and, most importantly, who will form part of the social group that surrounds their children. In this school system, where contact with the teacher is not as regular as in Latin America, we need to provide greater support to our children. Children say that when they get home after school they feel alone because their parents are not available or often don’t notice when they don’t keep up with their studies. They share their problems with the first person they can without knowing if this confidant is a wise choice or not. If this is what is happening with the emotional aspect of children’s lives, then the academic aspect becomes even more challenging since there is no one that they can turn to, they are hesitant to do so or they just ignore the issue altogether. Therefore, being informed, knowing and participating in the school-related activities, is an expression of our interest in our children and our desire to want the best for them.

Families that have been in Canada for a long time and have experienced an extended adaptation period form the third group. In this case, the situation is more complex because often the values and school routines from the past are on the verge of disappearing. Children do not find parental figures at home, and these are replaced by other things in their new country that call their attention, things that replace some vacations in their lives, like affection, values, family time, and smiles. Someone or something moved them towards a different path that they do not know how to walk, and they became trapped in the scent of something that could had been but in the end it was not.

In mentioning each of these groups it is impossible to forget each story, each work and each young person who talked to me. They suffer because they did not choose this or because no one told them how to deal with it. Many are sad because they see others succeeding at doing what they supposedly cannot.

On this basis, we can see that the Latino community needs more attention, particularly educational attention. Let’s not hide behind only the economic circumstances that prevent our young people from entering university and
pursuing a career. We are a passionate people with a great desire to succeed and offer the best of ourselves to the world so that they might learn about our culture, our language and our values. If we feel that we are not yet prepared to support our young people for whatever reason, let’s begin by acknowledging the problems at home and finding solutions for these.

How to do this?

There are many places that offer tutoring services for our Hispanic youth, some of them are free of charge and led by Hispanic adults. We should seek these out as well as other extracurricular activities so our children are occupied in activities that they enjoy, like sports, arts, science or dance. If they are not accessible because of the conditions we find ourselves in, then we will need to come together and organize groups sponsored by the government that act as an active site for cultivating excellence in our young people. The decision is in our hands, we need to identify the problem, find the solutions, and implement an action plan to reduce this rate.
Beyond Dropout Rates
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If you are reading this publication, you will undoubtedly be familiar with the bleak numbers highlighted in the Toronto District School Board's 2006 Student Census that links demographic data with student achievement. The report indicates that in most subject areas ranging from reading, to writing, to science, to math youth from Spanish-speaking homes are not achieving their full potential. In concrete terms, this means that many Latino/a youth are scoring below provincial levels in all major subject areas, that many are failing the benchmark standardized tests, and that many are at high risk of dropping out of high school.

To understand how and why this has come to be, we must reflect on what role we expect public education to play in our communities and what changes need to take place to ensure that our youth are given the opportunity to access and succeed in meaningful options during and beyond their highschool education.

The beginning section of the 2006 Census report indicates that "public education is currently in an era of heightened accountability, high-stakes standardized testing, and standards-based reform" (Brown, 2008, p.6). Rather than a mere footnote, I believe this statement to be central, and argue that this understanding is a key element that should guide our response to the report and the achievement gaps it points out.

In a study of Chicago's educational reforms of the 1990s conducted by Lipman, two major consequences of the accountability and standards-based reform trends were highlighted. First, it was noted that these concepts gave shape to the public definition of education, what constituted legitimate knowledge, and how educational failure was framed and understood. Secondly, the incorporation of these concepts into policy discourse brought the language of business into the education realm and resulted in the re-framing of education as a commodity that could be quantified, regulated and designed as a product (Lipman, 2002: 394).
In other cities where similar reforms have been implemented, a slew of negative consequences have also been reported (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000:18). These include a hyper-emphasis on test preparedness resulting in less time spent on regular curriculum material, the subsequent de-skilling of quality educators who find themselves teaching students how to pass the (standardized) tests rather than acquiring critical thinking skills, and a total denial of the possibility for multiple intelligences and skill-set strengths (Osborne, 2001:53).

Furthermore, while "standards", "quality", and "accountability" purport to setting high expectations for all students and ensuring uniform access to academic opportunities, these reforms have been noted to do the opposite by undermining equity principles and erasing race, socio-economic and gender inequalities (Darder, Torres, Gutierrez, 1997, McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001). This marks an important ideological shift that substitutes equity with uniformity, and as evidenced through the Brown report findings, this formula is clearly failing a significant number of students.

If we reflect on this, it becomes clear that the issue is much more complicated than the high-drop out rates for Latino/a and other marginalized youth. If uncontested, the "standards", "accountability", and uniformity-based reforms threaten to direct education further along a path that sees few students benefit and achieve their full potential. This will in turn, reinforce and deepen the social inequalities in which the Latino community is already embedded. Yet, the challenging educational climate faced by marginalized youth also provides a variety of opportunities for organizing and mobilizing for educational justice and democratic schooling.

As in other institutions, meritocracy is central to the narrative of schooling and academic success. Those who excel are deemed to have earned their success, while those who do not are faulted with a variety of characteristics which together account for their failure. Students who do not perform well academically or who are seen as disinterested and disengaged from school are, therefore, pathologized as unable, underachieving or un-ambitious.

This narrative, however, obscures the multiple processes involved in holding students back and as a community we have a responsibility to orient public policy debates towards a politics of social change that can challenge the current system and offer solutions to the structural problems that (re)produce inequality not just for Latino but for all marginalized youth.
References


School dropout has been a reality in our community for over 30 years

Fernanda Yanchapaxi

Universidad Simón Bolivar (Ecuador); volunteer at the Consejo de Desarrollo Hispano, Toronto

It is common to hear immigrant families mention that one of the benefits of living in Canada is that their children will receive a good education that will guarantee a successful career. For José, a 68 year old Ecuadorian-Canadian who arrived in Toronto in 1974, “it is not the same to graduate in Ecuador compared to Canada” and this is why “it is worth the sacrifice. For his children Alberto (45) and Cristina (43) “the sacrifice was from the whole family”. For Alberto it was not easy to adapt to a new country. His school life was “torture”. He now recalls: “others used hand gestures to speak to me as if I didn’t understand what they were saying. Of course, at first, I didn’t understand a lot, but later I knew what was going on and I could tell when [other students] were mocking me.” Cristina’s experience was similar. Both left high school in the 10th grade.

Tania and Jorge, also Ecuadorian-Canadians, settled in the city in 1990. Their daughter Andrea was 14 at the time and had one single friend at school. For her, “the hardest thing was not the subject matter but the behavior of others, her classmates and teachers. Andrea studied a lot but she would cry as she completed her homework.” Jorge and Tania went to speak to school officials several times.

They were told that they [the teachers] know how difficult their situation was but that they needed to solve this problem at home and that as parents they needed to provide greater support for their daughter. Tania recalls: “Jorge and I had two jobs and we would take turns arriving home early to help Andrea with her homework so she wouldn’t be alone. She was rarely home alone. She was a very happy girl, a good student and she had a great relationship with us.” Andrea left school the following year.
Esteban arrived in Toronto in 2001 along with his parents and two sisters. Within two years of living in the city, he left high school. Esteban, who had studied in the National Conservatory in Ecuador, clearly remembers that he decided to stop his schooling the day his teacher told him that he should take his time to know what he wanted to do with his life and that he could return to his studies later when he had figured this out. Esteban is a musician. Carmen and her husband came to Canada in 1990 and in 1992 their daughter Ann was born. Ann left high school last year and today she works in a fast food restaurant.

Early school leaving is an experience shared by many families and it is no secret that the majority are immigrants. There is no doubt about the magnitude of this problem or the urgency of finding a solution. Nevertheless, the context is complicated if we consider that early school leaving has been a reality in our community for more than 30 years.

After listening to testimonies of three generations of immigrants, I would dare to say that the issue of early school leaving should be treated not as a social phenomenon but rather as a social experience resulting from the colonial relationships that are part of the process of uprooting, displacing and settling of communities that constructs the social life of one of the most diverse cities in the world.

These relationships presuppose imageries (of class, race, gender, education, etc.) that place certain communities at a disadvantage and convert their settlement into an experience of inequity. This is apparent in the practices that define the position of certain individuals in comparison to others and that is legitimized on both ends.

Latino/Hispanic immigrant students have to deal with, firstly, the weight of the historical issues of inequality and discrimination in the host society. Secondly, in many cases, they experience a sudden loss of the status and privilege that they counted on and that provided them with a distinguished position in their country of origin (for example being mestizo in a country with indigenous communities). Finally, they face the delegitimization of their form of knowledge and understanding of reality.

In this sense, the high dropout rates point to the existence of permanent processes of colonization among cultures, the fallacy of multiculturalism, and the failure of an education system that has legitimized the relations of oppression and modes of silencing of our community. We cannot deny that the increase of resources directed to schools, the changes in the pedagogies of teaching, the broadening of new forms of knowledge and the work happening
with communities- among other things- are the most immediate and first steps in this process. These in practice will help to reduce the rates of early school leaving and help to reach a graduation rate of 100%.

Nevertheless, I think that the greatest challenge that our society faces is breaking with the reference points that we use to construct our daily actions so that we can then imagine different societies and a different world. As Andrea reflectively stated, “now I understand that the problem was not that my parents worked two jobs, nor that they couldn’t spend that much time with me, but that that was our reality, that it had to be like that because of the fact of being Latino.”
Stereotyped Latino = Obstacle

Catherine Young
University of Toronto

As a half Latina, half Caucasian, University of Toronto student, I found myself compelled to participate and share my views on why Latina/o students are twice as likely to leave school prematurely than their peers. My name is Catherine Young, and I believe that I have benefited from having been brought up between two cultures.

For the majority of my life, I was raised in a small town, not nearly as multicultural as Toronto. I attended a Catholic high school in my hometown and became more involved with the Latin community of Toronto at the beginning of grade 11 when I entered a local Latina pageant. Apart from my occasional month long trips to Chile, I was never really exposed to the Latino community, yet I felt an over-whelming passion for my culture. When time came to apply to University, I began to converse with friends from the Latino community in Toronto and quickly realized that many were not sharing my educational experience.

Upon being accepted to U of T, I attempted to find other Latinas/os who were also accepted. I created a Facebook® group called “Latinos @ U of T”. Within a month or so, I had managed to find 6 Latino friends, 5 of which joined. I realize that this was not a realistic or conventional way to find people but finding Latinas/os was not my main priority upon entering University. Now, almost at the end of my first year having read articles on race and education, a question remains in my mind: Why is the number of Latinas/os in University so low? Which is directly associated with the question: Why are Latino/a students twice as likely to leave high school early than their peers?

This semester I am enrolled in a Psychology course and a course titled Gender Race Science. Between the two classes, I have developed many ideas and learned many concepts that have helped me formulate a possible answer to these questions. Since the group being discussed is essentially Latina/o teenagers, I
decided to go online and question teenagers of Central American and South American descent who currently live in Canada. Of 53 questioned, within 2 days, 10 responded. When asked the question: Do you think you are smart?, six answered yes, and three answered average. When asked the question “Do you plan to attend University or College?”, one provided an unclear answer, while the rest responded that they were planning to attend, and one is already attending. The majority of the participants said expressed that they felt confident in themselves, however, some also commented that they cared much about what others said about them.

Using my data collected, as well as information from my classes, I’ve developed a possible reason as to why 40% of Latino youth do not complete high school in Toronto. I believe that it is due to a combination of factors including group difference, individual self-esteem and students’ response to stereotype threat, all within a largely populated stereotypical Latino environment.

Latinos are considered one of a host of visible minority groups of Toronto, and like minority groups around the world, they are the targets of discrimination. It is proven that people who face discrimination render lower intelligence scores on average when tested. John Ogbu, a Nigerian-American anthropologist, argues that the treatment of minority group members can make them pessimistic about their chances of success. This may result in them believing that hard work will not pay off for them ultimately lowering motivation levels. Logically, any victim of discrimination will face hardship and may suffer from self-esteem issues.

Using the conclusions from Mark Leary and colleagues’ Sociometer Theory, those with low self esteem fear rejection and therefore are highly motivated to manage their public impressions. If people behave in ways that will increase the likelihood that they will be rejected, their self-esteem decreases. This theory can explain why Latina/o teenagers may resort to conforming to an idea of what they think is acceptable in public. With the help of popular media and Latinos being the largest minority group in United States, Latinos of Toronto already have a preconceived image of what it is to be a Latina/o immigrant. The use of drugs, the high rate of pregnancy, and membership in a gang are some of the most predominant images associated with Latinos in popular culture and media. Although very much a stereotype, and not all truth, this is the image that many Latinos have become accustomed to seeing as representations of their identity.

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*Leary assumes that humans have a fundamental need to belong, a need that is adaptive. According to Leary, self-esteem monitors the likelihood of social exclusion.
People’s self-esteem also relates to how they believe others perceive them, that is, their reflected appraisal. This concept illustrates how stereotypes that are initially untrue become true through a self-fulfilling prophecy where people start to behave in ways that confirm their own or others’ expectations. Teenagers want to stand out and fit in all at the same time. By observing the actions of others and of those who they think they are expected to be like, they adopt others’ attitudes and behaviors as their own.

Joining a gang, for instance, might appear as a way of standing out but fitting in at the same time. Although street gangs are not nearly as prevalent in Canada as they are in United States, they still exist and will continue to grow in Toronto. In a report from Global National on May 2, 2007, police claimed that "the most dangerous gang in North America," the Mara Salvatrucha or the Ms-13, are now active in Toronto among other gangs that are already active. Teenagers who feel the need to belong, as a result of low self-esteem or peer pressure to fit in, might resort to a life in gangs.

However apart from the gang aspect, minority teenagers who fear that they don’t fit into a particular group that stands out, such as the Latino community, are threatened by the stereotypes to which they are pressured to conform or fear that they already have. Stereotypically, Blacks and Latinos are deemed less intelligent. This stereotype threat can destroy the motivation and self-esteem of a teenager who aims to be different.

Spencer Steele, an American psychiatrist, performed a study where he claimed that minority students who worry that they might confirm negative stereotypes become anxious and preoccupied and this interferes with their ability to perform in testing situation. For example, an experiment was done where equally intelligent black and white students took a test that they were told was unrelated to intelligence. Black and white students performed at the same level, but when they took a test that was to measure intelligence, black students did quite poorly. The anxiety of not wanting to fulfill societal stereotypes of racial inferiority in intelligence led these students to struggling with completing the test at their full potential.

Although I feel all these factors interact, I believe that perhaps one’s unique environment also has a part to play on how an individual will perceive things and what their motivations will be in pursuing academic excellence. A Latino/a individual who is surrounded by other Latinos who are overcome by low self-esteem, reflected appraisal, self-fulfilling prophecies or stereotype threat, may conform to these traits in an effort to belong to something. Personally, a large Latino population was not an element of my surroundings. The Latino influence that I had around me was my mom, abuelita and tias, who constantly
encouraged me to continue to get good marks and succeed in being accepted to and studying at University. They emphasized that it was an opportunity that they did not have. I didn’t have any other racial stereotypical Latino groups around me to conform to, rather the discriminations I did for being Latina I used as motivation to pursue my goals and prove them wrong.

I can only hope that it was not only because of the location of my upbringing that I am where I am now, but also a motivation from within to prove a stereotype wrong. I feel that if Latina/o teenagers of today can find motivation to prove the stereotype wrong they can create a new generation of Latino communities, and slowly the stereotype held in the United States will no longer be validated in Canada.

I also hope we can witness the number Latino high school student drop-outs decrease and can shift our focus on the improved rate of high school graduates and University/College students and as such can make the popular Latino aphorism of “Siempre adelante, nonce atrás” the new image of our people for ourselves and for others.