

# Proyecto Latin@

## Year One – Exploratory Research

Report to the Toronto District School Board

January 2011

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## TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>RESEARCHING LATINO/AS IN SCHOOLS</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PROYECTO LATINO</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>REPORT SUMMARY</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>“COMO UN SAQUITO” – LIKE A BURLAP BAG</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>LANGUAGE AND CULTURE</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AS HOPE AND BARRIER</b>	<b>15</b>
“KNOWING ENGLISH MAKES EVERYTHING EASIER”	15
“THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM IS ENGLISH”	19
<b>LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL MARGINALIZATION IN SCHOOLS</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>FAMILY AND OTHER FORMS OF CULTURAL SUPPORT</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>ENGAGEMENT, DISENGAGEMENT, AND SOCIAL CLASS</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>THE IMMIGRATION EXPERIENCE: “WE CAME HERE WITH NOTHING”</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>IDEAS ABOUT SCHOOLING: “EDUCATION SHOULD BE YOUR FIRST PRIORITY”</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>WORK AND SCHOOL: “FACTORY, SCHOOL, AND SLEEP”</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>PEER AND TEACHER DISCRIMINATION</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>RACISM AND STEREOTYPES</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF LATINOS: “YOU’RE SUCH AN IMMIGRANT.”</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF LATINOS: “THEY ALREADY THINK THAT WE ARE ALL MEXICANS”</b>	<b>51</b>
APPEARANCE	53
LANGUAGE	58
<b><i>STEREOTYPES IN THE CLASSROOM: “THEY SEE YOU AS STUPID BECAUSE YOU DON’T SPEAK ENGLISH”</i></b>	<b>60</b>
<b>STEREOTYPES IN SCHOOLS AND BEYOND: “THERE’S NO POINT OF ME TO KEEP GOING TO SCHOOL”</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>ADULT RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>THE IMPACT OF UNSUPPORTIVE EDUCATORS ON ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>THE INFLUENCES OF SUPPORTIVE EDUCATORS ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SUCCESS</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>SYSTEM-WIDE CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<b>85</b>
INTERNAL RECOMMENDATIONS	86
EXTERNAL RECOMMENDATIONS	89
<b>SCHOOL-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>90</b>
ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND SUPPORTS	90
INCREASING AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING	92
<b>CLASSROOM-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>92</b>
TEACHER QUALITIES:	92
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>95</b>



## INTRODUCTION

**IN APRIL 2008**, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) reported that achievement test scores for Latino/a students were consistently among the lowest across both core school subjects as well as standardized literacy tests. Even more troubling was the report by the TDSB that roughly 40 percent of Latino/a students were not completing their secondary school graduation requirements. These alarming statistics have raised the concern of Toronto's Latino/a community as well as educators and public officials who are committed to providing all of their students with equitable opportunities for academic success. The TDSB (2000) has made a public pledge to address these disparities by means of its systemic policies, programs, and practices. However, developing strategies for addressing these challenges presents educators with a major challenge because little is known about the experiences of Latino/a students in the context of either Toronto schools in particular or Canadian schools more generally. In fact, the report of the TDSB marks the first time that any Canadian school board has collected and disaggregated achievement data based on students' self-identified ethno-linguistic background.

### *Researching Latino/as in schools*

By contrast with the dearth of research on Latino/a students' experiences in Canada, over the past several decades US scholars have conducted a wealth of research and developed a myriad of theoretical frameworks related to Latinos/as in schools.<sup>1</sup> Much of this literature has focused on the achievement gap between Latinos/as and other ethnic/racial/linguistic groups.<sup>2</sup> Researchers have implicated a range of factors in explaining this educational disparity, including

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Darder, Torres, & Gutierrez (1997), Díaz-Soto (2007), and Gándara & Contreras (2009).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance the research documented by Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin, & Cogburn (2008).

discrimination, generational status, and low socio-economic status.<sup>3</sup> Other researchers have also pointed to the complex cultural processes through which, for instance, Latino/a students dis-identify with and/or disengage from their schooling because they perceive limited future opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

While the US academic literature provides many insights for understanding scholastic underachievement of Latino/a youths, Canadian scholars have identified significant variations in the patterns of migration, historical presence, and the contemporary demographics of Latinos/as.<sup>5</sup> These patterns of immigration and historical presence intersect in complicated ways with other demographic characteristics as well as various social categories producing what some scholars have called “segmented assimilation.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, 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 adapt to and/or engage their experience of migration. Therefore, it is imperative to develop a more nuanced understanding of whether and how the dynamics and processes that have been widely documented among Latinos/as in the US are relevant in the Canadian context and more specifically to the experiences of Latinos/as in schools. The exploratory research in this report is a first attempt at beginning to explore these questions. While much more research is needed, this research offers some initial insights into the schooling experiences and engagement processes of Spanish speaking students in Toronto schools.

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<sup>3</sup> For research on discrimination, see López (2003) and Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1995), on generational status, see Sykes (2008) and Kao and Tienda (1995), and on low socio-economic status, see Portes and Rumbaut, (2006).

<sup>4</sup> See Conchas, (2001), Fordham and Ogbu, (1986), Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, (1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Goldring (2006), Mata, (1987) and Simmons, (1993).

<sup>6</sup> See Portes and Zhou (1993), and Zhou (1997).



In May of 2008, a group of leaders from the Latino/a community, educators, and researchers at the Centre for Urban Schooling gathered at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education to discuss the challenges outlined above. In addition to grassroots organizing and specific educational initiatives, the group identified several areas for future research development, including both quantitative and qualitative research. Given the dearth of research on Latino/a students in Canada, the group stressed the importance of conducting basic research to better understand their experiences and the factors that affect their school engagement. Most importantly, the group determined that it was crucial to examine the experiences of students within the particular urban context of Toronto schools. After all, students invest a great deal of their daytime attending classes, working on assignments, and interacting with their teachers and peers. This research seeks to better understand the way in which the combination of personal, familial, and institutional factors exert great influence on whether and how students engage in schools and whether and why they choose to leave or stay.<sup>7</sup>

Researchers from the Centre for Urban Schooling initiated discussions with the Office of Student and Community Equity of the TDSB to explore different possibilities for conducting research with students who are currently enrolled in schools. As a result of these collaborative meetings, “Proyecto Latino” was initiated in the Fall of 2008 to address the concerns raised earlier regarding the city’s Latino/a youth. The focus of “Proyecto Latino” was to better understand how Latino/a students explain the processes and factors that influence whether they stay in or leave their schools. In order to understand this process, the project considered how Latino/a students define student engagement. We sought to explore what the students themselves identified as ways in which schools can engage them in their own educational process and support their achievement and success.

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<sup>7</sup> See Mantilla, Schugurensky, & Serrano (2009).

## *Proyecto Latino*

In the Spring of 2009, sixty students representing grades nine through twelve from six high schools across Toronto provided their perspectives on their schooling experiences and academic engagement through focus groups and interviews.<sup>8</sup> A team of three researchers from the Centre for Urban Schooling in collaboration with three staff members from the TDSB collected the data. Two scheduled focus groups covering different topics on Latino/a student engagement and educational experiences took place at each school. A total of thirty-three students participated in scheduled individual interviews that lasted approximately thirty minutes; these conversations focused on the educational experiences of the individual students, their perspectives on the educational experiences of their family members and Latino/a peers, and their opinions on strategies for ameliorating the low scholastic achievement of the city's Latino/a students.

The schools studied in “Proyecto Latino” varied in terms of their student population and the socio-economic context of the neighbourhoods in which they were situated. While some of the schools were located in high-needs areas that served large numbers of immigrants from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds, others were in more affluent areas that had more homogeneous populations. The six schools were located across the four geographic quadrants of the TDSB, and we included schools that had large numbers of Spanish-speaking students, as well as schools where there were very few students identified as such. The six schools also varied in terms of size.

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<sup>8</sup> Student participation in focus groups was erratic throughout the project, and we were unable to keep track of the exact number of students. While more than 60 students agreed to participate, only 33 were interviewed. Attendance to focus groups was erratic and difficult to monitor, and therefore not all students who agreed to participate actually attended the focus groups. Some students arrived late and/or left early, which also made difficult to keep track of numbers. Our best estimate is that there were 25 to 30 students who actually participated consistently in the focus groups but who were not interviewed.

The study participants comprised a diverse group that encompassed variances in country of origin, generational status, linguistic ability, socio-economic class, and academic success. Students identified and felt a personal connection with a range of countries throughout Latin America, including Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, among others, as well as Spain.<sup>9</sup> However, some students came from mixed ethno-racial backgrounds and also reported European and/or Middle Eastern heritage. The students who were interviewed completed a survey to collect demographic data. While immigrants comprised the majority of the students interviewed (n=23), the remainder of the students indicated that they were Canadian-born (n=10). None of the youths reported third-generation status. Linguistic ability also varied among the participants; while the immigrant participants were mostly Spanish-dominant, the majority of the Canadian-born students spoke mostly in English. Most interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English, based on the student's preference, and five interviews were conducted in both languages because the students regularly switched between Spanish and English. The socio-economic context of the students also differed and ranged from working-class to upper-middle class. Academic success among participants varied as well and extended from experiences with good grades in university-track courses to experiences with failing marks accompanied by thoughts about dropping out of school.

### *Report Summary*

While the student participants in “Proyecto Latino” were certainly a diverse group, representing a wide range of experiences, there were several crosscutting themes that emerged

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<sup>9</sup> The majority of the students interviewed identified as being born in Mexico (n=12), other immigrant students were born in Argentina (2), Ecuador (2), Cuba (1), Dominican Republic (1), Panama (2), Brazil (1), Colombia (2). The remaining 11 students were born in Canada and identified with several different countries, sometimes with more than one.

from the data and touched upon the issues of academic engagement and success. The four most dominant themes in the interview and focus group data were Language and Culture, Social Class, Stereotypes and Discrimination, and Adult Relationships. These are the four themes that organize this report and through which this preliminary data analysis is articulated. Because of the nature of the data and the analysis reported here, the conclusions cannot be taken as generalizations of the experiences of all Spanish-speaking or Latino/a students in the TDSB. Rather, the patterns observed and explained in this report must be understood as markers of the complex dynamics that shape the experiences of Latino/a students in our schools. Whether and in what ways individual students experience these dynamics cannot be predicted on the basis of the data presented here. Further research is required for more robust conclusions and it is important for all educators to remember that there is a wide range of variability between and within student groups of all backgrounds. As educators, we must recognize the individuality of every student and seek to understand their personal experience, even as we keep in mind the larger patterns and structural dynamics that shape their experience.

With regard to language and culture, the data pointed to four key dimensions of how students understand the role of language and culture in whether and how they engage in schools. Many of the participants, regardless of their generational status, spoke about the importance of learning English to be able to succeed not only in schools, but also in their future lives and careers in Canada. While immigrant students indicated their prioritization for learning English, the students who were either born in Canada or who had been in the country for many years recounted how learning the language provided them and their families with more opportunities. This is an important observation, as it departs from some of the research in the US that indicates

that learning English is a lesser priority for some students.<sup>10</sup> Despite this recognition of its importance, students were also very vocal about the many barriers they and/or their family members encountered while trying to learn English quickly and effectively. Students identified four key barriers: (1) the lack of Spanish speaking teachers, both in ESL as well as mainstream courses; (2) problems with proper placement in both English as well as other academic courses, including misplacement as well as a lack of available courses in the proper levels; (3) the lack of understanding that scholastic support for Latino/a students extends beyond linguistic support; and (4) the role of families, particularly whether and in what ways families were or were not able to support the development of the necessary skills to succeed at school. Students offered many and varied suggestions for addressing these challenges, all of which are outlined in the implications section at the end of this report.

With regard to social class, Spanish-speaking students talked about four aspects of their experiences both in and out of schools that were deeply shaped by their economic context. First, students' descriptions of their particular experiences of migration and those of their family members pointed to the critical role that economic challenges play in their personal histories. It is crucial to keep in mind that the economic context of migration plays a key role in how students choose to engage in schools. Echoing their ideas about the role of English in their ability to succeed in schools, students also spoke directly about the importance of succeeding in schools for their ability to achieve financial stability. Again, this was a theme that cut across the data collected from both generations of students, and almost all students expressed a belief in education as crucial for their future success. At the same time, many students pointed to the fact

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<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Akiba's (2007) description of Buchanan's (2001) book *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization*. Akiba notes that Buchanan claims that children of colour, particularly Spanish speaking populations, predominantly speak their first language, which not only hinders their English language learning but also their prospects for academic success.

that current economic demands on their family required them to work, often full time, while also attending schools. Students were caught in a bind between providing economic support for their families and staying engaged in schools to ensure future success. Lastly, students spoke about experiencing discrimination related to their social class status, and described how these experiences led them to withdraw from schools.

In fact, stereotypes and discrimination is the third theme that emerges from the data collected and that all students, in some way or another, described as playing a key role in whether and in what ways students engaged or disengaged from their schooling. Both immigrant and Canadian-born students spoke about the key role that the media plays in shaping the public image of Latino/as in Canada and how these stereotypes, often borrowed from the US, affected them negatively. Specifically, students described how stereotypes about physical appearance and about language negatively affected their relationships with teachers and peers in schools. Most poignantly, they pointed to the assumption that Latino/as are prone to violence, theft, and laziness, and that they are uninterested and unable to engage in academic work effectively. The image of Latino/as as stupid and incapable weighed heavily on the students and seemed to play an important role in their experiences at school. Some students felt that the lowered expectations about their future careers deeply shaped how resources and opportunities were made available to them. These students' perceptions of the resources and opportunities made available to them also influenced their own interest or disinterest in pursuing better opportunities. The amount of racism reported by students was perhaps the most disheartening aspect of the research reported here and an area in which much more work needs to be done at the classroom and school levels.

While many participants reported serious and negative experiences involving stereotypes and discrimination from both teachers and peers, they also spoke about the very important role

that teachers played in students' abilities to succeed in school. Indeed, as the last section of this report summarizes, students described the powerful ways in which teachers could either facilitate or hinder students' engagement with their schooling. While the negative experiences described in this report are certainly reason for concern, there is no doubt that many teachers in the Board are doing incredible things with students to help them succeed. Students were emphatic and expansive in their descriptions of positive interactions with teachers and the very positive impact that some teachers have had on their individual experiences. These stories offer important starting places for discussions about the implications of this work and for recognizing the important work that many teachers are already doing on behalf of Spanish-speaking students in our schools.

The last section of this report provides a set of implications for the future work of the Board in addressing the needs of Spanish-speaking students in our schools. The implications were drawn from two key sources: (1) the direct suggestions of students during focus groups and interviews, and (2) the analysis of the data presented in this report. This combination of suggestions drawn from students and from the analysis provides us with many ideas and starting points for initiatives that can be implemented at three levels: at the board level, at the school level, and at the classroom level. Some of the suggestions outlined in the last section require system-wide leadership and support, while others are ideas that could be implemented by individual teachers in their classrooms. However, we recognize that while the latter does not require system wide changes, teachers do need system-wide and school-based support to be able to implement some of these ideas, both in terms of resources and professional development.

Thus, all of the recommendations articulated in the final section have implications at all levels of the system, regardless of the point at which they are implemented.<sup>11</sup>

*“Como un saquito” – Like a burlap bag*

To conclude, we would like to offer one student’s words, which capture the essence of the data reported here and that illustrate the themes of the sections that follow. Mercedes is a twelfth grade student who has faced many challenges throughout her schooling. In addition to having to work every night from 9:00pm to 7:00am, she attended school full time, then went home to do homework and catch up on some sleep, before starting all over later in the evening. She describes the cycle succinctly: “fábrica, escuela, dormir” / *“factory, school, sleep.”* She says that her problem is not being irresponsible or lazy. She says, “responsabilidad hubo porque no he dejado la escuela, más bien yo creo que el problema son otros factores que influyen ... los que te hacen dejar la escuela” / *“there is plenty of responsibility in me, because I didn’t leave school. Rather, I think the problem is all the factors that influence ... that lead you to leave school.”* In describing these factors, Mercedes’s words highlight the way she is treated by others and how this shapes whether she feels welcomed or not at school. She says these factors are like rocks in a heavy burlap sack that she must carry with her:

Es como un saquito, ponle ahí que te discriminan, ponle ahí que tienes que trabajar, ponle ahí que no tienes dinero, ponle ahí que este, que no te gusta la escuela, ponle ahí esto, ponle ahí lo otro, y el saquito pesa. No es solo un factor el que te hace dejar la escuela. El saquito pesa, todas esas piedritas que tú vas poniendo con un nombre hacen que el saco se rompa. Entonces es difícil.

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to these implications for practice, there are also many implications for future research that emerge from this work. These will be outlined in a separate document.



*It is like a little burlap sack, you throw in discrimination, you throw in work, you throw in that you have no money, you throw in that, well, you don't like school, you throw in this and you throw in that, and the burlap sack gets heavy. It is not just one factor that leads you leave school. The sack is heavy; all of those little stones that you put inside with their name make the sack break. So it is very difficult.*<sup>12</sup>

This report outlines the many little stones that students must carry in their little burlap sacks. It offers a place for educators to think about how to relieve students from some of the burdens that fill their sacks unnecessarily and eventually “make the sack break.” Students have no doubt that schooling will help them get ahead, and we hope that this report will make some contribution to our ability to offer students more opportunities to learn. As one student put it: “¿cómo vas a salir adelante si no tienes estudios? La ignorancia es el peor amigo del ser humano. O sea mientras más sabes más, más oportunidades tienes.” / “*How are you going to get ahead if you don't study? Ignorance is the worst enemy of human beings. In other words, the more you know, the more opportunities you will have.*”

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<sup>12</sup> Throughout this report, the data is presented in the language in which it was collected. All data in Spanish has been translated and provided in italics following the original Spanish. All translations were done by the authors.



## LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

**LANGUAGE AND CULTURE FIGURE PROMINENTLY** among the most important aspects that students identified in relationship to their experiences of schools in Toronto. This first section of the report deals with comments collected from the interview and focus group data concerning these two related themes. The complexity of the interrelationship between language and culture is particularly revealed in the similarities and differences between what students who had recently arrived in Canada and students who were either born in Canada or had been in here since an early age had to say about their experiences. The latter, typically described as either second (born in Canada) or 1.5 (arrived in Canada at an earlier age) generation shared experiences that contrasted with the former. In part these differences had to do with different levels of language proficiency, but these were also marked by different understandings of culture and of what it meant to be identified as Latinos/as. Indeed, it is crucial to remark that the immigration histories and generational status of the students who participated in this research is often linked to the dominant language of each student. While the dominant language of students who have been in Canada for less than a few years is Spanish, the students who were either born in Canada or who immigrated as young children is more often than not English. As the focus group and research data suggest, the dominant language has a significant impact on the ways in which students navigate the school system and experience schooling.

On the one hand, students' comments pertaining to the social, economic, and academic struggles associated with not knowing English provide some insight into the difficulties of first generation immigrants' experiences in Canada. They reveal that even when students recognize that English is an important component for success in Canada, the challenges of navigating

institutional systems like schools, and other interactions in public and private domains shape student engagement their decision either to stay in or leave school. Indeed, the interviews analyzed reveal that schooling and family are deeply interconnected with language and influence the disengagement processes and the high rate of early departure from school among Latino/a students.

On the other hand, students who are English-dominant, either because they were born in Canada or immigrated into Canada as young children, face different challenges. While they do not encounter the same linguistic obstacles as their recently-arrived counterparts, their identification with Spanish as part of their ethno-cultural background translates into a unique set of social and systemic challenges. In fact, the hybrid cultural and linguistic identifications of these students place them in a double bind. While their identification with the Spanish language sometimes leads educators and peers to treat them as if they do not speak English, their English dominance yields ambivalence about their identification with Spanish-dominant Latino/as. Ironically, while English proficiency is seen as crucial for the success of new immigrants, for second and 1.5 generation students it translates into a shift in their identification with Spanish as part of their ethno-cultural background. Some teachers, for instance, neglect the importance of these students' cultural identification with Spanish because of their proficiency in English, and recent immigrants assume that their counterparts' English proficiency is an indication of being less "Latino/a" – or not at all.

As the interview and focus group data illustrate, the cultural and linguistic hybridity of second and 1.5 generation students has the potential to doubly marginalize them on generational and ethnocultural levels. The immigration and education histories of the students' families also influence the youths' schooling experiences and perceptions of education in Canada. As outlined

in subsequent sections on social class, and racism and stereotypes, the commentaries pertaining to such experiences and perceptions not only suggest that both immigrant and Canadian-born Latino/as understand the importance of English to succeed in Canada, but also that the linguistic difficulties experienced by immigrants can lead to other difficulties — social and socioeconomic — in future generations.

### *English Proficiency as Hope and Barrier*

The next two sections illustrate how students spoke about learning English as both the hope for succeeding in school as well as one of the main barriers leading to their disengagement, frustration, and potential risk for dropping out of school. Most students – regardless of their proficiency – regarded learning English as one of the keys to school success. Yet, they also expressed contradictions about the ways in which language became a barrier for their engagement in schools.

#### “Knowing English makes everything easier”

Immigrant students recognize the importance of learning English in order to interact with others in the multicultural context of Canadian society. In a focus group discussion, Rita, a Mexican student who came to Canada fifteen months earlier, recounts her feelings of isolation; she previously thought that she and her family members were the only Spanish speakers in Toronto: “Me imaginaba de esta ciudad que no había nadie en español más que yo la única, soy la única que voy estar ahí, yo no sé como voy a hablar con otra gente ¿no?” / “*I thought that there were no other Spanish speaking people besides me. I am the only one here, I am not sure how I am going to speak to others, right?*” Rita then shares a particularly uncomfortable incident on the transit system in which she was unable to respond to a question because she did not understand English. She adds that a fellow passenger who spoke both English and Spanish then

rudely asked: “entonces ¿qué estás haciendo aquí?” / “*[if you do not speak English] then what are you doing here?*”

Diana, a recent immigrant from Central America and a young mother in grade 12, worries about the prospects for success in Canada if one does not speak or understand English. She asks: “si no sabes ni siquiera contar o si no sabes hablar inglés pues, ¿qué vas a trabajar, de qué vas a vivir?” / “*if you don't even know how to count or if you don't know how to speak English, well, how are you going to work? How are you going to support yourself?*” Such comments emphasize the students’ views that learning English facilitates successful social and economic exchanges in Canada. As the following data excerpt reveals, it also facilitates one’s sense of belonging in Canadian society, especially in the school system. For young Latino/as — whether first, 1.5, or second generation — a sense of belonging at school is especially important for successful integration and academic engagement.

Language can also be an obstacle that limits the ability of recent immigrant students to socialize and make friends at school. For 11<sup>th</sup> grader Erica, who arrived in Canada from Cuba one year before the interview, learning English is important not only for academic success but also for making more friends, especially at a school like hers in which there are few Spanish speakers:

O bueno, mi experiencia ideal sería, que yo, el año que viene, que voy a empezar inglés regular, pueda entender todas mis clases, y me pueda ir muy bien. Y me pueda relacionar mejor con todos, con los demás estudiantes y tengo muchos más amigos. Porque a mí me gusta tener muchos amigos pero, en este momento no tengo muchos, por el inglés. Um, ya. Me gustaría que así sea, ser mucho mejor, que hablara muchísimo mejor.

*My dream would be that the next year, I will start “regular English,” understand all my classes and it will go well for me. I'll be able to relate to others, with students and make more friends. I like to have many friends, but for now, I don't have many, because of my English. I would like it to be better, to speak it much better.*

She agrees that it is important to learn English to be successful at school and make friends.

Indeed, as she underscores: “lo que yo quiero es quedarme aquí en la escuela de verano estudiando inglés” / “*what I want is to stay here in summer school to study English.*”

A comment made by Fabiana, a grade 10 student from Mexico, illustrates how students attempt to disentangle linguistic ability from ethnocultural background, even though the two are deeply connected. She says, “A mí me discriminan, o yo siento que alguna vez me llegaron a discriminar por no saber inglés pero no por ser latina” / “*I feel that I've been discriminated against for not knowing English, but not for being Latina.*” It is interesting to note that Fabiana does not equate language discrimination with ethnocultural identity, perhaps to some extent preserving a sense of integrity in her cultural identification. Yet, as shall be detailed in a later section of this report, language is deeply implicated in and shapes students' experiences with discrimination.

Ana, a student from Mexico who has been in Canada for 17 months, has also experienced thoughts about leaving school but has not done so because she acknowledges the importance of finishing high school: “Hay un límite que ya no quiero ni estudiar. Digo: ‘ya!’ Pero, no lo dejo, por, porque siento que en un futuro me va servir. Y entonces, llego. Eh, ese, esos estudios me va a servir para mis hijos, los hijos de mis hijos”/ “*There is a point to which I don't even want to study. But I don't quit, because I feel that in the future it will serve me well. So those studies will be useful for my children, for the children of my children.*” She adds that when

students arrive in Canada and know English, challenges are not going to be as demanding as when they do not: “Si vienen hablando inglés,[de otros países] ¿no?, yo digo que no es difícil. Yo digo que ya teniendo el inglés todo es fácil, te puedes comunicar con quien sea”, *“If they come speaking English,[from other countries] I say it's not difficult. I say that knowing English makes everything easier. You can communicate with anyone.”*

Ana also thinks that school should provide help for those students that do not speak English and offer courses or jobs where students can learn English faster: “Estamos, como trabajo ayudando a otras personas a, a, hablar inglés o hablando el español. Total que haiga el inglés, ¿no? Que sea un trabajo hablando el inglés para aprenderlo más rápido. Yo siento que aquí, lo que importa es, aprender el idioma también y los, el estudio”, *“While working, we're helping other people to speak English. As long as there is English, there will be a job where one speaks English, and you will learn it faster. I feel that here what's important is to learn the language as well as studying.”*

Some students express their frustration at the lack of support for English learners, and some of them share that they seriously considered changing schools in order to obtain the support they needed. In a focus group discussion, Simon, a Canadian-born student with Bolivian heritage, describes the language barriers that affect new-comers as well as more English-proficient Latinos:

They [teachers] wouldn't pay attention to kids who did not speak English or just didn't get the work. It was just difficult. And if you asked them, they wouldn't explain it to you, but then you wouldn't understand. So I don't know, that's why I didn't like my old school, and I didn't really go to class. I just didn't understand. They wouldn't really help me the way I wanted them to help me.



This excerpt emphasizes the importance of school support for immigrant students who are English language learners. Such support from teachers, administrators, and counselors would help provide Latino/a students with not only the language skills, but also the guidance and confidence that would help them stay in school.

“The fundamental problem is English”

As illustrated in the previous section, Latino/a immigrant students believe that learning English will help them not just to interact with the Canadian culture, but also to do better in school. Having all their classes in English pushes them to try harder to learn the language. However, while acquiring the grammatical skills to be successful at school, they have assignments, readings, and tests that require them to tackle two challenges at the same time; they must learn the language and do well in each class in order to pass to the next level. For example, Juliana, a grade 11 student who came to Canada from Cuba the year before, asserts that studying for a test after class is extremely difficult because she does not understand English well. While she is trying to learn the language, she is also trying to understand the subject content. She sees both learning English and studying the material for all her classes as a challenge:

Porque, yo, en mi caso, yo soy una persona que, cuando yo entiendo, lo que la profesora está diciendo, yo, yo, cuando una vez que entiendo la clase, ya no se me olvida. O sea, ya después, tengo que revisar pero no es volverlo aprender. Y ahora como no entiendo la clase, cada vez que no sabes es como volviendo aprender todo desde el principio.

*Because I am a person that, when I understand what the teacher is saying, once I understand the class, then I won't forget it [the content of the class]. So after, I will have to review but not learn it all over again. And now, since I don't understand in class*

*[because it is all in English], each time I am not sure of the material, it will be like learning it again from the beginning.*

Juliana believes that she could be a very good student if she were more competent in English: “a pesar de que no entiendo, yo pienso, a veces me pongo a pensar, pienso que si el profesor hablara español, o yo entendiera el inglés, yo fuera una alumna muy buena” / *“Even though I understand, I think sometimes, that if the teacher was speaking in Spanish, or if I understood English, I would be a very good student.”*

According to Juliana, her principal problem is the lack of proficiency in English. Juliana sees that one of the most complicated aspects of being Latina in school is “no saber el inglés muy bien” / *“not knowing English very well.”* She emphasizes that this is her main obstacle. “Creo que el problema fundamental es el inglés. Para mí.” / *“I think that the fundamental problem is English – for me.”*

Yet, immigrant students who are English language learners are not the only ones who encounter difficulties with English and with negotiating mainstream Canadian culture. A few of the students reported that despite being born in Canada, the fact that they had moved to Latin America as young children and then returned years later complicated their schooling experiences in Toronto. For Javier, a Canadian-born ninth grader of Salvadorean parentage, relearning English, “era una experiencia bien fea porque no podía hablar a nadie, me costaba decir una cosa, costó aprender a leer y a escribir otra vez.” / *“was a very bad experience because I couldn't speak with anybody, it took me a lot of effort to say anything, to learn to read and write again.”*

Christian, another Canadian-born student of Salvadorean heritage, reports how reintegration into a Canadian school can be an especially daunting experience. His experiences

relearning English became even more complicated with the culture shock of starting high school in a different language and a different city. He says:

Estaba en grado, grade 9, entonces, ¿cómo se llama? Cuando entré a la escuela, no había nadie que conocía. Sonaban las, las alarmas como así ya, y vienen toda la gente caminando y yo diciendo, ¿qué está pasando? Y entonces, yo me sentía asustado porque nunca había visto eso en mi vida, que todo el mundo salía de las clases y se iban por otros lados así. Y yo tenía el timetable diciendo, ¿cómo se lee esto?

*I was in grade, in grade 9, and, how do you call it? I did not know anyone when I started school [here]. The, the alarms would ring like that, yes, and all the people would come walking. And I would say, what is going on? And then, I would feel scared because I had never ever seen so many people leaving their classes and going everywhere like that. And I had the timetable and saying to myself, how do you read this?*

Christian then recounts how he coped with his initial difficulties by meeting and making friends with other students who spoke Spanish:

miré unas personas que hablan español y me hice un poquito de amigos. Después se hizo bien la cosas, ya no me sentía solo como antes [...] Ya eso, eso, primero uno se siente asustado así, ¿qué es lo que pasa aquí? Yo no podía [hablar] inglés en esos tiempos.

[Ellos] me ayudaban a mí.

*I met some people who spoke Spanish and made a few friends. Then things got better, since I didn't feel alone like I did before. And that, that, first one feels afraid from that, [as in,] what is going on here?' I couldn't [speak] English at the time. [They] would help me.*

As the experiences of these students illustrate, even Canadian-born Latino/a students can experience linguistic difficulties upon their return to Canada. These commentaries also point to the dangers of assuming that birth country determines the dominant language and cultural experiences of every student. Even more importantly, the experiences of Javier and Christian underscore the necessity of support systems to meet the needs of every student, regardless of their linguistic abilities and generational status.

To summarize, while students recognize that English is crucial for their success in schools and in Canadian society, they also perceive language as an obstacle that limits their ability to understand others and do well at school. As Carolina, a Mexican student in grade 10 explains, her difficulty at school is the language barrier. “Well, I guess something like the language barrier, because I don’t have like, a good English, and sometimes I don’t understand everything [...] they’re saying so, I guess that would be like, I don’t feel like, I don’t fit in or something. Hector, in one of the focus groups, commented that it was not only the lack of English, but also the lack of friends: “Well the language obviously like super difficult so it’s like, Ah man I don’t know the language, I don’t have any friends, like I left all my friends [at home].”

### *Language and Cultural Marginalization in Schools*

While there are some students who report positive experiences with their teachers, as we discuss later in this report, others complain about the lack of support for their linguistic and cultural needs. As Pedro, a recent immigrant from Colombia in grade 10 suggests, teachers should invest more time with new students, because learning English adds to the difficulties of learning new material and content. He feels that sometimes teachers associate a student’s limited English proficiency with being a ‘slow’ learner, and consequently set those students aside:

They didn't actually take the time, or like the consideration [...] The person doesn't understand. And it was the fact that, they actually, [...] seems like you have, like, that you're, [inc.] like you have some, you're slow. But you're not. You're just trying to like, learn a new language.

When recounting his own experiences in a Toronto high school, he mentions that the negative behaviours and attitudes associated with the limited English skills of newcomers can create especially unfavourable classroom experiences and perceptions of school:

A lot of people that I came across, they were rude, even the teachers. Like they set you aside. They're like, 'you don't understand a thing.' They don't really try to teach you or like, tell you about it and because like, when I came, I had like, no English whatsoever. So the way that I like, communicated with hands and it was, I don't know, it was like, the worst experience ever. It was the fact that, not only were they rude, it was the fact that when you're kinda' new, and this was not only me like I've come across a lot of people from other parts, and that teachers just neglect them, and they don't like, even try. Like, you're sent away, like, to ESL.

Such marginalization, whether intentional or not, can perpetuate student frustration with learning English and subsequently become academically disengaged, which in turn can lead some students to seriously consider leaving school. When twelfth grade student Fernando talks about his initial experiences in a Toronto school three years earlier, he says: "no quería ir más ir a la escuela, porque no podía el inglés. No me, nadie me ayudaba, entonces era como frustrante para mí para estudiar aquí." / *"I did not want to go to school anymore because I could not deal with the English. Nobody was helping me, so it was frustrating for me to study here."*

This marginalization can be especially deleterious, even to highly motivated students. Vanessa, a recent immigrant from Mexico who is in grade 12, describes an incident in which her teacher repeatedly commented that she did not understand what Vanessa was saying. Whenever Vanessa said something in class, this particular teacher would make her repeat herself several times. These exchanges led Vanessa to question her attempts to participate in class discussions:

Entonces este, me empecé a sentir mal y después dije, “yo le voy a echar ganas.”

Y llegó un momento en el que yo decía algo y ella me decía ¿pero qué? ¿Qué dijiste, qué? Es que no te entendemos.

*So, I started feeling bad and then I said, “No, I will try.” And then came a moment in which I would say something and the teacher would say, ‘What? What did you say? We can’t understand you.*

As data excerpts like the ones in this section reveal, the discouragement that comes with language difficulties can be compounded by negative interactions at school. Such challenges may lead students to seriously consider leaving school and instead enter the labour force in order to earn a living and feel more productive.

The interviews revealed that, because of their limited knowledge of English, some Spanish-speaking immigrants are placed in high school despite having already fulfilled their graduation requirements in their home countries. Eleventh grade student Carla recounts the experiences of one of her friends, who found himself back in high school despite having graduated from the equivalent back in his country of origin. This can be a significant source of academic disengagement for some students, especially if they initially aspired to attend university in Canada:

[él] dejó la escuela porque [...] uno el trabajo [...] y el segundo era de que pues no le llamaba la atención porque se supone que ya había terminado los estudios ahí en [ciudad de origen] y regresó aquí otra vez a [...] la high school [...] No le interesaba más, [...] se desesperó y dejó la escuela prácticamente. Después intento regresar pero no, no trabajo otra vez, o sea se salió.

*He left school because: one, he found a job, two, because school didn't appeal to him because supposedly he had graduated back in his country and here, he got placed back in high school. He wasn't interested anymore. He got desperate and left school. After, he tried to come back, but ended up continuing to work.*

Incorrect placement in high school interferes with these Latino/a youths' desire to continue with their schooling. It can lead them to feel that they are starting over and that they are suddenly less competent than they thought they were based on their schooling experiences in their home country. Returning to high school might be a way to help these students learn English without having to pay and obtain the credentials required for entry into post-secondary institutions. However, some students may be better served by alternative ways to obtain English instruction and the secondary school credits they require to pursue higher education. In fact, when students perceive their academic achievements are not recognized and that they are being pulled down in grade level, their commitment to schools diminishes greatly.

For one student, the experience of being “placed back” into middle school was especially negative, as she found that she was unable to relate to the “niñitas”/ “*little girls*” with whom she suddenly had to be classmates. As such, she felt very disengaged and consequently began her pattern of chronic absenteeism. “[...] eran como más juveniles, ¿me entiendes? Más, más, niños entonces para mí fue así como muy, muy estresante porque no, no eran como de mi edad.” /

*“They were very young, do you understand me? Much younger, children, so for me it was stressful because they were not my age.”*

This example illustrates the negative experiences of immigrant Latino/a students who try to learn English and integrate into Canadian society while being placed into an educational environment for much younger students only because they do not have a good command of the language. This can sometimes be the catalyst for some students to leave school prior to graduation. At the same time, the opposite phenomenon can also have negative consequences.

While students describe being placed in lower academic levels as having negative consequences on their school engagement, they also describe the problem of being placed in English courses that were too advanced for their skills. This often happens when a school could not offer the appropriate levels of English, and students are placed in classes that are either too basic or too advanced for them. In such cases, students face either increased difficulties or boredom. This in turn discourages them from learning English and working harder at school. As eleventh grade student Isabel explains, placement in a level that is too advanced is especially difficult and discouraging:

Los primeros días, [...] fueron horribles. [...] las personas me hablaban, y yo, “¿qué está hablando?” Yo no le entiendo nada. No entendía nada, pero nada. Fue muy, muy, muy difícil. Yo estaba, para el nivel 1 de inglés, pero cuando llegué a la escuela ya lo habían pasado, nada más que estaba el nivel 2 (ESL). Entonces me pusieron en el nivel 2, sin saber nada.

*The first days were horrible. People spoke to me and I was ‘What is he saying? I don't understand anything.’ I did not understand anything, nothing at all. It was very, very, very difficult. I was evaluated as Level 1, but when I arrived at school, they had already*



*passed the Level 1, so I was placed in level 2 of ESL. So they placed me in level 2 English, with me knowing no English.*

In a focus group discussion, Mexican student Paola comments that improper placement and the irrelevant content of the ESL curriculum in some schools can actually hinder English language learning and perpetuate academic disengagement: “ESL is piece of crap in the school that I went to. It was like, they teach you how to like, ah, colour. It was crap. Like you know, how is that gonna help me? So that’s what I just found.” The experiences and frustrations of English language learners like Paola illustrate the need to ensure that adequate resources are allocated to meet not only the schooling needs of ESL students but also to properly provide them with the skills needed to succeed in Canadian society.

*“Well, you should understand this ... read it over.”*

Interestingly, second-generation Latino/a youths also report problems with receiving the help that they need. In their cases, their high command of English can sometimes work against them in that it leads some educators to take their linguistic abilities for granted. When describing a particular teacher that she would repeatedly and unsuccessfully try to get help from, ninth grader Alina comments that she grew to “hate — just looking at her”. She adds that every request for help would be answered with, “‘Well, you should understand this, da da da da,’ and I’m like, ‘Okay but I don’t understand it, that’s why I’m asking you for help.’ She’s like, ‘Read it over again.’ And every time she kept telling me, ‘Oh read it over, read it over.’ I didn’t understand, I needed her help.”

In Alina’s description of her more positive experiences at her new school, she mentions how her teachers’ comprehension of both her cultural background and academic difficulties has

greatly improved her academic engagement. In describing one particular teacher at her new school, Alina states, “when she helps me like, I really understand it when she helps me. So I wanna keep doing more work and more work, ‘cause it's like, I understand. Like she understands where I'm coming from [...] she can relate, I guess, to Latinos, ‘cause she is Latino too.”

It is crucial to address the negative schooling experiences of second-generation students like Alina, especially in light of the TDSB’s findings that Canadian-born Latino/a students are especially at risk in terms of their achievement across various school subjects and on standardized tests.<sup>13</sup> The implications and recommendations for second-generation and other English-dominant Latino/a students will be discussed in further detail in the final section of this report.

#### *Family and Other Forms of Cultural Support*

In addition to teacher support, students also talk about family support as playing an important role in the academic engagement of both immigrants and Canadian-born students. For many immigrant students, it is the support of their family members that inspires them to practice their English so that they can succeed as productive and gainful members of Canadian society. Dora, an eleventh grader originally from Cuba, says that while her mother understands that her social and academic struggles at school are due to her limited English, she pushes her to persist with her studies at a Toronto high school. “Entonces mi mamá se pone: ‘Tienes que estudiar porque aquí es más difícil, porque no sabes inglés. Tienes que ponerte a estudiar inglés.’ / “*You have to study because here it [life] is more difficult, because you don’t know English. You must start studying English.*”

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<sup>13</sup> See especially Brown (2006) and Brown & Sinay (2008).

Another student, a tenth grader from the Dominican Republic named Alejandro, mentions that he persists with his schooling despite his serious thoughts about leaving school because he wants to please his grandmother, who continuously counsels him to study so that he can succeed in Canada. Shifting continuously between Spanish and English, he explains:

Mi abuela [...] she want[s] to see me graduate and with un buen oficio like a good job. I do it for her mostly [...] Ella me da consejos. Que tengo que tener paciencia, y si uno no te quiere explicar, tú te las buscas. Ella es, ah, mi motivo porque vengo a la escuela, really.

*My grandmother [...] she want[s] to see me graduate and with a good profession like a good job. I do it for her mostly [...] She gives me advice. That I have to be patient. And that if someone doesn't want to explain something to me, I can go look for an explanation. Really, she is the reason why I go to school.*

Immigrant students who have siblings in the same school find that the mutual support they provide alleviates the initial difficulties of navigating the Canadian school system as a newcomer. For tenth grader Diego, going to the same school as his brother provides him with the motivation to persist in attending a new school in Canada:

That meant the world to me, because I had my brother. And he'd speak, he'd speak the same language as I did. And not a lot of people, did. Because like, uh my, Spanish, my English was really broken at that time.

One strategy that some students employ to navigate their linguistic difficulties at school is to actively seek academic help from other family members. For instance, Dora was especially fortunate in receiving her mother's support, especially since her mother possessed a degree in

mathematics and was able to help Dora with her homework. Dora reports how this type of family support directly influences her efforts and grades in math:

Los profesores hablan, especialmente el de química, él habla, primero muy rápido, segundo, son palabras técnicas de química, o sea, que a veces, yo no me las sé y no entiendo lo que él me está diciendo. Y entonces, ya, por ejemplo, el lunes, tuvimos clase de matemática, y la maestra empezó a explicar sobre el, las cuentas de banco, era, estadísticas financieras, ¿no? Yo no entendí nada, pero nada en la clase. Cuando llegué a mi casa, como mi mamá es licenciada en matemáticas, ella fue la que me explicó, y, gracias a eso, [...] Pero, entonces gracias a que ella me explicó, es que entendí. O sea, que si mi mamá no es licenciada, si mi mamá no sabe nada de matemáticas, entonces, yo no sé, no voy a saber nada para la siguiente clase.

*Some teachers speak, especially in chemistry, he speaks, first, very fast, and second, he uses technical chemical words. Sometimes I don't know the words and then I get lost and don't understand what he's telling me. For example, on Monday, we had a math class and the teacher started explaining about banking transactions, financial statistics. I did not understand anything, nothing in the whole class. When I arrived home, since my mom has a degree in math, she is the one who explained it to me. Thanks to her, I understood. So if my mom hadn't graduated in math, if she had known nothing about math, then I don't know, I wouldn't know anything until the next class.*

The fact that Dora's mother has a degree in mathematics made school assignments easier for Dora because of the help she received. While this help assisted Dora with the content, it still did not adequately prepare her for actively participating in class discussions, even in instances in which she really wanted to do so. She explains:

El profesor empezó a preguntar, y yo me sabía la respuesta, y yo levanté la mano, y, y empecé a responder, pero me quedé así como, qué palabra es la que tengo, o sea, me lo sé en español, pero no sabía entonces como explicarlo en inglés en el momento. /

*The teacher started asking, and I knew the answer. So I raised my hand and started to respond, but I got confused because I knew the answer in Spanish, but I did not know how to explain it in English at the moment.*

While Bertha sometimes felt discouraged at school because of her limited English, her mother's support and academic help provided her with the motivation to persist, especially with her mathematics classes.

Unfortunately, many students are not as lucky. During a focus group discussion, Manuel points out that his "mom doesn't speak English whatsoever. And my brother, he's kind of made me learn things. So, if I need help with homework, I can't get her to help 'cause she has no idea what ... is going on." This last comment emphasizes the need to increase resources to help the students who require it, regardless of their English language skills. As previously suggested in second generation student Alina's case, it is necessary to provide not only academic help for all students, but also to provide an education that takes into account their needs as ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic minorities.

Luz, a student who immigrated to Canada from Colombia at age 6, suggests that the availability of ethnocultural groups or clubs at school may help students deal with language barriers while providing them with opportunities to socialize with other Spanish speaking students:

Because there is always that need of having like, you know a sense of close to home maybe. Being comfortable with people that like, relate to you, speak your language, kinda

joke around about the same things. Just having like, knowing that all these people are probably there for me to like, I can, if I'm not feeling like talking to my English speaking friends lets say, one day, I have my little Spanish speaking group, sort of. And I think that'd be pretty cool, but, then again, I don't know if the people would come, they, I mean they didn't come here, but they should have, I think it would have helped them, but I don't know.

Luz's suggests that having groups or spaces in which to find other students with similar linguistic and ethno-cultural identifications could be an important source of support. Organizations like ethnocultural or language clubs could benefit immigrant students through various means such as obtaining school-related information, like reading a timetable and finding out about other school clubs. English-dominant Latino/a students could also benefit from having such ethno-cultural space at school, in which they could do things such as helping each other with their homework and working on other school activities. Such opportunities for socializing may serve as an important protective factor for Latino/a students regardless of their generational status, especially if they lack the support they need from their families and educators.

### *Summary*

Across generations, the Latino/a youths in this study recognize the importance of education for success in Canada. Immigrant students clearly understand that learning English is crucial to succeeding in school. As the interview and focus group data reveal, however, the barriers encountered in the school system are often linked to the dominant language and the ethnocultural background of each student.

For immigrant students, limitations with the English language present them with the greatest challenge in terms of integration into their new schools. While many of these students

express their desires to succeed in Canada, they are also frustrated by the systemic barriers such as incorrect ESL placement and the lack of resources to address their linguistic needs as newcomers. Although some students are fortunate to have the academic and emotional support of educators and family members to alleviate their linguistic challenges, there are many others who were not so lucky. In fact, some students experience academic and social hardships that are so pressing, that they lead to serious thoughts about leaving school and entering the workforce, even if it means obtaining low paying jobs.

Latino/a students whose dominant language is English are certainly not exempt from scholastic challenges associated with language and culture. In fact, their ethnolinguistic and cultural hybridity positions them in a way that sometimes complicates their prospects for succeeding at school. While the majority of Canadian-born Latinos/as do not face issues of English acquisition, they echo some of the difficulties voiced by the immigrant Latino/a group, such as the lack of support from teachers or other school staff, and the absence of Latin American culture from the school curriculum. The assumption that these students are linguistically assimilated in the Canadian school system has sometimes limited their opportunities to obtain the academic help they require.

As Alina's case illustrates, the lack of support that she faced compounded her academic difficulties and disengagement. She began to engage with her schooling again when she changed schools and met a Latina teacher, who not only provided her with the help she needed, but who also comprehended her situation as a second generation Latina. Circumstances such as this point to the importance of providing *all* Latino/a students with the linguistic, curricular, and emotional support that they need without regard to their generational status or language abilities. This particular group faced other challenges associated with their status "between two worlds"; of

belonging to separate cultural groups and facing discrimination from both. For this group, increased support from teachers in the classroom and more opportunities to explore and showcase their cultural background would be beneficial in stimulating their engagement with school.



## ENGAGEMENT, DISENGAGEMENT, AND SOCIAL CLASS

**LATINO STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT** in schools is strongly conditioned by their experience of social class. The data analyzed reveals four ways in which social class is experienced by these students: their migration experience, their ideas about the role school plays in shaping their future lives, their relationship to paid work, and their experiences with peer and teacher discrimination. The outcome of these experiences is that Latino/a students are forced to perform a balancing act between continued engagement in school on the one hand and yielding to the forces that push them out of school on the other. Neither option, however, is able to fully meet the students' needs on its own. The solution to this dilemma, we suggest, is to make engagement a truly viable option for students by shifting the ways they experience social class.

### *The Immigration Experience: "We came here with nothing"*

Most of the Latino students who participated in this research project were born outside Canada. As the interviews reveal, migration is a difficult experience that demonstrates the impact of structural class forces on their lives. When asked about his experiences as a Latino immigrant, Miguel, who came to Canada from Argentina, says that it is important to dispel the notion that coming from a Spanish speaking country means being poor:

Eh, for one thing, you have to make people understand that you speak Spanish, but you don't come from a really impoverished country. Like, because, the main reason that we moved to Canada was because, uh, economic, in Argentina, the economic crisis.

This student's comment refers to the 2001 Argentinean economic crisis, which paralyzed the whole country for weeks and led to mass street protests by angry and frustrated citizens who

saw their livelihoods disappear from one day to the next. The Argentinean crisis was in a way a prelude to the current global economic crisis and only one of many in the long string of acute economic crises experienced in Latin America over the last three decades. Returning to the comments of this particular student, it is also important to note the subjective dimension of class and immigration experiences, which work in tandem with objective structural factors. For Miguel, living in Canada as a Spanish-speaking immigrant leads to association with coming from an “impoverished country.” In other words, his class position in Canada becomes subjectively experienced through his association with Spanish, his mother tongue.

Having been pushed out of their country by structural class forces, students arrive in Canada having to deal with a whole set of new problems, some of which include involuntary membership in a new class structure. Student dialogues about the immigrant experience commonly concern having to start a new life in a new country from scratch. As Canadian-born student Belinda reveals when asked to compare her experiences to those of her peers whose parents are non-immigrants:

I think they're [non-immigrant students] just like, well 'cause I'm like Latino and Arab, you know? I think we have different standards, like, I'm not racist against White people or anything, they're just like; they're not as hard on their kids 'cause they didn't experience what my dad experienced and all that, like they didn't work so hard to get into this country and make a future for their kids, you know what I mean? They just pretty much, you know, they were born here and they have family, relatives and everything. Well we left all our relatives back home, you know? We didn't, we came here with nothing basically.

And in some cases, “nothing” means literally nothing, highlighting how the immigrant

experience sometimes goes hand-in-hand with joining the lowest ranks of the Canadian class structure. As eleventh grader Víctor reveals about his recent experiences as a Latino immigrant, in some cases joining the lowest ranks of society in Canada means living in a shelter:

Sí, yo llegué aquí a un shelter y de ahí le dijeron a mi papá que el requerimiento para que pudiéramos estar en el shelter es que nosotros estudiáramos porque nosotros llegamos en septiembre 13 al shelter. Entonces luego hicimos el placement test en [Newcomer Reception Centre Name] y de ahí mismo del shelter nos hicieron un appointment aquí y todo entonces de ahí mismo nos hicieron todo.

*Yes, I arrived here to a shelter and from there they told my dad that the requirement for us to be able to stay at the shelter was for us to study, because we came to the shelter on September 13. So then we did the placement test at the Newcomer Reception Center and from there, from the shelter they made us an appointment here and everything and then from there they did everything for us.*

For some of the immigrant youths in the study, joining the lowest socioeconomic classes is especially difficult because they belonged to higher social classes in their home countries. In Canada, the academic and university credentials of many of these students' parents are not recognized, which means that they take on jobs that are sometimes unrelated to their professions in order to earn a living. During a focus group discussion in which some students raised the issue of the difficulties their parents encounter in obtaining employment in their fields, tenth grader Miguel comments that his "mom is a pediatrician, she is very good at it. Unfortunately she has to redo a couple of university courses." When asked about the university courses, he adds that a major barrier facing them is money: "Well, for university courses of course, you gonna have to pay. So far the only person in my house getting paid is my dad, and he is getting paid, and he is

getting paid just enough to pay the rent and my apartment, buy food.”

Such economic and professional barriers sometimes lead students to consider leaving school so that they may work to help their families. As Miguel recounts his immigration experience, he reveals that he had seriously considered dropping out of school in order to financially contribute to his household: “Le dije a mi mamá, a mi mami, ‘¿Sabes qué? No hay punto en que, no hay punto en que yo eh, no hay punto de un estudio. Necesitamos plata y necesitamos plata, y la necesitamos ahora.’” / *“I told my mother, my mom, ‘You know what? There is no point, there is no point for me, uh, there is no point of studying. We need money and we need money, and we need it now.’”* While Miguel was fortunate to have his mother reject his offer of leaving school to work, there are many other students, both immigrant and Canadian-born, who are not so lucky. Such dire economic situations, especially in cases where the parents of these students spend years or even give up trying to obtain their professional certifications in Canada, can often impact Latino/a youth’s academic engagement and participation. As suggested in the introduction to this section of the report, scholastic engagement should be made a viable option for students by shifting the ways that Latino/a youths experience social class.

The above are just a few experiences that reveal the difficulties faced by the Latino students we interviewed. But some aspects of the immigrant experience prove to be more positive. This is the case with Sara, a young mother who immigrated to Canada from Mexico. She reveals that she is able to find opportunities in Canada that are not available in Mexico:

Para el estudio porque hasta ahorita nos está saliendo gratis la escuela, ¿no? Y en México tienes que pagar por todo. El estudio la oportunidad que tengo para llevar a mi niño al daycare sin que me cobren, en México yo no tendría nada de eso. Yo tendría que trabajar para mantenerlo y a ver donde lo dejo mientras trabajo. Sí, muchas oportunidades.

*For studying, because until now school is free for us, right? And in Mexico you have to pay for everything. Studying, the opportunity I have for taking my child to daycare without being charged. In Mexico, I would not have any of that. I would have to work to take care of him and then see where I would leave him while I work. Yes, many opportunities.*

As tenth grader Valeria reveals, opportunities in Canada also include access to amenities and other resources that may not have been made available to them:

In Mexico we didn't have a lot of money either. So, by coming here, it's like, we're able to come to programs like this. And, you know, we're able to like, uh, community centres, like libraries, and like parks. You never find that in Mexico like that. Even like High Park. You never find anything like that in Mexico.

It is here that we see how despite all the difficulties that students and/or their parents face as part of the immigrant experience, living in Canada provides them and future generations with certain opportunities that are not available to them in their home country. While on the one hand Latino/a students, through their immigration experience, are often placed at the bottom of Canada's class structure, they on the other hand appreciate the opportunities they find here (access to school being one of them) for bettering their situation. This "dual frame of reference" may in some instances provide students with the motivation to put forth the necessary efforts to succeed in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

As the comments from Belinda, a second generation student, inform us above, the difficulties of the immigrant experience may still be felt in future generations, at least in terms of

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<sup>14</sup> Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (1992) inform us that the *immigrant dual frame of reference* is the comparing and contrasting of life in a new country with that in the home country. Although immigrants may face economic hardships and discrimination in their new country of residence, they view it as a land of ample opportunity (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995, p. 53).

understanding the hardships that past generations have had to endure and the sacrifices they had to make. This dynamic between their actual social position and the possibility for future improvement finds perhaps its best expression in students' relationship to school.

*Ideas About Schooling: "Education should be your first priority"*

Without a doubt, the most salient idea students have about school, regardless of their generational status, is that it is an essential vehicle for achieving upward mobility and acquiring a good future for themselves. These ideas are therefore an important source of students' motivation and engagement with school. As Lina comments at the end of an interview after being asked to give some final thoughts:

I would just like to say that, it doesn't matter where you're from, education should be your first priority, and you should stay in school because it's just--it's gonna take you somewhere in the end. And you may be Latino, you may be Portuguese, you may be Arabic, you may be ... You know, it doesn't matter. I think education should be your first priority.

Another student, Canadian-born eleventh grader Elena, is motivated to do well in school as she looks both at her brother and her potential future employment at an engineering firm:

My brother's a civil engineer. He works. He's like one of the people, the owners of the company or something. And um, all I have to do is do good in school, go to university do good in university and right after university I can have a job where he works.

When discussing friends and family who did not complete high school, she mentions that "they're not getting good jobs, [and] they're getting low pay." Later in the interview she proceeds to discuss her motivation to do well in school not only so that she could work in the engineering field like her brother, but also so that she could experience upward social mobility.

For her, preparation for upward social mobility also entails dressing (or not dressing, rather) in a certain way: “Even though you live in the ghetto, you go to school in the ghetto, you shouldn't dress like you're in the ghetto [...] Like it's a poor area.”

For students like Lina and Elena, staying in school is a priority that leads to more promising opportunities, while leaving school prior to graduation means socioeconomic limitations. When asked for her thoughts about students who leave high school, Mexican student Valeria replies:

Well I, I think maybe they should've just stuck around a little longer. They would've maybe graduated. I, I think their decision, like, is something I could never do. Because the fact uh like, you know, you need it in order to, go through, life and get a proper job. So, by dropping out, that's like, you're only limiting yourself at the jobs you could have. And like the things that you be doing.

Later in the interview, this same student reveals her own doubts about completing school. What encourages her to remain in school is the value that she places on what she perceives to be its effects on her future success:

‘Cause I mean, yeah, there's been points where I've been, “Do I really want to do this [finish high school]? Is it really worth it?” But I, in the long run it really is. So I just gotta, suck it up. And, you know. Do what I can.

It is also important to note how this particular student feels that she has to “suck it up.” It is clear from this that she sees school as instrumental to her life. School then, is a means to obtain gainful employment rather than as a space in which they can develop their own interests. As Elena and Valeria's comments tell us, school serves as a credential mechanism through which they can develop themselves as future workers in the labour market. The market is therefore not

something that is found outside of schools; it is also present within them and even inside students' minds to such a degree that when asked about how he could encourage his peers to stay in school, second generation Ecuadorian Ricardo responded:

I'll give each one of them a hundred bucks if they stay in school. I'm not lying ... I'll put another two hundred bucks in there too. I'll tell them that "every week, if you go to class I'll put you two hundred in." ... I would just tell them "Just go to class. Just don't do it for your family. Just do it for yourself. Cause to be honest with you, like, if you don't do it for yourself you're gonna be one day, you're gonna be a fucking homeless."

*Work and School: "Factory, School, and Sleep"*

While motivated by their ideas about school as a vehicle for upward mobility (or simply as a means for not being homeless), Latino/a students must face the reality of their social class position as they confront the pressure of having to work while they are in school. One student describes how he experiences this pressure:

Pues sí, cuando necesitas dinero y no tienes, este, no tienes dinero y necesitas hacer algo porque decir "ah no yo no puedo" si te estás muriendo de hambre y no quieres hacerlo eso, es incongruente, ¿no? Tener un, que te estén ofreciendo un trabajo, que te estén ofreciendo ganarte un dinero extra y decir "no", no lo hago.

*Well yes, when you need money, and you don't have any, and you need to do something, because saying "oh no I can't" if you are starving to death and you don't want to do that, that does not make sense, right? Having a, being offered a job, being offered [the chance] to earn extra money and say "no," I wouldn't do it.*

This student then goes on to describe his work experience while in school:



Bueno yo estuve trabajando en fábricas. Entraba a las 9 de la noche y salía a las 7 de la mañana y de las de las 7 de la mañana yo venía aquí a estudiar, dormía, cuando llegaba a mi casa llegaba como a las 3:30 dormía hasta las 8 y otra vez: fábrica, escuela y dormir.

*Well I was working at factories. I went in at 9 in the evening and left at seven in the morning, and from seven in the morning I came here to study. When I arrived home at about 3:30 in the afternoon I would sleep till 8 PM and then once again: factory, school and sleep.*

Another student describes one of his peers, who is experiencing a situation similar to that of the student above:

Mm, no pero mas bien tengo el, el la situación está de con un amigo de que a veces se ... tiene que trabajar tanto que la mañana ya llega bien cansando. Ya, ya ni pone atención en las clases o simplemente no, no viene no entonces también eso afecta sus estudios ¿no? De que se van a trabajar así bien noche y salen así en la madrugada entonces pues venirse aquí a la escuela temprano. Pues es pesado para ellos, ¿no? Y pues no, no creo que sea, que sea justo.

*The situation with one of my friends, that sometimes he has to work so much that in the morning he arrives [at school] really tired and he can't even pay attention in class or he simply doesn't attend. And that affects his studying. Going to work late at night and leaving in the early morning, well coming here to school in the morning is really difficult for them, right? And well, I don't, I don't think that's fair.*

In the following interchange, ninth grader Maximiliana comments on how despite the fact that nothing bothers her about school itself, her economic situation leads her to consider dropping out:

No. Pues eso [school] no me incomoda nada porque al pasito estoy aprendiendo el inglés y todo. Qué pues a mí se me haría mejor aprender bien el inglés porque se agarrare un mejor trabajo, ¿no? Pero pues es que así como ahorita la situación la verdad es que necesito trabajar... Pues la verdad no sé, no se tal vez, tal vez en un restaurante, no se la verdad, no sé de lo que sea pero necesito es trabajar.

*No. Well that [school] doesn't bother me at all because in little steps and learning English and everything. For me it would be great to learn English because I'll get a better job, right? But with the current situation, the truth is that I need to work ... I don't know where, maybe at a restaurant. The truth is I don't know. I'll do whatever. I need to work.*

When asked if she has ever considered dropping out of school, twelfth grader Isabel responds that she has. She explains:

Porque bueno estoy viviendo sola, ¿no? Y eso complica un poquito más la situación porque a veces que pagar la renta, que la comida, que esto que lo otro. Sí es medio complicado. De hecho, lamentablemente, tuve que faltar [school] dos semanas.

*Because well, I am living alone, and that complicates the situation a little more. Because sometimes it's paying the rent, paying the food, it's this and that. Yes, it is somewhat complicated. Actually, unfortunately, I had to miss [school] for two weeks.*

The same student then goes on to state how she really would not like to drop out of school; she currently works as a cleaner and would like to find a better job. However, she currently feels as though “her hands are tied”. She is “anxious” to go to university and eventually find a better job, but she feels that she lacks the resources to do so.

At least some of these students seem to be entangled in a difficult and conflicting situation. Their economic circumstances demand that they work, but the more they work trying to meet these demands, the less they are able to engage with school. Their decreased engagement with school, then, also decreases the likelihood that they will eventually find a better job and improve their economic situation. Such a conflictive situation becomes an almost impossible balancing act. Indeed, as the data reveals, although some Latino/a students are able to cope with the demands of school as well as those imposed on them by their class position, many others cannot do so and therefore drop out of school and try their luck in the labour market instead. The situation is exacerbated by students' encounters with discrimination based on social class.

#### *Peer and Teacher Discrimination*

In addition to the economic pressures immigrant and Canadian-born Latino/a youths encounter while in school, they also confront discrimination by peers and teachers on the basis of their class position. One student complains about how her upper-class peers at school are "able to pretty much get away with anything and do whatever they want because they have a lot of money." When asked to expand, he replies:

There's a lot of situations where like, um, okay, we were in, in drama class. And this girl's wallet got stolen. And um, I didn't know 'cause I walked in late, right? And then I went to my next class, which was careers, and the principal took me out of class and he's like, "Oh we're getting everybody out of class and we're just asking if you know where that wallet has been." And I'm like, "I don't even know what you're talking about. But I don't see it and if I have I'll tell you." And it's a fact, and then I actually, I asked some of my friends, like, "Did they take you out of class?" They didn't.

As another student reveals, class-based discrimination can sometimes also be more subtle. Ninth grader Michelle, who was born in Canada, reveals her negative social experiences as a student in an upper-class school. When asked if she had ever thought about dropping out of school, she replies:

Actually yeah when I was going to my other school, [in an affluent part of the city] my home school, um I didn't fit in with the people there because everybody there was like those rich type of people, and they were like upper class, and they would like talk about whole other things than what I would talk about. And they're just like a whole 'nother look than how I look ... you know like preppy girls ... 'Cause everybody there, like honestly, everybody seemed like they were rich at that school like, they all had all their, like the clothes and everything and their iPods and everything it was so different from where I grew up in my area.

The student responded to her situation by simply not engaging with the other students in the school. As she puts it, "I don't hang around those types of people." In addition, she started skipping class. The result of this behaviour was that the student was eventually kicked out of this school.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Latino/a students can be the targets of class-based jokes. As one student comments:

Ahorita estaban diciendo un par de bromas en la escuela que dijeron que ¿por qué los mexicanos comían tamales en navidad? ¿Si sabes lo que son los tamales? (Si.). yeah

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<sup>15</sup> Ogbu (1991) argues that that this parental disillusionment may be manifested in such a way that the children also become disenthralled. Consequently, the second and subsequent generations of Latino/as do not see themselves as being better off. Instead, they compare themselves to the dominant populace and then clearly perceive themselves as deprived and marginalized (Horowitz, 1983; cited in Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Schugurensky, 2008b). They may not put in their maximum effort at school because they feel that they are not worth what they perceive to be the inequitable results. Since these feelings of deprivation and marginalization form a part of a long process that leads to early school leaving, for the purposes of our project it would be useful to not only explore these among Latino/a dropouts but also among Latino/a students who are at risk of dropping out.

porque para que tenga algo que desenvolver ese día. Como que son tan pobres que ni para regalo tienen. O sea, bromas así como que en vez de ser graciosos son como que medio pesadas cayendo a lo...

*Just now they were telling a couple of jokes at school. They said “why do Mexicans eat tamales at Christmas? Well, it’s so that they have something to unwrap that day.” The idea is that they’re so poor that they can’t afford gifts. I mean jokes like that which instead of being funny, are somewhat annoying.*

What is interesting is that in this case the perpetrators of the joke were not White students as one might expect, but other Latino/a students, highlighting how class and race do not necessarily go hand in hand. In addition, this comment highlights how class is experienced subjectively by students, in this case through the use of a joke that touches upon students’ experience of Christmas. In the next section, we explore other themes related to stereotypes and racism.

### *Summary*

This section has outlined four ways in which Latino/a students experience social class. The first way comprises their migration experiences. In the case of immigrant Latino/as, the structural market forces in their countries of origin push them out. When they arrive in Canada, they must start their lives over, sometimes with only part of their family to help them along and sometimes even in conditions of severe poverty. For some second-generation Latino/a youths, membership in lower socioeconomic classes continues to be a reality. Second, these students then become convinced that the only way to achieve upward mobility is through school. To these students, school is simply a preparation for the labour market, not a place for self-development. Indeed, at least for some students, school is like a job; they may not like it, but they have to “suck it up.” Or perhaps their engagement can be bought, as one student suggested, with “one

hundred bucks.” Third, and very important, is that there are many students who do have to deal with the realities of having to work. For some, this might mean showing up to school in the morning after working a night shift, the alternative to this being, as one student put it, “starving to death.” Finally, many students must also bear the burden of belonging to a lower socioeconomic class by having to face class-based discrimination in school, from teachers as well as other students.

Given the above, it is not surprising that a large proportion of Latino/a youth are having problems in school. Many are caught having to perform a balancing act between engagement (staying in school) on the one hand and disengagement (dropping out) on the other. At the time of making a choice, often neither option is ideal. If they choose to fully engage in school, Latino/a students face the real possibility of not being able to meet even their basic survival needs, the reality of discrimination at school, and a schooling experience that feels more like a bad part-time job. On the other hand, if they fully disengage from school and decide to drop out, their dreams of a better situation for themselves in the future suddenly become even less plausible. The only way out of this trap is to take steps that would make engagement in school a viable option for Latino/a youth.

## RACISM AND STEREOTYPES

**EXPERIENCES WITH RACISM AND STEREOTYPES** comprise another key theme that emerged from the analysis of the data collected from immigrant and second generation Latino/a youths. The data suggests significant interrelationships between the students' experiences with racism and stereotypes within and outside the school setting. More specifically, some of the students feel that the racism and/or stereotypes they encounter at school are influenced by negative ideas about Latino/as that are perpetuated by factors in the public sphere, particularly through media sources such as television shows and movies. These negative ideas, which have become widespread among the public, have entered the school system and influenced the ways in which some educators and peers perceive and treat Latino/a students. The resulting perceptions and treatment of Latino/a students have led some of them to question their own abilities and prospects of success at school and in the professional workforce. As a result, they have disengaged from their schooling and have encountered significant academic challenges.

*Public Perceptions of Latinos: "You're such an immigrant. "'*

One stereotype that emerged from the data was the public perception that all Latino/as are recent immigrants. While it is the case that many Latinos/as in Canada and in Toronto in particular are relatively recent arrivals,<sup>16</sup> there are also sizable numbers of students who identify as Latinos/as and how were either born in Canada (second generation) or have spent a significant part of their childhood in Canada (1.5 generation). These youths have typically attained a high level of English language skills. When asked about her Spanish speaking peers who have

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<sup>16</sup> For more specific details on the numbers and generational status of Canada's Latino/a population, please refer to Statistics Canada. The bibliographic information for the specific source from which this statement originates is in the references list at the end of this report.

immigrated to Canada, tenth grader Maritza mentions that the Latino/a youths she does know “speak English fluently [as] they've been here for a while, so they're comfortable.” Nevertheless, she and other immigrant students who are proficient English speakers still deal with “people [who] use that word ‘immigrant’ now like it’s a funny thing. They go, ‘you're such an immigrant.’ And [...] they’d be like, ‘you’re a FOB. You're Fresh Off the Boat.’” The usage of the term “immigrant” to mock these Latino/a youths then becomes a subtext that refers to foreigners from non-English speaking countries in a derogatory manner.<sup>17</sup>

Although second generation Latino/a youths were born in Canada and possess native fluency of the English language, they are certainly not exempt from being erroneously described as recent immigrants and then negatively stereotyped. During a focus group discussion almost entirely composed of second generation Latino/a youths, one student comments that many peers and teachers automatically associate being from a different ethnoracial or cultural group with being an immigrant: “Every kind of race you’re in, you’re an immigrant.” In a subsequent conversation with the same group, the students lament the ways in which their peers would label them as immigrants who either came recently or who arrived illegally: “They would say, ‘you just crossed the border.’ Or, ‘you hopped the border.’” As this quote reveals, being a Latino/a student, even one who was born in Canada, is often accompanied by stereotypes associated with recent immigrants. It must be reiterated, however, that it is not the term “immigrant” in itself that is problematic, but rather the way in which it is contextualized and used to denigrate.

As we shall see in the next subsection, the pervasive public perception of Latino/as as immigrants, regardless of the fact that some of them were born in Canada, becomes almost synonymous with the public perceptions that all Latino/as are Mexicans.

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<sup>17</sup> Dr. Peter Li has written extensively on immigration in Canada and the social challenges and assumptions that affect immigrants and their children. See in particular his 2003 essay “The Social Construction of Immigrants,” which is referenced at the end of this report.



*Public Perceptions of Latinos: “They already think that we are all Mexicans”*

Students across the data express their dismay at the perception that all Latino/as are Mexicans. The following exchange between a mostly Canadian-born group of students illustrates how this erroneous perception is encountered by Latino/a youths on a large scale:

Daniela: They said to me, okay in Grade 7 they thought I was Mexican.

Facilitator: Okay. Okay you talk about Mexican, you talk about Mexican, and right now you are saying Mexican. What’s with Mexicans?

Victoria: They think everyone is Mexican.

Sonia: Because I guess they only think Spanish people are Mexican. They don't know there are different countries.

For these youths, being ascribed with one single nationality overlooks the historical, social, and political differences of the more than 20 other Spanish-speaking countries. As one student in the focus group mentioned above puts it, one way of educating people about the many nationalities of Latino/as is to “show them where on the map.” Nevertheless, the pervasive idea of one single ascribed nationality becomes closely tied to negative stereotypes derived from the media.

The negative ideas about Latino/as perpetuated by the media and adopted by the public, including teachers and peers, dismay many of the students. Marina, a twelfth grader who recently immigrated into Canada from Mexico, is especially aggravated by the negative stereotypes that associated Latino/as with illicit activities such as drug dealers. “Por ejemplo, mis amigos, o sea, que ah, como decían una vez que en televisión, ¿no? Que [en] películas por ejemplo, de que luego, ‘Ay, que la droga.’ Que ‘¡Aja! En México.’” / *“For example, my friends, in other words,*

*that uh, what they once said that on TV, right? That [in] movies for example, something happens, oh, drugs. That 'Aha! In Mexico.'*”

During a focus group discussion at another school, students also express their dismay at the negative stereotypes that Latino/as were gangsters or drug dealers, but also thieves:

Miguel: La fama, por ejemplo nos ven más que nada en las películas. Ven una película de tal parte, “Ah ... son.”

Camila: Y más que nada que por ejemplo los latinos por uno los llevan a todos. ¿Sí entiende? ... Uno hace algo y por allí los llevan a todos los latinos. Por ejemplo los mexicanos, “Que los mexicanos - ellos son bien rateros. Allí se llevan a todos.”

Facilitator: ¿Qué quiere decir rateros?

Francisco: Que roban mucho.

Miguel: *Notoriety, for example. More than anything they see “us” in movies. They see some movie, [and say], “Ah, they are.”*

Camila: *And more than anything for example one Latino represents all Latinos. Do you know what I mean? One [Latino/a] does something and then people see that as representative of all Latino/as. For example about the Mexicans – “That the Mexicans – that they are big thieves.” Then everyone thinks that all [Latino/as] are like that.*

Interviewer: *What does “rateros” mean?*

Francisco: *That they steal a lot.*

As explored in the previous section on social class, issues of socioeconomics also interconnect with instances of discrimination in the school setting. The negative stereotype that

position Mexicans and other Latino/as as thieves from lower social classes became a reality in the experiences of Elias, a tenth grader from Mexico who was singled out for questioning by his school's administrators about the theft of a classmate's wallet:

We were in, in drama class. And this girl's wallet got stolen. And, and um, I didn't know 'cause I walked in late, right? And then I went to my next class, which was careers, and the principal took me out of class and he's like, "Oh we're, we're getting everybody out of class, and we're just asking if you know where that wallet has been." And I'm like, "I don't even know what you're talking about. But I, I don't see it, and if I have, I'll tell you." And it's a fact, and then I actually, I asked some of my friends, like, "Did they take you out of class?" They didn't.

This student expresses his chagrin at being singled out and then lied to by the administration about being questioned. This experience with his school's administrators was especially perplexing: "I just, found that was pretty stupid, and that kind of pissed me off. That was also like, that was a turn off for going to that, for going to that school, too." As Elias's experience demonstrate, the negative interactions with educators and peers that result from racism and negative stereotypes sometimes lead some Latino/a students to perceive the school environment as a place that is hostile to their ethnolinguistic background. The students speak of stereotypes around two areas: their appearance, and their use of the Spanish language.

### Appearance

Some of the major stereotypes that students described dealt with the public's ideas of what Latino/as should look like. Several immigrant students from different countries and in different school contexts express their dismay at these inflexible ideas, especially since these ideas did not consider the various national and ethnic differences among Latino/as. In a focus

group, one student remarks:

Más que nada que por ejemplo, los latinos por uno, los llevan todos ... Porque por ejemplo tú eres [de] color, “Eh, tú eres salvadoreña ... tú eres mexicana.” ... Eso es lo primero que te confunden.

*More than anything, for example, Latinos are thought to all be the same ... Because if for instance you are [a person of] colour, “Eh, you are Salvadorean ... you are Mexican ... That’s the first thing they confuse you with.*

Liliana, a recent immigrant from Mexico, laments that people, especially her friends, stereotype and make fun of all Mexicans:

Me desespera que luego representan allí en México que es, “A sí, como que todavía usan los sombreros y todo con el bigote.” Y mis amigos siempre hacen burla de eso, de que todavía se tienen allí los bigotes y así.

*It gets on my nerves then, that the representation of Mexico is, “Oh yes, like they still wear sombreros and everything along with the mustache.” And my friends always make fun of that, that there they still have mustaches and such.*

Second generation Latino/a youths, particularly those of mixed backgrounds, encounter an even more complicated set of experiences with racism and stereotypes. While some students find that their darker skin tones lead to negative experiences of racialization, other students who had lighter skin tones find that they too were discriminated against, albeit for not looking Latino/a enough.<sup>18</sup>

With respect to discrimination based on darker skin or phenotype, twelfth grader Raquel discusses the discrimination that her sister experienced from her teachers as a result of her

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<sup>18</sup> On the importance of skin color for Latino/s students, see Fergus (2009).

appearance. She states that “My sister, ‘cause she’s kinda’ darker, so then sometimes, what the problems that she has is that, because she’s darker than I am ... There was a teacher at another school that they didn’t like her because of how dark she was.” When asked about the effects of this discrimination on her sister’s schooling, Raquel indicates that people are “rude to her, and they don’t show her the help that she wants. Then she just doesn’t go to school. Like she won’t go to that class.” Raquel’s comments of how racialized discrimination can affect student motivation are very telling; such experiences may have negative consequences on scholastic achievement.

Interestingly, students with lighter skin or phenotype also find themselves subjected to stereotypes and discrimination when their Latino/a ethnocultural background is made known. Viviana, a ninth grader whose father is Bolivian, indicates that people are initially incredulous when she reveals her Latino/a background: “I don’t really look like your average Latina girl, like, you see, because people think dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes, that’s how people think Latina. Some are like, ‘Oh, you’re not, you’re not Spanish,’ I’m like, ‘Yeah I am,’ that’s like, the same thing like, they always think I’m not Spanish, but then I say, ‘Yeah I am,’ like, you know!?” When discussing the challenges that Latino/a youths, including herself, encounter as students, she complains that even her friends stereotype her: “My friends that know I’m Spanish, they’re always like, ‘Oh you’re so lazy, you’re so lazy. It must be you’re Bolivian.’ Like what are you talking about? Why? Because I’m Spanish I’m lazy? I don’t understand that.” Valeria’s situation is suggestive of two ideas that pervade the public perception of Latino/as: first, they should have dark eyes, hair, and skin; and second, regardless of their physical appearance, they must also be lazy, if not downright criminal.

Catalina and Reina, two Canadian-born sisters of Guatemalan origin, express their annoyance at the lack of public understanding that Latino/as comprise a broad range of ethno-cultural groups with different racial identifications. They indicate that they are very proud of being “guatemaltecas,” but that they often have to contend with statements like, “Oh really? I thought you were White.” As Valeria and the sisters from Guatemala attest, the mistaken assumption that Latino/as have particular phenotypic traits leads to a complex experience of racism. As they put it, it is necessary to let people know that “there is everything.” Latino/as comprise “dark people and White people, even in El Salvador. There are like dark, dark people and there are some White people [...] In Ecuador there are even coreanos (*Koreans*).”

Some students report that the stereotypes related to societal perceptions of their appearance are also gendered. When asked about her experiences as a Latina high school student, Elena, an eleventh grader of Salvadorean parentage, describes how Latinas are able and expected to “pull off” wearing more provocative clothing than females of other ethnic backgrounds:

Like, if I was like, you know, I think like the way you dress is like mostly, ‘cause you know, when you dress, if, when you dress a certain way they're like, “Oh you're so Spanish,” right? ... Like [friend's name's] like Indian or something, people when she wore a skirt, they used to say, “Why are you wearing a skirt?” right? But when I wore a skirt, mine skirt was even shorter than hers, right? And they would say, “Oh you can't wear it, but she can wear it because she's Spanish she can pull it off and you can't.” ... Like we can pull it off and people won't say anything to us. But other people, they, like in my school if they see them they're like, “That girl's like a slut or something.”

Elena's comments point out the stereotypical expectation that Latinas dress more provocatively than girls of other ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Her comment also points to the

differences in societal perceptions and expectations of different cultural groups in terms of dress and morality.

Male students like twelfth grader Sergio find that people at school perceive him as a gangster – incapable of achieving high levels of academic success. When recounting the ways in which his physical appearance and dress shaped other people’s initial perceptions and behaviours towards him at school, he comments:

Antes sí tenía un poco más de, de problemas con los maestros ... Por mi forma así de vestirme, y luego luego, pues a uno lo, lo estereotipan, “Ah ese es de Los Ángeles,” ... [por los] Dickies y las, las camisas también acá de cuadritos así y las gafas ... Así como, como que, así como que piensan que uno, uno como que uno es de allá entonces, lo empiezan a tratar así como pandillero. Los que no me conocen igual me siguen viendo así como, como, como pandillero ... No se juzga, no, a un libro por su, su el cubier- como se llama, la cubierta, no, sino lo que tiene adentro.

*Before, I did have a bit more of, of problems with the teachers ... Because of the way I dress, and then others form stereotypes, “Ah, that one is from Los Angeles,” ... [because of the] Dickies and the, the plaid shirts like this and the sunglasses ... Like that, as if, like as if others think that one, one as if one is from there then, they start to treat you like a gangster. Others who do not really know me still see me like, like, like a gangster... One should not judge, right, you cannot judge a book by its, its cov- what do you call it, its cover, right, but rather by what’s inside.*

Sergio also comments that he initially experienced strained relationships with his teachers because of the way he dressed. After reaching out to them and getting them to know him better, however, the interactions between them changed into more positive ones. In addition, he has

experienced increased success at school. “Así todos los maestros me conocen. Yo, yo ya he tenido así platicas con ellos, y así ya me conocen ... ya subí mis marcas.” / “*Like this all the teachers know me. I, I have already had chats with them, and like this they now know me ... Now my marks have gone up.*”

### Language

Students remark on the association that people make between their appearance and language. In a focus group discussion about the stereotypes that Latino/a youths face in Toronto, several students comment on how people tend to view all Latino/as as Mexicans who speak Spanish, regardless of their national family background and country of birth:

Javier: Lo primero que te van a decir es que tu eres mexicana.

Interviewer: ¿Okay?

Javier: Eso es lo primero que te confunden.

Adriana: Por el español.

Javier: Confunden a todos por mexicanos.

Leonardo: Y ven a uno por ejemplo, que sé, de El Salvador y seguro han de creer que es mexicano por el español porque ese es mexicano y no saben en realidad...

Adriana: Ya no saben ni de dónde es. Y ya le están diciendo otra cosa.

Interviewer: Mm hmm y solamente por el idioma.

Javier: ¿Y por el aspecto de la persona no? ... Ah, la cara.

Adriana: Con solo que lo vean latino - ya.

Yesenia: Ya piensan que todos somos mexicanos.

Javier: *The first thing people will tell you is that you are Mexican.*



*Interviewer: Okay?*

*Javier: That is the first thing they will confuse you with.*

*Adriana: Because of Spanish.*

*Javier: People confuse all Latino/as with Mexicans.*

*Leonardo: And people see a person for example, I don't know, [from] El Salvador, and for sure they will think that he is Mexican because he speaks Spanish, since another guy is Mexican and they don't even really know.*

*Adriana: And people don't even know where he is from. And they're saying something else.*

*Interviewer: Mm hmm. And just because of the language.*

*Javier: And for the person's appearance, right? ... Ah, his face.*

*Adriana: Just with seeing that he is Latino.*

*Yesenia: They already think that we are all Mexicans.*

For some second generation students, this stereotype is particularly out of place given that some of them do not speak Spanish, or at least not fluently. As in the case of Canadian-born student Anastasia, not all Latino/a youths have a high command of the Spanish language:

I wish sometimes I could like fit in more with--like I could--I wish I could speak the language fluently, 'cause like when people like my dad's--like he speaks it all the time right and when I hear him talk on the phone it's like, I understand some things that he says, but I can't speak the language fluently so it's kinda hard for me, like to talk to other Spanish people and like, communicate with them.

When asked whether, despite her lack of Spanish speaking ability, she still identifies as Latina, Anastasia responds in the affirmative. Not all students, however, agree over whether

speaking Spanish or not is relevant for being identified as Latino/a. During one focus group, the students disagreed on the language criteria for being Latino/a:

Elizabeth: It wouldn't like, make a difference. It's like just 'cause you can't speak it, it doesn't mean you're not Spanish.

Casey: Yeah.

Graciela: I disagree with them. I say if you speak Spanish, you're Spanish. If you don't speak Spanish, then you're not Spanish.

Such arguments are related to the dual bind described earlier, in which Canadian-born students who identify as Latinos/as are positioned as non-Canadian (whether or not they speak Spanish) while also being positioned as not-Latino/a-enough because of their English fluency, sometimes even if they do speak Spanish.

*Stereotypes in the Classroom: "They see you as stupid because you don't speak English"*

In a focus group discussion, several immigrant students from various Latin American countries report that their ESL status and native Spanish-speaking background negatively influences their classroom experiences. Mario, who identifies as Mexican, recalls a particular incident in which he was unable to write according to the teacher's instructions because the teacher was speaking too fast in English:

Ese profesor habla rapidísimo, y yo no puedo preguntarle a nadie porque sólo yo soy hispano y otro man, pero y ay, ese man habla rapidísimo [...] ... Y yo no sé cómo, cómo, cómo escribir bien las palabras, y yo, yo no escribo nada.

*That teacher speaks too quickly, and I cannot ask anyone because I am the only Hispanic and other student... And oh, that man [teacher] speaks really fast ... And I don't know how to write the words properly, and I don't write anything.*

Another student, Raúl, adds that there are times in which such classroom experiences lead even teachers to unfavourably perceive them as students, because they do not speak or understand English very well:

Raúl: Hay aparte que, hay gente que, que así como por ejemplo, tú no hablas inglés entonces te ven así como estúpido porque tú no hablas inglés. Por ejemplo los maestros a veces se enojan porque, hey ...

Fabio: Uno no entiende.

Raúl: Uno no entiende y cómo quiere que entienda y uno tiene que, que...

[...]

Julio: En la forma de como los maestros se ponen ¿no? hay veces una forma de como e reaccionan al saber que, como que los maestros, como que te, te lo explican y tú pues, tú estas na'más más nervioso, que tú lo ves enojado y tú "ayy" menos entiendes. Y se enoja, y se enoja, y se enoja, y así como que se desesperan y después no son de, pienso que, que dicen: "ah estúpido no sirve para nada" o no sé.

*Raúl: There is separately, there are people for example you don't speak English. So they see you as stupid because you don't speak English. For example there are teachers that sometimes they get mad because, hey!....*

*Fabio: One does not understand*

*Raúl: You don't understand them how they want you to understand and one has to, to ...*

[...]

*Julio: For example there are teachers that sometimes get mad in the way that teachers do, right? Sometimes a way in which, uh, they react when they find that, how teachers explain things to you. And you, well, you get more and more nervous that you see him mad and you “ayy”, understand less. And he gets madder and madder and madder and like he gets frustrated and then, right? He is one of those that [pause][thinks], “Worthless idiot.” or I don't know.*

Other students find that despite their high level of proficiency in English, their Spanish-speaking background still leads others to automatically make assumptions that they do not speak English well. Isabel, a tenth grader from Mexico, is incensed about an experience in which a principal called a French teacher to interpret for her because he assumed that she did not speak English. This incident occurred despite the fact that she had already been in Canada for four years and had become fluent in English:

I was talking to the principal, and they thought I didn't understand, and then they had to get the French teacher, who like, spoke like, broken English 'cause she was like French. And she was like, “¿Me entiendes?” and she, whatever, she's trying to talk to me and like, I've been here for four years. And it's the fact that they treat you like you're fuckin' stupid. Like they need, that's what bothered me, like the fact that they need to get somebody like, to explain to me, like, “Do you understand this?” And it's like, (raises voice) “I do. I've been here for four years.” You know? And yeah that's one thing that I hate the most.

As illustrated in the example above, the negative stereotypes associated with the ethnolinguistic background as well as the intellectual and linguistic capabilities of Latino/as can

have a deleterious effect on the interactions between students and educators. These interactions then lead some Latino/a students to perceive their schooling experiences negatively.

In addition to negative stereotypes based on Spanish-speaking background, students also report that they habitually encounter stereotypical comments that position them as non-intellectual partygoers who dance all the time. During one of the study's focus group discussions, Ximena expresses her annoyance at being stereotyped in a "vulgar way" and being told by people at the store where she works that she knows how to dance:

Trabajo de cajera en un store, siempre llegan y me dicen: "Hablas español," y me dicen "Sabes bailar salsa, ah, sabes bailar reggaetón." ... Me ven cara de reggaetonera ... Pero es la forma ... Yo bailo reggaeton y me gusta bailar el reggaeton en las fiestas, pero no en la forma en la que te dicen de bailar reggaeton ... Que lo bailas como taibolera, ¿sí me entiendes? Te ven en la forma vulgar ... Me ven cara de reggaetonera ... Entonces eso eso uff, cómo me enoja.

*I work as a cashier at a store and people always come and tell me: "You speak Spanish," and they tell me, "You know how to dance salsa, ah, you know how to dance reggaeton." ... They view me as a reggaeton dancer ... But it is the way ... I dance reggaeton and I like to dance reggaeton at parties, but not in the way they say ... that one dances it like a stripper, do you know what I mean? They see you in a vulgar way ... they see me as a reggaeton dancer ... So that that, uff, how that annoys me.*

Maribel, a twelfth grader from Mexico, points out the negative implications of a widespread and negative stereotype in the school setting:

Los demás piensan que nosotros por lo regular somos, somos, [que] no somos inteligentes. Nada más bailamos, ¿no? Se tienen un estereotipo de los latinos muy, muy mal para mí. Piensan que nada más bailamos reggaeton y salsa ... que no estudiamos.

*Everyone else generally thinks that we, we, that we are not intelligent. That we only dance, right? In my opinion, they have a very, very bad stereotype of Latino/as. They think that we only dance reggaeton and salsa ... that we don't study.*

Students from other schools comment that stereotypes that position Latino/a youths as non-intellecuals have detrimental effects not only on their social interactions with peers and educators, but also their perceptions of themselves as students. Roberto, a Canadian-born tenth grader of Mexican heritage, reports how such stereotypes are also used to make fun of what others perceive to be his intellectual capabilities. "They usually just say, like, 'You're stupid 'cause you're Mexican'." Eliana, a Mexican girl in grade 12, mentions her frustration at people's perceptions of her intellectual capabilities in both school-related and non-school-related situations:

Nos toman por tontos, somos su burla. Pero así, ah yo cuando, ¿Qué le dije? Hice una tontería creo, que me caí así, y me dijo, "Ah, she is Mexican." Y así como que ... ¿y eso qué tiene que ver? Porque sea mexicana, ¿soy boba?

*They consider us dumb, we are their joke. But like that, oh when I, what did I tell him? I did something silly, I think I fell like this, and he told me, "Ah, she is Mexican." And that as if ... what does that have to do with it? I'm dumb because I'm Mexican?*

Other students report that in addition to being viewed as unintelligent because of their Latino/a background, they have encountered comments that they are lazy. In describing experiences in which she and one of her friends encountered people calling them lazy because of

their Latina background, ninth grader Alejandra indicates:

Like people are always call, like, what Selena said too about how people call her lazy. It's true, like, my friends that know I'm Spanish, they're always like, "Oh you're so lazy, you're so lazy. It must be you're Bolivian." Like what are you talking about? Why, because I'm Spanish I'm lazy? I don't understand that ... What does that mean? Like my Black friends too. They're like, "Oh we hear Spanish people are lazy." I'm like, "How are Spanish people lazy? That doesn't make sense at all, it doesn't matter what you're Spanish, White, Chinese whatever, like." Why do people stereotype? I don't know.

*Stereotypes in Schools and Beyond: "There's no point of me to keep going to school"*

Even more detrimental to the negative schooling experiences of Latino/a students is the negative stereotype that they are destined for careers in menial fields such as gardening and maintenance. As Ecuadorian student Pablo puts it, "People think that every Spanish guy or anything like that is going into like, gardening, or is going to be a janitor." Another student, Valeria, reports an incident in which she was approached on the street in the affluent neighbourhood where father had recently purchased a home by a woman who was looking for a maid to work for her:

This one lady comes up to me and says, "Excuse me. Come here, Come here." I was like, "Okay, maybe she needs help with something." She is like, "I need a maid to help me clean my house ... You want to work for me?" And I was just like "Ah, you know what? I actually speak English. No I don't wanna work for you. My father lives around this area, and yeah." and I walked away. And she is like, "You speak English? I am so sorry. I didn't know. I thought you are a Mexican, I did not know you know English, I, I just

thought, I'm very sorry." I'm just like, "Well, you know it's kind of rude ... assume they are gonna clean for you and everything ... I am not trying to be disrespectful with you but, yeah don't ever do that. That's not good, plus I am living in the [affluent neighbourhood]," [and the lady responds,] "Ooh you do?"

Interestingly, this student is English-dominant and speaks very little Spanish.

Nevertheless, this incident occurred because of her phenotypic features, which led the lady to assume that she was a Mexican who spoke very little English and who would be available to work as a maid. It is this type of attitude and behavior towards Latinos/as that negatively affect the schooling experiences and perceptions of these students when they filter into the school system.

Other students report that the predominant and negative stereotypes of Latino/as often result in rejection by peers of other ethnic groups, particularly those of African-Canadian and Anglo-Canadian background. Daniela, a ninth grader who recently immigrated to Canada from Mexico, describes her experiences with rejection at school:

A veces que nos rechazan a los latinos, los morenos aquí, por ejemplo, uno va a veces caminando y como usted sabe que aquí hay mucho morenos, muchos blancos y así, usted pasa y de repente hablan. Y te empiezan a decir indirectas, "Que los mexicanos," porque pues como uno se ve luego luego latino. Pues yo soy mexicana y empiezan a hablar, "Que los mexicanos que esto y que el otro."

*Sometimes they reject us Latinos. The Black [students] here, for example, sometimes one is walking and, you know that here there are many Blacks [and] many Whites. And like that, you walk by and all of a sudden they talk. And they start to make indirect comments, "That the Mexicans," because well, right away they see you are Latino/a. Well, I am*



*Mexican, and they start to say, "That the Mexicans are this and that."*

When the interviewer proceeds to ask about the kinds of words used by her peers in her negative experiences with them, she replies, "Pues, cosas pues así feas. Así cosas, groserías, a veces pues así como 'fuck you' 'fuck you' y todo eso." / *"Well, they say mean things. They sometimes say rude things like 'fuck you' 'fuck you' and all that."* Daniela then observes that negative comments make her feel bad because she feels targeted due to her own Mexican background:

No me siento bien, y alguna de las veces pues, aunque me digan cosas, a veces no las entiendo bien, bien porque ... es mi inglés, ¿no? Es mi lenguaje y a veces no entiendo las groserías, pero una que otra sí, ya entiendo cuando dicen la palabra "Mexican" es porque se refieren a mí, que soy mexicana.

*I feel bad, and well sometimes, although they say things to me, I don't understand them very well because ... it's my English, right? It's my language and sometimes I don't understand the rude comments but I do understand when they mention the word "Mexican" because that refers to me, as I am Mexican.*

Discriminatory and racist actions and comments, however, were not only made by other students. Alejandro, a tenth grader from Colombia, reports that one particular teacher at his school expressed her disdain for Latinos/as by excluding their team at a schoolwide multicultural event. "There was a team, Latino team, and we, it was our turn to play, and they didn't say our name ... The teacher that had to call us, she didn't like Latinos ... She was always saying, 'I don't like Latinos'." In addition to being excluded by this particular teacher, Alejandro recounts an encounter in which the same teacher openly lamented the presence of Latino/a students in the hallways; "She was saying loud ... 'Man, what a lot of Latinos, I hate Latinos!'"

Such negative attitudes and behaviours of people, including teachers, can diminish the confidence of Latino/a students with respect to their prospects of succeeding in the Canadian school system. This lowered confidence can significantly impact both immigrant and Canadian-born Latino/as because they tend to be negatively perceived in the same manner. In a focus group discussion with a group of Canadian-born Latinas, one student opined that these negative perceptions discourage many Latino/a students from working at their highest potential. She observes that Latino/as internalize the negative stereotypes and start to believe that they will not succeed despite their efforts:

They just get kind of discouraged and say that, you know, like, ummm, like, I don't know, they consider them stupid. And then they'll be like "There's no point of me to keep going, to keep going to school because, like, I'm not going to graduate with good marks, I'm not going to make it into college.

### *Summary*

As described through the voices of the students, negative stereotypes of Latinos/as are abundant in the school system and affect the ways in which Latino/a youths are perceived and treated as students. Whether they are recent immigrants who speak little English or Canadian-born youths who are English-dominant, they encounter negative experiences with both peers and teachers. When educators express their negative perceptions of Latinos/as, however, the impact on the schooling experiences and engagement processes of these youths can be especially detrimental. As such, it is particularly important to address issues of racism and stereotypes against Latino/a students in the school setting and work towards a more equitable and positive environment.

## ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

**PERHAPS THE MOST CONSISTENT THEME** expressed by the students regardless of their generational status, academic achievement levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, or linguistic abilities is the significance of their relationships with adult educators in either fostering or curtailing their academic engagement and success. While there are many students who describe experiences with caring teachers who consistently demonstrate their genuine patience and understanding at school, they also indicate that these supportive educators comprise a minority. In fact, these caring adults are vastly outnumbered by the many more teachers who make little effort to forge positive relationships with their students. Whether the attitudes and behaviours of these educators are overt instances of hostility or more subtle instances of apathy, they both have a negative impact on the academic engagement of Latino/a students.

This section of the report discusses both types of relationships in the school setting – with caring teachers and with unsupportive educators – and the ways in which these relationships impact the academic engagement and disengagement of Latino/a students in TDSB secondary schools. An analysis of the ways in which these relationships interconnect with the peer and out-of-school social dynamics experienced by these students will also be presented in this discussion. Taken together, these findings point to the need to reexamine the relationships between Latino/a students and their educators and the ways in which these relationships influence patterns of academic engagement and disengagement.

### *The Impact of Unsupportive Educators on Academic Engagement*

The interview and focus group data consistently suggest that the negative attitudes and behaviours engendered by educators in schools can manifest in a variety of ways that adversely

impact students' academic engagement and perceptions of schooling. A major factor that leads to disengagement among Canadian-born and immigrant Latino/a students is the perception of teacher preferences for students from other ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic groups. Sofia, a ninth grader from Mexico, reports strained relationships with some of her teachers because she feels that they give preferred treatment to her Asian peers. As she describes, while Asian students were permitted to speak in their native languages in class, she gets in trouble for speaking Spanish:

Pero también es que no solo nosotros hablemos español, español. También ellos se la pasan hablando en Vietnam, en indiano, y todo ... Los demás, pues, los chinos, todos. Y no les dicen nada. Entonces a penas pasan los latinos, están hablando español. Yo veo que como hablan todo el día vietnamita y todo eso pues yo digo "Ay bueno, no entiendo algo. Voy hablar con el Charlie en español," [y] hablo en el español ... Yo un día sí me enojé, y le dije a la maestra "¿y por qué diablos solo a mí me regaña y no la regaña a la otra?" Y me dijo la maestra que era, ¿por qué yo le estaba diciendo eso? que no le contestara. Y yo le dije "es porque es la verdad." Es que también, yo, yo le dije ... "porque es la verdad." Yo soy de no aguantarme yo por eso suelto porque yo veo que hay tanto racismo con latinos, que a mí me da cólera eso.

*But also, it's not that only we speak Spanish, Spanish. They also spend time speaking in Vietnam[ese], in Indian and everything ... Everyone else, well, the Chinese, everyone. And no one says anything to them. But as soon as it's the Latinos, they're speaking Spanish. I see that since they spend all day speaking Vietnamese and everything like that, well, I say, "Okay, I don't understand. I'm going to speak to Charlie in Spanish," [and] I speak Spanish. One day I did get upset and I told the teacher, "Why the hell do you only*

*scold me and not the others?” And the teacher asked me why I was saying this to her, and not to answer back to her. And I said, “It’s because it’s the truth.” It’s also that, I, I said to her, “because it’s the truth.” I am not the type to take it, and for that I answer back. Because I see that there is so much racism against Latinos that it makes me angry.*

This particular student is also concerned about the inconsistencies in the ways in which one of her teachers disciplines her students for being late. Although she understands that late arrivals to class are against the rules and subject to consequences, she is incensed that her Asian classmates are excused for their tardiness while she is not:

*Llega[r] tarde a las clases, pues la maestra ve eso, y pues la maestra sí ... Pero también solo conmigo. También yo veo que la otra es tal [nombre de estudiante] que es de Vietnam hace lo mismo, hasta peor. Hasta se sale de la clase y todo y ella no le dice nada. Coming late to class, well the teacher sees that and well the teacher does ... But also only with me. I also see that the other girl [student’s name] who is from Vietnam does the same, even worse. She even leaves class and everything and she [the teacher] does not say anything.*

Several Canadian-born participants also report that they experience similar inconsistencies in terms of treatment from their teachers, which in some instances stem from stereotypical and/or racist ideas about Latino/as. As indicated in the previous section of this report, this negative treatment can have grievous effects on the scholastic engagement of Latino/a youths. For instance, Alejandra, a second generation Latina of Bolivian heritage, points out that she would be singled out and sent to the principal’s office for her late arrivals to class. The teacher, however, did not subject other students from different socioeconomic and ethnolinguistic groups to the same treatment:

My English teacher she, I dunno, it seemed like she was always picking on me or something ... I don't know, every time I was late, like ten minutes late or something, she would always say, bring me out in the hallway say, "Oh, go to the office," or something and then when someone else came in like later than me, she would just say, "Oh, hi," and let them go to their seat. I didn't understand that at all. Like I didn't understand why I was like ... All the time, every time ... I felt like, why is she acting like that towards me, like, I didn't do anything to her for her to act like that ... I didn't talk to anyone in the class, and everybody talked to everybody, but I wasn't from around that neighbourhood.

According to the students, such experiences with unequal treatment from teachers not only result in strained school relationships, but also feelings of differentiation and exclusion. Alejandra in particular expresses her feelings that her appearance and Latina background differentiated her from the "White" and "preppy girls" at her previous school who were "just like a whole 'nother look than how I look, you know like ... 'Cause in my neighbourhood it's like, mostly just Black and Spanish people." While Alejandra's experience also points to differential treatment on the basis of class, it highlights how class can sometimes become inflected by race through the relationships between students and teachers. Since she was from a different neighbourhood than her classmates, she felt that she "didn't belong in that school and didn't fit in with them." Her teacher's "picking on" her further exacerbated her feelings of exclusion, which in turn led her to skip many of her classes and later to be transferred to an alternative school. Such inconsistencies in the ways that educators relate to their students and deal with the disciplinary issues among them require further examination, as the students' dialogues indicate that these differences in treatment contribute to academic disengagement and negative perceptions of the schooling environment.

Inconsistencies in the ways that educators treated different groups of students are also noted in terms of attitudes towards student work and assignment evaluation. One student points out that he feels that while the work of Latino/a students is glossed over, that of their Asian peers is given more attention and care. The perception of inconsistencies in teacher practice leads this particular student to ponder the differences in treatment and teacher-student relationships according to ethnolinguistic background:

Pasa un Latino ... y la maestra, "Ah, thank you." Y así, o sea como que no lo revisa con gusto pues. Uno de Vietnam digo no, pues así como que les hace el favor a ellos. Por ser uno Latino, yo creo.

*A Latino [student] comes by, and the teacher goes "Uh, thank you." And like that, in other words, well, it is as if she does not go over it with pleasure. But to those from Vietnam I'm saying, well, it is as if she does them the favour. I think that this is for being Latino.*

For these students, feelings that they are treated less favourably because of their Latino/a American background constitute a setback in their aspirations and motivations to put effort into their schoolwork. This setback becomes even further intensified when the teacher in front of the class ridicules their limited English language skills. Twelfth grader Maribel, a recent immigrant from Mexico, describes a "horrible and despotic" teacher who would express her chagrin at her limited English skills and openly belittle her attempts at participating in class discussions:

La maestra me hacía el fuchi porque no hablaba bien. Y entonces, este, empecé a sentirme mal. Y después dije, "No, yo le voy a echar ganas". Y llegó un momento en el que yo decía algo y ella me decía "Pero ¿qué? ¿Qué dijiste, qué? Es que no te entendemos..." A mí me gusta participar muchísimo ... yo tenía alguna opinión de lo

que ella estaba dando de la clase y pues quería expresarlo, ¿no? No me aguantaba las ganas de querer expresarlo porque, me expreso mucho. Entonces, este, me expresaba lo que pensaba pero ella como que no, no entendía y me decía “¿Qué? Es que no te entendemos. ¿Qué dices?”... Lo repito y lo repito y me dice “No, es que no, no te entendemos.”

*The teacher would express her disdain for me because I did not speak [English] well. And well, um, I started to feel bad. And then I said to myself, “No, I will try.” And then came a time when I would say something and she would reply “But what!? What did you say, what!? We don’t understand you!”... I like to participate a lot ... 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 myself a lot. So, um, I was saying what I thought, but she didn’t understand me and kept saying: “What? We don’t understand you. What are you saying?” ... I keep repeating myself and she says: “No, no, we don’t understand you.”*

The continuous disparagement that this particular student encountered during her attempts at expressing herself using the little English she knew lowered her confidence as a student. In addition, she also perceived her teacher’s comments as reflecting the entire class (i.e. “we don’t understand you!”), which in turn positioned her as an outsider who did not belong there. The feeling of exclusion within an unwelcoming environment was not conducive to her learning needs as a Spanish-speaking newcomer. These feelings decreased her motivation and desire to continue with her attempts to participate in class discussions. In fact, she also comments that she started to “feel bad” about such negative classroom episodes and consequently stopped attending all her classes except for ESL.



Alejandro, a student from Colombia, also became pessimistic about his prospects for belonging to and succeeding at school because of his teacher's negative attitudes toward his limited English language skills. The negative experience of being singled out for being "the only one in the class" who did not speak English led Alejandro to be afraid of going to school:

I came, uh, I came last year ... from Colombia ... And I didn't speak English, and I was in his class, and he was always rude, he was only saying, "Learn English! Learn English!" He was always [yelling] like that. And I didn't like that ... I didn't want to come to school, and I was afraid.

As illustrated in this student's interview data, the feelings of fear resulting from the perception of a teacher's overt disdain for those with limited English language skills can lead to student disengagement and negative perceptions of the schooling environment.

Negative relationships with educators in the school setting, however, did not necessarily exist on the basis of openly adverse interactions between teachers and students. For some students, negative relationships also mean the absence of caring relationships with teachers and other adults in the school. According to some of the students, such apathy among these educators has especially deleterious implications for students who are marginalized on the basis of their ethnolinguistic and socioeconomic background.

Mariela, who came to Canada from Mexico four years earlier, describes how the apathy and marginalization at her school created a negative atmosphere that led her to "hate" her school and not want to attend. She emphasizes how "there aren't a lot of Spanish kids" at her school and that the majority of its students are "White" and "rich" individuals who can "pretty much get away with anything and do whatever they want because they have a lot of money." This negative and divisive school context is especially harmful when teachers are aware that students from this

majority group mistreat others and yet make no efforts to intervene. Describing a particular incident, Mariela recounts how one of her teachers would ignore students' discriminatory comments towards one of her classmates and act as if she did not see or hear them:

He was like, really passionate about politics, and then like, a lot the kids used to like, just rip on him for that. And the teacher wouldn't say anything. Like this kid would like, make fun of him, or call him like, gay. And the teacher like, ... actually pretended like she didn't hear. She would just sit in her desk writing some shit down. Like, she never even tried to interact with some of the students.

Mariela describes her own strained relationship with this particular teacher, as she “never tried to help” Mariela, in addition to “putting me on the spot and make me shut down” whenever Mariela tried to participate in class discussions. In fact, Mariela notes how it was in that particular class when she seriously considered dropping out of school:

I wasn't doing well and I hated that school. Like I didn't, I, you know, the atmosphere, was not for me. So, I was in class, I was actually in Civics, and I was saying, I was like, “I really don't want to be here. Like I hate this place. I don't want to be at school.”

As Mariela's words suggest, the lack of caring relationships with educators can significantly exacerbate negative schooling experiences not only when they involve apathy towards marginalized students, but even more so when they include exclusionary actions in the presence of others.

Several students also report that while they have not had confrontational experiences with their teachers, there were many instances in which they became disengaged from their studies because they perceived their teachers to be impatient and unapproachable, especially when they would ask them for help. For immigrant students with limited English language skills, such

perceptions of teachers sometimes hinder their attempts to seek help when needed. One eleventh grade student from Cuba notes that she declined to approach her teacher despite struggling with math because she perceived her as “scary.” Another student from the Dominican Republic indicates that he gave up on his repeated attempts to ask for help because he was consistently told to “just sit down and try to find out what you can do or ask somebody else.”

Canadian-born and other English-fluent students also face the detrimental effects of unhelpful educators on their scholastic engagement and success. For ninth grader Alejandra, her teacher’s consistent dismissal of her requests for help not only led her to experience feelings of incompetence, but also to question her own efforts as a student who had to cope without the extra help she required:

When I needed help from her I asked her for help and she’s like, “Well you should understand this,” and I’m like, “Okay but I don’t understand it, that’s why I’m asking you for help.” She’s like, “Read it over again.” And every time she kept telling me, “Oh read it over, read it over.” I didn’t understand, I needed her help ... It made me feel like, why am I even trying then? If you’re not willing to help me, why am I gonna try like, if I’m telling you I can’t understand? I’m not getting the help I need, why am I gonna like, bother to try and work for you?

This lack of support from teachers and other adults in the school setting acts as a stressor that can further complicate students’ adaptation to school. This in turn can diminish their coping capacities and render them more susceptible to scholastic disengagement and failure. In instances in which the students do not receive much support towards their studies from their families or peers either, this vulnerability to disengagement and failure becomes even more critical. As such,

it is especially important to take a closer look at how the lack of supportive relationships between educators and students influences the processes of academic disengagement and failure.

*The Influences of Supportive Educators on Student Engagement and Success*

By contrast to the data presented above, a resounding point of view expressed by many students is that when teachers are supportive, this plays a key role in their academic engagement and success. In describing a particularly “funny and down to earth” teacher, Canadian-born student Luisa explains how his positive rapport with students in both curricular and non-curricular contexts can be especially helpful in times of personal difficulty:

He can like, relate to people. Like, most teachers, you can walk into a classroom and you’ll look like, all sad, they don’t care, right? You know it’s just their job to teach you and go home, right? But [teacher’s name]’s not like that, he’s pretty much he’ll ask you what’s wrong, you know, “Can I help you with anything?” — like that.

It may be that these students do not actually encounter personal difficulties that require the intervention of an educator. Nonetheless, a welcoming school environment fostered by educators may serve as a protective factor. Teachers who deliberately engage students who may be ambivalent about their schooling for a variety of reasons – whether related to school or not – might make a significant difference in their lives.

In the case of Maribel, an eleventh grade student from Mexico, the close personal relationships she developed with some of her teachers have been especially inspirational in motivating her to continue with her schooling despite the extreme financial and linguistic challenges she has been facing since her arrival in Canada a few months before. One of her teachers is particularly motivating. Maribel realized that her future aspirations were attainable

through perseverance after the teacher shared that she understood Maribel's situation because she too had experienced similar difficulties as a young person:

Con la maestra ... hablé con ella, este, acerca de lo que estaba pasando en mi vida, que estoy sola [en Canadá], que tengo que pagar renta, comida. Este, se me hace este, muy difícil, porque luego no me alcanza el dinero lamentablemente y este, tuve que trabajar ¿no? Ella, ella dijo que está bien, "lo reconozco," porque también ella estuvo en esa situación también ... yo sé que puedo hacer un buen trabajo, que puedo llegar, hasta puedo de ser jefa, sí se puede.

*With the teacher... I spoke to her, um, about what was going on in my life, that I am alone [in Canada], that I have to pay rent, food. Um, it gets very, um, difficult for me, because later, unfortunately I don't have enough money and, um, I had to work, right? She, she said that it was all right, "I acknowledge it" because she was also in the same situation ... I know that I can do a good job, that I can get to, I can even be a boss, yes, it's possible.*

Another teacher recognized this student's passion for Biology and provided her with information about hands-on opportunities that incorporated this interest:

Como sabe ella que yo estoy muy envuelta en lo de biología, que me llama mucho la atención eso, este, me dio una aplicación para poder aplicar, [a] un trabajo de es tipo voluntariado pero se les paga a los estudiantes, y es más relacionado así con un laboratorio, o algo así.

*Since she knows that I am very immersed in Biology, that I am drawn to it, um, she gave me an application to apply to a volunteering job but that pays students and that has to do with a laboratory or something like it.*

As evident from Maribel's experiences, the caring demeanour and encouragement she received from her teachers provided her with the confidence to overcome her financial and linguistic obstacles and work towards her career aspirations. Such close teacher-student connections not only motivate students, but also yield valuable opportunities for career-related opportunities, which in turn can have far-reaching and positive implications for students who otherwise may not have such guidance.

The guidance of a teacher can also have positive implications when it involves strategic language use to both teach and personally connect with students. Several immigrant students at one particular school indicate that their ESL teacher speaks Portuguese. Since Portuguese is similar to Spanish in terms of grammar and vocabulary, she will sometimes use Portuguese words or terms to explain English language concepts that are difficult for them. In addition to using Portuguese as a teaching strategy, this particular teacher also uses it to reach out to them and encourage them to persist in their learning, regardless of the number or size of steps required. The following student, a ninth grader named Elisa who arrived in Canada from Mexico only a few months prior to being interviewed, describes her appreciation for the efforts of this teacher to encourage her and engage her with her learning, even when it became difficult:

Pues es que hay a veces que por ejemplo, como por ejemplo ella habla portugués, y hay a veces que por ejemplo a veces no entiendo una palabra y Ud. sabe que la palabra la ... el idioma portugués tiene un poco de español, entonces pues cuando de veras no entiendo ella me trata de explicar en una que otra palabra en portugués y es cuando yo entiendo, pero la maestra me dice que no me preocupe, que todo va al pasito, de que pues como no es mi lenguaje de todos modos pues al pasito lo voy a ir agarrando o sea como que me trata de dar consejos o sea es muy comprensiva y muy buena onda conmigo.

*Well, for example sometimes, like for example, she speaks Portuguese, and there are times for example when I don't understand and you know the word that...the Portuguese language has a bit of Spanish so when I really don't understand she tries to explain it to me with another word in Portuguese. That is when I understand. But the teacher tells me not to worry, since everything happens in steps. Since it's not my language anyway I take it step by step. In other words, she tries to give me advice. In other words, she is very understanding and is very good to me.*

Although Elisa recognizes that Portuguese is not the same as Spanish, she appreciates her teacher's extra effort to go beyond teaching English language curriculum to connect with her learning. This linguistic connection also allows her to better understand the teacher's caring attitude towards her academic success, and even more importantly, her confidence as a student.

Other students, both English learners and English-proficient, also express high regard for the advice on schooling and future career goals that their teachers provide for them. Marco, a 14-year-old student who arrived in Canada from Brazil in 2007, feels that he has had "a lot of chance ... to be some more, something in the future." He feels especially motivated by his ESL teacher, whose help and advice about the future has provided him with the confidence that he will attain his career goals:

Teachers told me to do my best to be something. In the future ... like, if the person were to be like, to work like a police officer. If he do [sic] his best, then he can go to college, then uh, be a police officer ... I would like to be a fireman.

Students' commentaries such as this suggest that they appreciate interpersonal connections with their teachers that involved genuine caring, not only for their scholastic success, but also for their future goals and aspirations after high school.

This appreciation for educators who make the extra effort to reach out to their students and engage them with their learning is also expressed by both high-achieving and Canadian-born Latino/a students. Angelica, a Canadian-born twelfth grader, comments that she felt inspired to do her best in her English class because her teacher provided all her students with numerous opportunities to catch up on any missed work and succeed:

I have an English teacher, um, just the way she has the class I really ... she finds ways to help you catch up ... which I really, really like ... if I miss something, like, she always has, she has this box where like, she puts stuff that you miss so you can catch up. She has, she also makes like, every, about every two, three weeks she has a sheet of what your mark is. She is always updating it, and she has um, how many zeros you have in what stuff, what exactly things you're missing that you could hand in. She gives you a long period of time of when you can get it. And like, it's an easier way for a student to catch up, which is really cool ... She's very understanding ... she's like that with everybody.

Angelica's comments also demonstrate the interconnections between teacher caring and curriculum; it is not only the teacher's personal attributes that positively impact students, but also the ways in which s/he uses them to make curriculum more accessible to *all* students.

For Pablo, a twelfth grade student from Ecuador, the "really good teachers" are those who are "not only about marks," but who also consider the desires of his students to learn and succeed. In describing one of his teachers, he commented that:

He kind of like, sees other things than your actual work. He sees how you interact with others and how you work in the shop and if you're, uh, responsible in other things. And that's how you get your grade instead of the final product, which could be like a piece of



wood right? ... So it's not only your skill ... Like, your, way of, um, learning, I guess. Like if you want to learn, and if you want to succeed in these classes. And even if you're not good at it, he'll still give you a good mark. Not only because um, you made an excellent piece of wood with great detail or anything like that ... Um, I guess he just sees how people pay attention or not, or, if they're actually interested in learning how to use that specific tool and stuff like that.

Pablo was particularly engaged by the holistic approach that his teacher adopted as a means of evaluating and assessing student learning and achievement. In addition, he highly regarded the ways in which this teacher connected curriculum with the world outside the classroom and with the student's future:

He's a guy that's really focused in today's world ... Well he's not, teaching just, technical stuff or autocad or stuff like that. But he's like, concerned on, environmental aspects of technology, which is really big right now, and stuff like that. He's really concerned, [about] things that will happen in the future that will affect us in our careers in the future.

### *Summary*

As outlined by the students' experiences, the nature of their relationships with their teachers and other adults in the school make a significant impact on their academic engagement processes and perceptions of schooling. These relationships influence the schooling experiences of all the Latino/a students who participated in "Proyecto Latino" in one way or another, regardless of their academic and linguistic backgrounds. It is clear that negative relationships disengage students from their learning and sometimes lead them to engage in negative behaviours, such as chronic skipping and serious thoughts about dropping out of school. Yet, the

positive relationships prompt students to connect with their learning and future aspirations. Even more importantly, these supportive relationships yield numerous other resources for students — both emotional and scholastic — that in turn provide them with the confidence and information needed to engage with and succeed in their learning. Whatever the case may be, student-teacher relationships have an integral role in the ways in which students engage with and perceive their schooling. As such, it is essential to understand these relationships and devise strategies to connect teachers and their students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

**ACROSS THE FOUR MAJOR AREAS** of language and culture, social class, stereotypes and discrimination, and adult relationships, in addition to sharing their experiences, students had many ideas and recommendations for how to mitigate the challenges they face. The recommendations have implications for changes across the whole schooling system, within our schools, and within our classrooms daily. To conclude this report, we draw on the data collected to note the suggestions and recommendations that students offered as well as those suggested by our analysis. These recommendations are organized in relationship to the institutional level at which the implications are best situated and where changes would be required. Although there may be over-lap between categories, we hope that this organization will be useful in an effort to enact do-able, sustainable, and meaningful change.

### *System-wide considerations*

Many of the challenges facing Latino/a students arise from gaps between what Latino/a students have within the TDSB and what they articulate they need. In looking to create change that results in more successful outcomes for these students, there are broad areas to be addressed that may provide a source for creating new and better opportunities for engagement. The items under this system-wide category can be defined as internal, for those specifically relating to programming, services, and personnel that the TDSB system has responsibility for; and those defined as external, for the implications that involve community and other outside groups and organizations.

### Internal Recommendations

Many students spoke of the importance for more and more positive cultural spaces. To accomplish this, students suggested:

- **More courses in Latin American history and culture in the curriculum**, as one way in which to validate the experiences of Latino/a students and help others to understand the diversity of cultures in Latin America. This could possibly reduce the ignorance that leads to stereotyping encountered by many students in the study, allow Latino/a students to connect themselves within the curriculum, and empower them through their own history.
- **More Spanish-speaking classroom instructors, ESL instructors, and guidance counselors**. The students overwhelmingly discussed how strongly language barriers impact them daily. Having professionals with whom they interact daily speaking and teaching in their first language can build bridges for students learning content and learning to speak English. Additionally, one student suggested that each quadrant of the city should have a Spanish-speaking contact who can provide helpful information and support.
- **More staff that are equity-trained and have an equity-track record working directly with Latino/a students**. The role that positive supportive personnel can have in students' lives was well-documented in the data and seemed to influence their ability/decision to persist within school. Furthermore, developing support and incentives for teachers who create positive Latino/a spaces, engage in sponsoring extracurricular activities, etc. would show that this is a priority across the Board.

- **Provision of more cultural-based extracurricular activities such as Latino/a Cultural Fairs, Latino/a specific academic opportunities, such as conferences, and inter-school encounters and exchanges with other Latino/a students.** The ability to speak Spanish freely and connect in a positive cultural space, free from stereotypes, racism, and the pressure to conform, engaged in an activity that empowers them within their own cultural context was an overwhelming request from many students across the data.

Students also described suggestions that might affect their financial situations positively, enhancing their ability to stay in school. For instance, they suggested:

- **Scholarships and opportunities for students to access economic support.** With work being a significant factor in the lives of many students, often pulling them from their studies and only allowing them minimal economic gain or support, students suggested that there be better/additional ways to support Spanish-speaking students.
- **The creation of a district-wide or perhaps school-based *Latino Youth Engagement Fund*.** The fund would be collectively and democratically managed by the Latino youth and community with the purpose of trying to meet students' economic needs.

Recognizing the importance of language for their school success, students offered suggestions for better ways to learn English. They suggested that:

- **ESL programming must be improved and increased.** The lack of availability of multiple levels of ESL classes make learning the language more challenging for the students. According to recent research in second language education,

second language learners who are not ready to move forward with certain aspects of the second language will not master them until they reach a specific psycholinguistic stage. Students placed in a lower level may not learn as fast as they could. Therefore, placing these students in the incorrect ESL class will have linguistic consequences that they may never overcome. The students clearly recognize this need for more support in learning English, which they recognize as important.

- **More opportunities to learn English through classes or programs.** One participant suggested that students should be afforded the opportunity to focus solely on learning English for one full year – expressing how strongly they feel the need to acquire the necessary English language skills.
- **Spanish-speaking ESL teachers might be more helpful in learning English.** A Spanish speaker teaching the course might allow for connections and make explanations that go beyond the limitations of the students' knowledge of English.

Students also spoke about the need for better academic decisions and options. They made suggestions regarding the need for:

- **An improved system for placing students in appropriate course levels.** As noted in the data, many students language difference is viewed as a cognitive deficit and they are often faced often with the problem of being put back in grades, where the content has already been mastered, due to their lack of English knowledge. Students across the data cite this as one of the major contributors to academic disengagement.

- **Better informing teachers about the language acquisition process so that they understand students’ development and the gradual learning of the language.**  
Additionally, provide teachers with more strategies for teaching English language learners other than relying only on the ESL teacher. One student suggested the use of alternative forms of learning such as games that would facilitate knowledge sharing and build English skills.
- **Smaller classes so that more “one-to-one” attention can be given to support students.**

#### External Recommendations

The suggested recommendations within this category centered around two major areas, which could be described as resource provision and information dissemination and discussion.

With regard to resource provision, many students mentioned that they wanted:

- **More information** regarding additional supports for them, such as credit completion and the availability of supportive academic programs in the community.
- **Identifying newcomers in order to provide pro-active support and a safety net before difficulties become insurmountable.** New families to Canada have many needs that are often under-served. The Board and the schools can take proactive measures to support them more directly.
- **Increased ability for community organizations to provide programming at the school-level.** Students commented on their general disinterest in the extracurricular programming provided by the school to engage or support them. Many of these programmes have developed proven strategies for youth

engagement. The process for community groups to utilize the schools has been noted as a barrier to students having such opportunities for engagement.

With regard to information dissemination, students spoke about:

- **Issues regarding policy.** Disciplinary processes, racism and streaming, what to do if falling behind, and the need to obtain credits were all mentioned as issues about which parents and students need more information and opportunities for discussion; these opportunities should be conducted in both Spanish and English. Public consultations with community leaders around some of the barriers within schools and the system would be helpful. Sharing data with the community regarding this information may also be important.

#### *School-Level Recommendations*

Students in the study consistently cited aspects of the school climate as factors in their engagement or disengagement with school. What is offered at the school in terms of information and support shows the students what is valued as important at the school-level. Although we have mentioned some items already in the system-wide category that could also be included in the school-level category, such as positive cultural space, there are still others that tie very specifically to the school-level and creating a supportive environment for Spanish-speaking students.

#### Access to Information and Supports

- Many students in the study expressed their need for information and supports to negotiate and navigate within their new schools and English language settings. Students suggested having a **Spanish-speaking “student guide”** at school for newcomers. This guide would introduce and support students getting acclimated



in their new school setting. Similar opportunities should be provided for parents as well.

- A funded **peer-to-peer support program** might help newcomers to negotiate the school environment. One Canadian-born participant suggested that such support programs would provide a much needed means to help students of all generations support each other culturally, linguistically, and scholastically.
- As economic concerns for many of the students is a grave one, **part-time job availability on the school site**, such as in the library, is suggested.
- Students also could potentially benefit from resources at the school-level that would help them know and understand the sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences and develop pragmatic competencies to facilitate the integration into the new culture. **Community-based programming related to this issue should be available at the school level.**
- **Students expressed that materials sent home should also be written in Spanish**, in the home language. This would include everything from homework to information going out to parents or to the school community.
- **Information regarding issues that impact schooling experiences** was also desired: short and long-term consequences of dropping out; clear complaint system when faced with a discriminatory teacher or administrator; a way to troubleshoot a situation when things are not going as planned; etc.
- Students had many ideas for **additional and different extracurricular activities at the school**: Dances, Latino-specific clubs, Spanish speaking tutoring programs, Latino arts workshops, and Latino culture and history club are some of the

suggested ways that Latino youth would like to engage after the formal school day is completed.

### Increasing Awareness and Understanding

As is evident from the stereotypes/racism category, there needs to be more valuing/respect, awareness and understanding of Spanish-speaking students and cultural and other diversities amongst the entire school community, from their fellow students to teachers and administrators.

### *Classroom-Level Recommendations*

Just as some of the recommendations in the system section could also be supported at the school-level, the same applies for the classroom-level. However, specifically, the things that are noted from the study that might make a difference for the students daily lives are the qualities that individual teachers possess and share:

#### Teacher Qualities:

Students described the following as teacher qualities that helped them succeed in schools:

- **Patience and understanding** were cited as the most important attributes for educators to have, regardless of the students' linguistic ability or level of academic achievement. For some students, these two characteristics were essential to help them feel more confident with their schooling and in their opportunities to seek help. For ESL students, the prospects of having patient and understanding teachers were especially important, as their schooling in a new language requires going, as one student put it, "step by step".
- **Approachability** was also noted as an important teacher characteristic. Students do not want to feel scared or intimidated by their teachers. Instead, they would

like to feel comfortable asking them for help or advice on school work and even on decisions pertaining to future goals. Students noted that teachers who make all students feel comfortable in class and who do not engage in “put-downs” or inequitable treatments are also key characteristics.

- Students should have **opportunities to recognize teachers** that support them in ways that they wish to be supported. This could be done via student nominations for teaching awards specific to the Latino community. Conversely, student should be well informed of their right to take issue with teachers who may not be providing what the students need.
- **Alternative pedagogies** were noted as a strategy that might support Spanish-speaking students. Teachers who also acknowledge in their teaching more student-centered approaches and welcome critical pedagogy in the class is noted as a way to engage and motivate the students.

The implications outlined in this conclusion are a starting point for discussions about the future of Spanish-speaking students in the TDSB. While further research is certainly needed, these recommendations provide a first step for thinking about how to better support these students as they pursue their dreams of achievement in the schools of the Toronto District School Board.



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