

***Latinidad* and the High School Experience:
Working to Curb Early School Leaving among Spanish Speaking Youth in
Toronto's Public School System**

Preliminary Version

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The milieu of students in the city of Toronto's public schools is both a multilingual and multicultural one; its peoples originate from a myriad places and present an array of different histories and life experiences. According to the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) *2006 Student Census*, 42 percent of its students from Grades 7 to 12 reported that they were born outside of Canada (Yau & O'Reilly, 2007, p. 9). This figure, however, does not reveal the whole picture on the multicultural and linguistically diverse fabric of the city's schools, since second and subsequent generations of students with families originating from other countries and cultures must also be taken into account. When the students were asked about their racial background on the *TDSB Student Census*, over two-thirds of them identified themselves as non-white (ibid., p. 10).

To affirm its commitment to equitable access for all students regardless of linguistic heritage, race, colour and creed, the TDSB established its *Equity Foundation Statement* in 2000. This Board mandate pledges a commitment to "fairness, equity, and inclusion [as] essential principles of [the] school system, which will be integrated into all policies, programs, operations, and practices (http://www.tdsb.on.ca/_site/viewitem.asp?siteid=15&menuid=682&pageid=546). The TDSB specifically addresses its undertaking of equitable classroom learning in its schools by stating that it will ensure that "educational practices are inclusive and reflect the contributions of diverse cultures, and that all forms of stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, racism, and violence against Aboriginal, racial, ethnocultural, and faith communities are challenged and eliminated" (http://www.tdsb.on.ca/_site/ViewItem.asp?siteid=15&menuid=7077&pageid=6173). As Schugurensky (2008) points out, such equity discourse seems highly promising. After all, Canada is a wealthy country with many available resources. Furthermore, its *Multiculturalism Act* (1988) recognizes and promotes the diversity and equality of its citizens.

This utopian vision of equity across ethnolinguistic and racial backgrounds, however, is far from reality in Toronto's public schools. According to a five year Grade 9 cohort study released by the TDSB in 2006, youths whose home language was Somali, Spanish, or Portuguese, had the highest proportion of dropouts – 37 percent, 39 percent, and 43 percent respectively (Brown 2006, quoted in Riviere et. al., 2008, p. 6). Belonging to a particular linguistic group, nonetheless, cannot be a sole indicator of school leaving, especially in consideration that students of English speaking Caribbean heritage reflect a dropout rate of 40 percent (ibid., p. 6). According to Anisef et. al. (2008), Blacks and Hispanics undergo severe economic and academic disadvantage upon immigration that persists across generations (p. 5). Gunderson's 2007 research on the Vancouver middle and high school system reveals that Spanish speaking students tend to perform less well than their counterparts who are both Canadian-born and English-only speaking. As Riviere et. al. put forth, these alarming figures are in urgent need of being addressed because by 2017, half the population of urban centres such as Toronto and Vancouver will consist of visible minorities (p. 6). If the current high levels of early school leaving continue to persist among people of English speaking Caribbean and Latin American heritage, the economic and academic disadvantage that Anisef et. al. describe will become even more widespread and detrimental across generations. *There is a pressing need to deal with this precarious educational issue now.*

As this paper will focus on the high rates of school leaving among Spanish speaking youth, it is necessary to first clarify some of the terminology used to represent this group of people. Although *Latino* is a term that is often used in North America to describe the various peoples from Central and South America, it must be noted that TDSB research reports do not utilize this appellation. Instead, the reports specify students of Latin American heritage as

“Spanish speaking students” and “students who identify themselves as having Latin American racial background”. These designations of language and race, then, are the manners in which the TDSB organizes its statistical data. Why does the TDSB not use the term *Latino*? Although I cannot comment on the issue with certainty, it seems to me that the Board wishes to maintain a certain degree of positivism with reference to language and the student’s reported racial background. Another possibility could be that the Board does not want to use a name that often comes with negative connotations and stereotypes that are perpetuated by the media. After all, constant newspaper headlines such as “Feds Tackle Vicious Latino Gang in L.A.” (The Charleston Gazette, December 2007) and “Violent Latino Gangs are Spreading across Canada” (Canada NewsWire, January 3, 2007), greatly contribute to the public’s negative perceptions of Latin Americans.

Of course, the term *Latino* also presents particularly confounding identity discourses that deal with issues like place, time, nationalism, and social class. What exactly does it mean to be a *Latino/a*? Who is a *Latino/a*? Perhaps the TDSB simply does not want to deal with this discourse for now. I too am unable to untangle the intricate web of issues that arise with the *Latino* name, I will also utilize the term “Spanish speaking” to describe students from Central and South America. I will, however, attempt to address the topic of *latinidad* when I deal with student issues of identity later in this paper.

As both a Spanish speaking high school teacher with the TDSB and a doctoral student of education, I am particularly concerned with the disquieting statistics on the school leaving rates among Spanish speaking youth. The 39 percent figure is significantly higher than the TDSB-wide school leaving average of 23 percent. I am also alarmed when I compare this number to U.S. statistics on school leaving. Although Spanish speaking youths are identified as the

linguistic and racial group with the highest rate of school leaving, the percentage stands at 30 percent (Schmid, 2001, p. 74) – 9 percent lower than the TDSB figure. I comprehend that even though the percentage of Spanish speaking school leavers in the United States is significantly lower than that of the TDSB, the actual number of these students are much higher. Then again, I also need to consider that the American statistic that I am aware of is a national average that may significantly differ from the rates of urban centres where there are high concentrations of Spanish speaking students. This is a topic that I could return to as I progress through my doctoral research. Since it is outside the scope of this paper, I will leave it here as is.

Returning to the Toronto context, the 39 percent figure means that roughly four out of every ten Spanish speaking youths will leave school and face various socio-economic challenges. “Given the significant growth of the Spanish speaking population in the last decades, [this means that more Spanish speaking] youths will be condemned to a life of low paid, low skilled jobs if they are fortunate, and to long cycles of unemployment if they are not able to be hired in the small percentage of jobs that do not require high school completion” (Schugurensky, 2008, p. 9). These precarious employment circumstances will in turn exacerbate, prolong, and continue cycles of socio-economic disadvantage through various generations. Economic gaps may widen even further. A study on the income of Toronto couples revealed that Latin American couples earned \$35 400 annually – roughly half that of European couples, which earned an average of \$68 900 per year (Ginieniewicz, 2007, p. 38). The earning figures of the Latin American couples does include people who have attained university degrees in their home countries but who have been unable to practice their professions, thus taking on manual and/or unskilled employment. As such, their living standards tend to be much lower than those of their European counterparts. If there are many university educated Latin Americans who experience socio-economic

inequalities, what would the outlook be like for the Spanish speaking youths who do not complete secondary school?

As a person who has experienced the difficulties of school leaving in both the personal and professional contexts, I can affirm that the socio-economic prospects can be quite bleak. Within a span of two years, both my brother and I left high school. While my brother made the decision to leave school in Grade 10, I was expelled during my last year of high school due to my chronic absenteeism, which was a result of my disengagement with my courses. My brother was fortunate to complete a drywalling apprenticeship and work for a union-protected company that provided excellent pay and benefits. However, he found that when he wished to switch careers, his lack of a high school diploma limited his options. In my case, if it were not for the one teacher who fought with the school administration to rescind my expulsion, I most likely would not have gone to university and earned my degrees, one of which is in teaching. Since I was not keen on engaging in the type of heavy physical labour that my brother took on, I probably would have continued working at my menial job at McDonald's. From my experiences and conversations with my colleagues at McDonald's, I know that the working hours are long and unstable and the pay is not much higher than the minimum wage for adults. However, for McDonald's employees under the age of 18, the pay is less than the minimum wage. This practice is legal (Ontario Ministry of Labour, http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/guide/guide_4.html). While such a low salary may be acceptable for a part-time and temporary working experience, it is certainly insufficient for a lifetime of raising a family and paying bills.

As a teacher, I have also seen some of my Spanish speaking students stop going to school. Although low socio-economic status is often a macro-level factor that influences the school leaving of many Spanish speaking students, it should not be considered a general circumstance

for all of them. Two of my Spanish speaking students that dropped out of school, for example, were siblings who came from a well to do family of professionals. Despite the differences in socio-economic status between those siblings and my brother and me, there are particular micro-level commonalities in our experiences as students; these commonalities are what Ferguson et. al. identify as problematic student involvement with their education and issues of identity (2005, p. 14). Such factors do not develop and manifest themselves overnight. “Early school leaving is a long term, multi-dimensional process influenced by a wide variety of school and out of school experiences with broad social and cultural implications, rather than a single decision made at a specific moment in time” (ibid., p. 59). It is, then, the culmination of a “process of disengagement with academic activities that takes several years” (Schugurensky, 2008, p. 9).

Although I do believe that the intricate web of economics and family dynamics can and often do play major roles in the issue of early school leaving, there is a need to focus more on the educational experiences of Spanish speaking youth in Toronto’s public schools. After all, students invest a great deal of their day attending classes, working on assignments, and interacting with their teachers and peers. Negative educational experiences and attitudes towards school would then likely exert great influence in a student’s departure from the high school system (ibid., p. 9). By examining the interactions between students and their teachers and school environment, I will attempt to consolidate my personal and professional experiences with the Toronto public school system and find out how educators can work to engage Spanish speaking youth so that they can perceive school as a positive experience and become motivated to stay in and succeed in school. Of course, the issue of early school leaving among Spanish speaking youth is complex and I do not presume to be able to come up with a “cut and dry” answer, but I do aim to provide insight from my perspective as a Spanish speaking teacher.

When addressing the educational predicament that Spanish speaking students are facing in Toronto's public school system, it does not suffice to only consider the rates of school leaving. In its *Linking Demographic Data with Student Achievement* report (2008), the TDSB reveals information on the achievement levels of students from grades 7 to 12 according to region of birth and racial background. The TDSB states, however, that such information is not to be construed as cause and effect but rather as relationships and patterns (Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 3). Even so, I feel that attention still needs to be paid to the TDSB's data on the achievement results of Latin American students in various academic skills and school subjects. These results should be considered in conjunction with the school environment context, which includes teaching practices. That way, educators, curriculum writers and students could identify and work on specific areas for improvement. Such efforts that strive to engage Spanish speaking youth with their high school studies include a more relevant curriculum, the presence of more Spanish speaking teachers, and the fomenting of positive student-teacher and student-peer relationships. Perhaps they can lead to higher levels of academic achievement and a decrease in the rate of early school leaving among Spanish speaking youths. I will expand on these possible efforts later in this paper, as I must first return to the TDSB statistical data.

When region of birth is taken into account, students born in Central and South America are among those who are "less likely to achieve similar grades than students born in any other region" (ibid., p. 1). Especially alarming are the percentages of these students that achieve grades below the provincial standards – the "B" grade range or Level 3. Below is a table on the academic achievement of Grade 7 and 8 students born in Central and South America that I have compiled using the data presented in Brown and Sinay's TDSB *Linking Demographic Data with Student Achievement* report (2008, p. 14).

Figure 1

Academic Achievement for Grade 7 and 8 Students Born in Central and South America		
Academic Skill or Subject	Percentage of Students Achieving Below Provincial Standards	Percentage of Students Achieving Level 1 (“D” Grade Level) or Below
Reading	49%	18%
Writing	48%	16%
Mathematics	51%	20%
Science	52%	27%

As can be seen from the table, the academic achievement of roughly half of these students lies *below* the provincial standards. Upon examination of the percentage of students that achieve levels at the “D” grade or below, the number still remains quite substantial. Some may opine that it is the immigrant status of these students that lead to their low levels of academic achievement. However, a look at the next table - which is based on the Latin American racial background of the students and includes those who were born in Canada - reveals that the numbers remain consistent with the exception of writing at the “C” grade level.

Figure 2

Academic Achievement for Grade 7 and 8 Latin American Students		
Academic Skill or Subject	Percentage of Students Achieving Below Provincial Standards	Percentage of Students Achieving Level 1 (“D” Grade Level) or Below
Reading	47%	14%
Writing	38%	17%
Mathematics	52%	20%
Science	53%	27%

(source: Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 15)

Although the issue of early school leaving is generally attributed to secondary school, it is important to also examine achievement levels in middle school because they determine the academic streaming of students in secondary school. Guidance counselors and school administration will generally place lower achieving students in the general or basic stream. Such

streaming practices can then be linked to a student's perception of low expectations for their academic success, which in turn can significantly influence learning and educational outcome (Ferguson et. al., 2005, p. 70). "Many teachers believe that due to lowered teacher expectations, minority students are placed more often in the lower streams" (ibid., p. 71).

For achievement levels in Grades 9 and 10, the TDSB examined several factors: credit accumulation by the end of Grade 9, and performance in English, Mathematics, Science, and Geography. Literacy was also assessed through the results of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) (Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 31). Once again, below I present some tables on the academic achievement of students born in Central and South America compiled from the research of Brown and Sinay.

Figure 3

Credits Accumulated by Students Born in Central & South America by the end of Grade 9	
Six or less credits	23%
Seven or more credits	77%

(source: Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 29)

Almost a quarter of students born in Central and South America passed six or less of the eight courses that they took in Grade 9. These students are at risk of falling further behind in their studies, which may lead to frustration and perceptions of inability. Such circumstances may also be exacerbated by teacher perceptions of these students as "socially and academically lacking, with deficient values and attitudes towards education. This negative view is one of the most significant reasons given by youth as to why they left school prematurely" (Ferguson et. al., 2005, p. 69).

Figure 4

Academic Achievement for Grade 9 Students Born in Central and South America		
Academic Subject	Percentage of Students Achieving Below Provincial Standards	Percentage of Students Achieving Level 1 (“D” Grade Level) or Below
English	50%	27%
Mathematics	66%	45%
Science	64%	42%
Geography	56%	33%

(source: Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 30)

The numbers of students achieving levels below provincial standards are even more alarming for Grade 9 courses. While roughly half of the students studied that were born in Central and South America performed below provincial standards in Grades 7 and 8 Math and Science, the number increased to two thirds performing at such a level when they reached Grade 9. The number of students at risk of failing these courses (i.e. at “D” Grade Level or below) also increased substantially. While the percentage of these at-risk course performances in Mathematics more than doubled from 20 to 45 percent, the percentage of “D” Grade Level achievement for Science increased by 15 percent. The performance of these students in English and Geography are also problematic, since the majority achieve levels below the provincial standard.

This educational situation is quite precarious, since these four courses are core subjects that must be passed in order to take the next level and accumulate the credits needed to graduate. If the students who pass their courses continue their trend of obtaining mediocre marks, such low levels of achievement will negatively impact their prospects for acceptance into post-secondary institutions, which in turn may prevent upward socio-economic mobility in adulthood.

Figure 5

OSSLT Pass Rates for Students Born in Central and South America – First Attempt	
Successful	54%
Other – failed, absent, deferred, exempt	46%

(source: Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 31)

While over half of the students born in Central and South America passed the OSSLT during their first attempt, the number is significantly lower than their Canadian and European-born counterparts (54 percent versus 79 percent). Although students are required to pass the OSSLT to fulfill their high school graduation requirements, they do have opportunities to retake the test.

Although knowledge of the English language from birth may be considered an advantage in performing better scholastically, Brown and Sinay's research demonstrates the opposite in the *racial background* context. As evident from the tables below, the proportions of students performing below the provincial standards increases to even higher levels. I must also note that for some unknown reason, their report does not include data on credit accumulation by racial background.

Figure 6

Academic Achievement for Grade 9 Latin American Students		
Academic Subject	Percentage of Students Achieving Below Provincial Standards	Percentage of Students Achieving Level 1 ("D" Grade Level) or Below
English	51%	28%
Mathematics	71%	48%
Science	66%	42%
Geography	59%	36%

(source: Brown & Sinay, 2008, p. 32 & 33)

What is causing these troubling achievement levels among the Spanish speaking students in Toronto's public schools? It is overly simplistic (not to mention discriminatory) to attribute such a precarious educational situation to racial or linguistic background, even in consideration

of the fact that this group of students is consistently the second-lowest achieving in the mentioned subjects from Grades 7 to 9. As previously mentioned, Brown & Sinay contend that the statistical data is not meant to manifest cause and effect but rather relationships and patterns (2008, p. 3). Using this line of reasoning, being a Spanish speaking student of Central or South American heritage does not cause low academic achievement. Belonging to this group and achieving low academic scores does not measure intelligence either – a student could be extremely intelligent but receive low marks because he or she does not attend class and consequently miss tests and assignments. It is very possible that an irrelevant curriculum and unchallenging work can repel some students.

What do students have to say about their curriculum and the practices of their educators? In addition to compiling demographic information on Grade 7 to 12 students within the TDSB through the *2006 Student Census*, researchers Maria Yau and Janet O'Reilly also examined student perspectives on curriculum and the practices of their educators. Although student answers were presented as a whole rather than categorized according to factors such as linguistic or racial background, the information reflects the point that I previously mentioned about the importance of looking at the school system and the way in which it affects students. I will then take the discussion of these results and attempt to put them into context with the views of Spanish speaking students along with *latinidad* and education.

Although many would think that the teaching profession promotes “a culture of care, support and meaningful instruction for students... [that reflects] the desire to create a community of lifelong learners” (Ontario College of Teachers, <http://www.oct.ca/standards/standards.aspx?lang=en-CA>), Yau and O'Reilly's *TDSB Student Census* reveals that 40 percent of the surveyed students do not feel supported or encouraged by their teachers (2008, p. 82). As Ferguson et. al.

point out, the school learning environment has a profound impact on students' school experiences and perceptions of schooling. Many teachers do not realize the critical role that they play in student engagement and academic achievement. Often, they place the blame for early school leaving on the individual student's characteristics, whether it is his or her personality or family dynamics. Such a teacher-student disconnect can then discourage and "push" youths out of school because they perceive school to be an inhospitable place with unconcerned teachers and staff who take no interest in the learning of their students (2008, p. 68 & 69). As a high school teacher myself, I comprehend the demanding nature of the job – a teacher teaches at least 90 students each day and is consistently grading student work and preparing lessons, which do require research, especially since textbooks tend to be lacking in detail and examples. Teachers also need to deal with classroom management and administrative issues. Nevertheless, teaching *is* a publicly accountable profession. People should carefully consider the different aspects of the teaching profession prior to becoming educators because their actions and attitudes often have profound effects on the learning outcomes of their students.

The *Student Census* also discloses interesting information on the relationships between racial and linguistic background and the application of rules. The importance of examining such perceptions should not be underestimated, since the manner in which an individual understands his or her environment may have greater implications than the "objective reality". It is that perception that impacts the way that a person reacts to his or her environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, cited in Ruck and Wortley, 2002, p. 186). With reference to the TDSB Census, while 12 percent of the students surveyed reported that they felt that their cultural or racial background influenced the unfair imposition of school rules on them, 5 percent of the students surveyed felt that it was their linguistic background. Interestingly, 17 percent of the students surveyed

indicated that they perceived their grades to be a reason for their teachers and administrators to unfairly impose rules on them (Yau & O'Reilly, 2008, p. 83). Such numbers may have serious implications on Spanish speaking youths with lower levels of scholastic achievement, especially if the unfairly imposed rules are due to discrimination or an inaccurate "reading" of them. According to Ruck and Wortley, such disciplinary problems are a factor that contributes to the high rates of early school leaving among minority students (2002, p. 186).

The TDSB Census section entitled "Inclusive School Experiences" provides a wealth of information with regard to students' perspectives on their school curriculum. While 46 percent of students surveyed reported that they learned about different racial and cultural groups at least on a few occasions, only 30 percent learned about people from different socio-economic classes (ibid., p. 22). Yau and O'Reilly's research then reveals that an overwhelming amount of students do feel that a more culturally and socially diverse curriculum would enhance their learning experiences. While 69 percent indicated that they feel that learning about their own and other cultural and socio-economic backgrounds would make learning more interesting for them, 55 percent believed that it would help them to enjoy school more. Close to half the students surveyed – 45 percent – stated that such a curriculum would help them to do better in school (ibid., p. 22). Both the TDSB and the Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines have specific directives for a diverse curriculum that addresses race, class, language, and gender. If educators really were committed to the success of their students, they would heed the TDSB and the Ontario Ministry of Education's directions. In my experiences both as a student and as a teacher, however, I can say that the secondary school curriculum tends to be Eurocentric and not connected to the lives of the students that come from a myriad ethnolinguistic backgrounds. For example, the textbook for the Grade 10 History course that I teach, *Canada: A Nation Unfolding*,

glorifies the white Anglo-Canadian experience from Confederation to the 1960's. The few readings that do portray Aboriginals and Japanese-Canadians are very short and in separated parts of the text. Since they are not part of the book chapters, it is very easy for teachers to skip over them and not teach them at all. Of course, it is up to the teacher to make an effort to teach their students about different cultures, but as the *2006 Student Census* data informs us, the majority of teachers choose not to do so. Many students who do not see their backgrounds reflected in their lessons and books may feel that their education is not very relevant to their lives. After all, when Toronto students exit their schools and enter their homes, places of employment or anywhere else, they do encounter people from many different cultures, ethnolinguistic backgrounds, and socio-economic classes. Such an irrelevant Eurocentric curriculum may alienate students from their schooling and consequently contribute to their early school leaving (Ferguson et. al., 2005, p. 69; Bascuñan, 2008, p. 56; Schugurensky, 2008, p. 45).

It must be noted that the quantitative data only tells half the story, for the issue of early school leaving among Spanish speaking youths in Toronto is much more complex than the analysis of numbers. In addition to examining achievement levels and the percentages of students who hold certain opinions about their schooling, it is also necessary to look at the issues of identity and the school environment that these youngsters must grapple with. Both the school environment and identity formation processes are major components of the adolescent years, which comprise a developmental stage in which youths are trying to establish and assert their identities. In addition to finding out what their values are and who they will become as they grow up, they “try to integrate various aspects of themselves – intellectual, social, sexual, and moral – into a unified sense of self-identity” (Harter, 1998, quoted in Sternberg and Williams, 2002, p. 82).

This identity journey, then, has a profound effect on the schooling experiences of Spanish speaking youth. In addition to experiencing the physiological and psychological changes that come with adolescence, Spanish speaking youths are also negotiating their identities as *Latino/as*. They must deal with what they perceive to be the meaning of being a *Latino/a* as well as how others affix the *Latino/a* label on them and behave towards them. The consolidation of the multiple perceptions of *Latino-ness* then becomes a major component of the identity formation of these youths both within and outside the school context.

For the immigrant students from Latin America, *Latino-ness* may seem like an alien concept. Whereas in their home countries their national identity may have been a significant part of their identities, in Toronto they experience a “situatedness outside of Latin America. This spatial referentiality brings the concept, the identity, and the experience under the domain of North American symbolic systems and conceptual schemas to a greater extent” (Alcoff, 2006, p. 228). Despite the class, racial, and linguistic diversities among Latin Americans, many North Americans still aggregate all Latin Americans together into one homogeneous group. They then affix a pan-Latino identity onto them without “differentiating among differences, and among different kinds and levels of difference” (Flores, 2000, p. 196).

Second generation Latin American youths must face an even more complicated process of identity that can reach crisis proportions. They are born in Canada but are of Latin American heritage. They are not immigrants, but they are the offspring of immigrants. They may think to themselves: Am I Canadian? Am I Latino/a? Or am I both? Or as Edward Said asks, do I even belong to either world (1993, p. 17)? As Department of Canadian Heritage researcher Stuart Sykes puts it, “the story of the second generation is not simply an immigrant story. Visible minority status appears to be a defining characteristic of the second generation. Such a marker

appears closely associated with second generation Canadians experiencing challenges” (2008, p. 3). In addition to having labels affixed to them by themselves and others, they can even perceive discrimination from members of their own ethnic group (ibid., p. 22), be it for reasons such as speaking Spanish in a manner that is different from that of their Latin American born relatives. Such identity confusion and feelings of being an outsider can certainly be exacerbated to an even greater degree at school.

Whatever the case may be, many people, including teachers, guidance counselors and school administrators, tend to group both immigrant and Canadian born Spanish speaking students into one coherent pan-Latino group. A “disproportionate majority of these educators are white, middle class Canadian born professionals” (Bascuñan, 2008, p. 55) who are misinformed by distorted stereotyped images of Latinos that are perpetuated by the mass media. While males are often depicted as dangerous and uneducated gangster criminals, females tend to be portrayed as unintelligent and overtly sexual beings. These “are the only images of Latinos that many people in the United States, and around the world, are ever exposed to, which makes it difficult for the public to gauge their accuracy” (Flores, 2000, p. 195). In conjunction with their Eurocentric teacher training programs and school curricula, they tend to lack any meaningful connections or “understanding of the special needs of [their] immigrant or minority students” (Simmons et. al., 2000, p. 4). As a result, there is a “prevalence of educators and counselors categorizing Latino/a youth as underachievers, incapable of reaching certain goals, including postsecondary education. The world of Latino/a students is then shaped by prejudices, which some of them internalize and come to believe” (Rivas and Duarte, 2008, p. 70).

The internalization of these negative and prejudicial classifications creates a cycle that can greatly influence the identity formation processes and behaviours of Spanish speaking

youths. Some of them may adjust aspects of their identity to reflect societal influences and attitudes (Sykes, 2008, p. 6) about what it means to be Latino/a. They may even experience certain degrees of ethnic shame (Carranza, 2008, p. 61). Given that many of these perceptions are negative, educators may also internalize them and behave in adverse manners towards them, either out of discrimination or fear of “Latino/a difference” (ibid., p. 61).

Such adverse behaviour on the part of the educators, however, is not always overt. As my brother Luis told me, teachers do not necessarily have to act hostile towards their students to manifest their negativity towards them; indifference can often articulate the very same negative messages and consequently make the pertinent students feel like “nobodies”. Such unspoken messages can be very negative when teachers make efforts to ensure that the needs of certain students are being met while ignoring those of other students. Students “may hesitate to ask for help when in need, especially to a teacher that is perceived as hostile to them” (ibid., p. 61). When I asked my brother to comment on why school curriculum tended not to be representative of Toronto’s multicultural population, he replied that some teachers only teach from the textbooks and their accompanying manuals. “If the books are not multicultural, then the lessons are not multicultural either...Some teachers will not make the effort to teach about other cultures because they think that their students will not care either. But teachers don’t realize that their students can easily see right through their teachers. If the teachers don’t care, then why should the students?” (Guerrero, 2008, personal communication).

The negative and prejudicial classifications that educators place on Latino/a students also extend to their parents. Ryerson University researcher Judith Bernhard found that the teachers she interviewed often perceived Latin American parents as passive or uninterested in the education of their children. They cited their lack of involvement in school activities and their

absence at parent meetings. Some teachers adopted a “poor and ignorant immigrant” mentality without realizing that many of these parents actually possessed university degrees but worked multiple menial jobs only because they were unable to practice their professions in Canada (2008, p. 59).

The actions and attitudes of administrators further exacerbate the precarious educational situation of Spanish speaking youth in Toronto’s public schools. They too, adopt negative and inaccurate perceptions of these youngsters and consequently are inconsistent with the application of school rules. When the TDSB’s *Zero Tolerance Policy* was in effect, a disproportionate number of visible minority students, including Latino/a students, were suspended or expelled (Puxley, 10 April 2007, <http://thestar.com/print/Article/201456>; Bhattacharjee, 2003, p. 30). When Human Rights Consultant Ken Bhattacharjee researched the negative implications of the *Zero Tolerance Policy*, he was informed by a community worker at a legal clinic that serves the Latino community that all the parents who have contacted her are “visible” members of the Latino community: “In my experience, it is indigenous, Black and mixed Latinos who are being suspended and expelled, not White Latinos.” (2003, p. 37).

Both suspensions and expulsions take a student away from his or her learning time. What kind of educational equality is that? Now that the inflexible and discriminatory *Zero Tolerance Policy* has been discontinued and replaced with Bill 212 as of February 2008, principals are to first consider all factors when disciplining a student, which include the student’s understanding of the consequences of his or her behaviour, as well as the reasons for the student’s behaviour and his or her history (Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, <http://www.etfo.ca/ISSUES/INEDUCATION/Pages/default.aspx>). As Bill 212 is quite recent, I have been unable to locate any research on whether or not there still is a disproportionate number of Latino/a students being

suspended and/or expelled from school. Even with the new Bill in place, however, principals still have the power to suspend students anywhere from 1 to 20 school days. I wonder how the consideration of the “other factors” will actually be enforced.

How can the education system and its teachers work to help engage Spanish speaking youth in their education so that they could stay in and succeed in school? As I previously mentioned, I do not presume to have the answer to this pressing and very complex issue. However, I can present some ideas that I have either read about in my research or pondered during my own teaching praxis.

Firstly, teacher training programs should try to recruit teacher candidates from different ethnolinguistic groups, including peoples from Latin America. Concurrent teacher education departments can even visit secondary schools to inform students about their programs and attract them to the teaching profession. In my three years as a secondary school teacher, I have had numerous students inquire about various aspects of the job because they were interested in becoming teachers themselves. Because I attended OISE/University of Toronto, I was only able to answer their questions about the program there. If teaching education program representatives from different universities were to actively recruit high school students, including those of Latin American heritage, they can provide them with a variety of informed options. Moreover, they may attract and create a future and diverse generation of teachers and roles models.

Secondly, teacher education programs should also become more comprehensive and include mandatory courses on media studies and multicultural education across the whole curriculum. My mentioning of media studies courses might seem peculiar, but I feel that teacher candidates should be made aware of the manners in which the media can distort their perceptions and consequent actions towards their students. In terms of multicultural education, teacher

training faculty members must teach their students about adopting diversified curricula that addresses different ethnolinguistic groups and socio-economic classes throughout. They also need to teach them that it does not suffice to simply “add in” separate lessons on groups such as Latino/as or Aborigines. Instead, teacher candidates should learn to connect the diversities together. In addition to compulsory teacher training courses on media studies and multiculturally diverse curricula, teacher candidates should also “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” (Bernhard, 2008, p. 60) in the education and academic success of their children.

Thirdly, hiring practices should become more equitable and diverse. As former TDSB trustee and education advocate Luz Bascuñan states, there are many qualified teachers who have been educated in Spanish speaking countries but who are unable to practice their profession in our schools. The Board should work with the Ontario College of Teachers to create opportunities for these foreign trained teachers so that they could teach in our schools, especially in those that have many Spanish speaking students. These teachers can then serve as role models for the Spanish speaking youths in our schools as well as communicate with parents and guardians who may not be able to speak English (2008, p. 56).

Fourth, administrators and teachers need to learn to set clear and consistent rules to students. They need to ensure that all students understand rules from the beginning of the school year and that they will be applied fairly and equally. They must also ensure that they take the appropriate steps to provide fair and appropriate alternatives to their schoolwork and any other aspect of their education if needed.

Curriculum writers and textbook editors also need to take Canada's multicultural population into account. Perhaps if more school boards and administrators were to boycott overly Eurocentric materials and purchase more diverse books from different publishers, teachers may have experience greater facility in teaching curriculum that is more representative of their students' diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds and experiences.

Since teachers are the most direct agents of education, it is up to them to vary their curriculum and teaching styles so as to engage their students. As I previously stated, curriculum and course materials tend to be Eurocentric. However, teachers can attempt to use such materials in their teachings and teach their students to develop their own critical thinking skills and question the world around them.

On a student-teacher relationship level, teachers must develop professional yet meaningful relationships with their students and their parents so that they can work together towards academic success. Because of the large number of students that high school teachers encounter on a daily basis, fomenting such relationships can be difficult. However, establishing relationships of mutual respect and manifesting a caring attitude can certainly make the difference between whether or not students will ask for help with their schoolwork. If students feel cared about and valued, they may be more motivated to work towards their academic success.

Very importantly, teachers and administrators need to value their students and help them to form positive perceptions of themselves. Although student behavior and grades may cloud educators' perspectives of their students and consequently contribute to their negative interactions with each other, it is essential to do away with stereotypical and misinformed images students and help give them "school kid" identities that will enable them to construct ambitious

yet realistic conceptualizations of themselves and their goals (Stepick, 2003, p. 40). I understand that teachers cannot possibly comprehend every single student's identity issues on an individual basis – I have grappled with such complexities myself when dealing with my students. However, teachers should be sensitive to the identity issues that accompany adolescence and recognize that such issues can be further complicated by language, ethnicity, or racial background. One suggestion that I have is to encourage students to adopt a multifaceted identity or set of identities that transcend through the school experience.

There remains a great deal of work to be done with regard to the 39 percent early school leaving rate of Spanish speaking youths in Toronto's public high schools. Although it is true that socio-economic and family situation greatly impact the early school leaving of secondary school students, it does not suffice to examine those factors alone. Rather than focusing solely on the students themselves, it is crucial to also analyze the system of the educational environment that they are in, especially since high school is a major component of adolescence and the identity formation processes that accompany it. Changes are needed in both TDSB and school policies, as well as in the practices and attitudes of teachers and administrators. As Judith Bernhard puts it, educators are in an ideal position to act as advocates for their students and families (2008, p. 60). The time has come to address the pressing issue of early school leaving among Spanish speaking youth in our classrooms and schools. That time is *now*.

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