Proyecto Latin@ Phase 2 – Pilot Program
Youth Participatory Action Research with Latin American Students

Report to the Office of the Superintendent,
Inclusive Schools, Students, Parents, and Community
Toronto District School Board

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Preamble

The secondary school credit-granting phase of *Proyecto Latin@* that we describe in this report is a youth participatory action research (YPAR) initiative committed to addressing the social and academic challenges facing Latina/o students in Toronto. Implemented as four sub-studies that employed different research methodologies – interviews and focus groups, mixed media collages, self-portraits, and surveys – this youth participatory credit course addressed the issue of happiness and levels of satisfaction among the city's Latina/o community. In this report, we articulate the project's background, the work we did with the students, indicators of success, as well as some of the challenges we experienced and future considerations. As we shall see with excerpts from the students' written reflections about the course, youth participatory action research initiatives such as *Proyecto Latin@* serve to open up the space for further pedagogical and curricular initiatives not only with Latina/o students, but also with other youth who experience marginalization in schools.

Before proceeding, we want to acknowledge the important support that this project received from the office of the Superintendent for Inclusive Schools, Students, Parents, and Community; the Administrative Staff at the Central Technical School and the Division of Continuing Education, and the Centre for Urban Schooling at OISE. Without the support of these three organizations, this work could not have been possible.

Background

This second phase of *Proyecto Latin@* builds upon the initial stage of this joint TDSB and OISE/University of Toronto study, which explored how Latina/o students themselves understand and explain the processes and factors that influence whether students leave or stay in school. In order to understand these processes, we also considered the students' conceptions of student engagement and disengagement as well as their ideas regarding how the school system could better support their educational needs.

During the Spring of 2009, sixty students who self-identified as Latina/o and who represented grades nine through twelve provided their perspectives on their schooling experiences and academic engagement through focus groups and interviews. Two scheduled focus groups

covering different topics on Latina/o student engagement and educational experiences took place at six TDSB school sites. A total of thirty-three students participated in scheduled individual interviews that ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes. These conversations focused on the educational experiences of the individual students, their perspectives on the educational experiences of their family members and peers, and their ideas about strategies for improving the student engagement and academic achievement of the city's Latina/o youths.

Many of the students that participated in the initial phase of *Proyecto Latin@* expressed the desire to provide their own direct input and work towards change, as youths who value education and social justice. These calls for participatory and student-centred initiatives provided the impetus for the Centre for Urban Schooling and the TDSB to conduct further research through youth participatory action research (YPAR). In YPAR, the students themselves become both the researchers and the subjects of the inquiry, empowering them to identify and provide their own answers to the problems that affect them most directly. The dialogues that ensued between the Centre for Urban Schooling, the TDSB Office of Inclusive Schools, Student, Parent, and Community and the administration at Central Technical School instigated the creation of a Saturday credit course program in which participating students would jointly explore the educational issues they felt were important to them and their communities.

Proyecto Latin@ at Central Technical School: Program Design and Mandate

Incorporated as one of the strategies to be piloted as part of the TDSB Achievement Gap Task Force's Student Success Initiatives and Urban Diversity Strategy, the second phase of Proyecto Latin@ was designed as a senior social science credit course. The Achievement Gap Task Force and the TDSB Office of Inclusive Schools, Student, Parent, and Community have expressed their commitment to fostering dialogue with Latino/a students and actively incorporating their input in future projects, policies, and strategies aimed at improving their engagement and success.

The YPAR project was designed based on four insights drawn from the first phase of Proyecto Latin@. First, based on the observation that language was one of the most challenging barriers that Latina/o students faced throughout their schooling, the project was designed to be fully bilingual. This allowed students to choose which language they wanted to use as well as improve their language skills in both Spanish and English. Second, based on the observation that students face economic challenges that affect their ability to fully engage in school, students were paid as "research assistants" on a monthly basis, based on their regular attendance to the weekly class meetings ($25.00 for each class meeting they attended). As an additional financial incentive, students who complete the program were offered an opportunity to obtain a summer job through he Focus on Youth work program. Third, based on the observation that students often have difficulty accumulating the necessary credits to pursue post-secondary education due to lack information and/or institutional support, the project was premised on the ability for students to earn senior course credits. Fourth, and perhaps most important, the project was based on the insight that peer-to-peer relationships are one of the most important sources of support for students. The project sought to allow students to take leadership over and to support each other through their own learning experiences.

To encourage participation from students in different grades, students were eligible for one of three senior social science credits: HSP3M (Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology), HSB4M (Challenge and Change in Society), and HZT4U (Philosophy: Questions and Theories). Each participating student was placed in the course according to her/his grade level and in consultation with the Guidance Office at Central Technical School. When scheduling the course meetings, we considered the TDSB Office of Continuing Education hours of instruction requirements as well as the availability of the school space and resources. We also sought to provide a time that would provide minimal conflict with the student's school and work commitments. In consultation with the TDSB and the Principal of Central Technical School, the course was scheduled to take place at the school site on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Three additional meetings, two of which were Sunday day-long research intensive camps at OISE/University of Toronto, were also planned during the scheduling process. The process of research implementation and data collection also required additional hours during two extended Saturday classes.

A team of four adult facilitators worked with the students to implement the course: Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández is the Principal Investigator for Proyecto Latin@, and an Associate Professor at OISE/University of Toronto; Cristina Guerrero is a a Ph.D. student at OISE and Graduate Assistant for Proyecto Latin@ as well as a TDSB high school teacher with over six years of experience; Mónica Rosas is the Course Instructor, and she is a TDSB teacher with over six years of experience in various TDSB's Alternative Schools and Programs; Elizabeth Guerrero is the Undergraduate Research Assistant, and she is an experienced tutor for students with literacy and language challenges. All four facilitators are fully bilingual. This language ability was necessary to accommodate the learning and language needs of all students, regardless of whether they were bilingual, English-dominant, or Spanish-dominant, which was one of the premises of the project, as outlined above.

In this credit granting phase of Proyecto Latin@, we sought to engage a group of students in a participatory action research initiative in which they would identify their own areas of inquiry and conduct their own studies pertaining to the experiences of Latina/o youths in Toronto's public school system. Three key principles informed our YPAR approach and work. They are: 1) youths hold valuable knowledge and expertise about their lives and the social conditions that affect them; 2) youths possess enormous leadership potential that they can apply in their work and alliances with each other and others in their communities; and 3) youths have vast potential for collective organization and action across the intersecting domains (school, government, family, etc.) in their lives.[1] In consideration of these key notions of YPAR, we sought to provide the students with a collaborative and community-based forum and the tools to explore the issues

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[1] See Cammarota, J. (2008). The cultural organizing of youth ethnographers: Formalizing a praxis-based pedagogy. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 39*(1), 45-58; Cammarota, J., & Romero, A. (2006). Participatory action research for high school students: Transforming policy, practice, and the personal with social justice education. *Educational Policy, 20*(10), 1-19; Cahill, C., Cerecer, D. A., & Bradley, M. (2010). ''Dreaming of . . . '': Reflections on participatory action research as a feminist praxis of critical hope. *Journal of Women and Social Work, 25*(4), 406-416; Fox, M., Mediratta, K., Ruglis, J., Stoudt, B., Shah, S. & Fine, M. (2010). Critical youth engagement: Participatory action research and organizing. In L. Sherrod, J. Torney-Puta, & C. Flanagan, C. (eds.), *Handbook of research and policy on civic engagement with youth*. NJ: Wiley Press; Rodríguez, L. & Brown, T. M. (2009) From voice to agency: Guiding principles for participatory action research with youth. *New Directions for Youth Development, 123*, 19-34.

they deem relevant to their schooling experiences and work towards meaningful personal and educational activism. Although we were also particularly interested in gaining a better understanding of what the students themselves see as the key dynamics affecting their school engagement, how they develop strategies for understanding these dynamics better through their research, and how they develop their own means of disseminating and communicating their research findings, we wanted to work with the students through what Chávez and Soep describe as a "pedagogy of collegiality … a context in which young people and adults mutually depend on one another's skills, perspectives, and collaborative efforts to generate original, multitextual, professional quality work for outside audiences."[2]

While we drew upon feminist, critical pedagogy and critical race theories to inform our YPAR framework and to design a curriculum that would be relevant to the needs and interests of the students, we were also required to meet the Ontario Ministry Guidelines for each of the three senior social science courses that applied to our program. Despite our focus on the student-centred and participatory aspect of the course, the students were required to fulfill instructional hour, content, and skill expectations as mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines and the TDSB Office of Continuing Education in order to receive their credit. Further details about these requirements are discussed in a later section entitled "Program Details."

Student Recruitment, Selection, and Profile

We sought to recruit 15 to 20 Central Technical School students between grades 10 and 12 who identified themselves as Latina, Latino, Hispanic, Spanish, and/or having Latin American heritage. We encouraged students who expressed an interest in community action towards improving the educational experiences of Latina/o students. Through announcements, flyers, and letters in both English and Spanish, we invited students of varying language abilities; regardless of whether they were bilingual, English-dominant, or Spanish-dominant. We also encouraged students of different academic levels and with academic interests to participate in the program.

With the assistance of the school Principal, Guidance Office, and Communications Office, we organized and held two information sessions at the school to introduce students to Proyecto Latin@'s credit course program, answer their questions, and distribute information letters and consent forms. We asked interested students to complete an application form that contained questions about their interest in the program, skills and abilities, and the issues they were interested in exploring. The purpose of this application form was primarily to inform the preparation for the course. In addition, in the event that more than 20 students applied and qualified for the course, the application forms would be used to ensure that the students in the group brought a diverse range of experiences, profiles, and interests. Fortunately, exactly 20 applications were received and no students had to be turned away from the project for any reasons other than scheduling conflicts.

At the start of the Winter-Spring 2011 semester, the course had a class roster of twenty students (9 females, 11 males) representing grades 10 through 12. The students' ages ranged from 15 to 22; some of the students over 18 had been enrolled in post-secondary programs such as

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[2] Chavez, V., & Soep, E. (2005). Youth radio and the pedagogy of collegiality. *Harvard Educational Review, 75*, 1-23, p. 3

architecture and computer science in their home countries. Several Latin American countries were represented among the students, including Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Uruguay, and Guatemala. Two students were born in Canada and the remaining eighteen were born in Latin America. Nineteen students were bilingual to some degree and one student was a new English language learner. Two students had Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and were provided with the necessary accommodations and modifications throughout the semester. Eighteen students (8 females, 10 males) fulfilled all attendance, term work, and summative course requirements and received the senior social science credit for which they were enrolled. The other two students missed more than three course meetings, and therefore did not fulfill the attendance requirements as determined by Continuing Education regulations. These students did not complete the course.

Program Details: Charting the Semester

Since we strived for youth participation and input as fully as possible, we emphasized an environment of collegiality, collaboration, and community throughout the program's activities. In the spirit of YPAR, we felt that it was of utmost importance to establish and nurture respectful relationships and teamwork in the development, conducting, and implementation of the students' action research initiatives.[3] Though challenging at times, as described later in this report, we realized that in order to implement this vision of horizontal power dynamics and inclusivity it was necessary to create an ambience in which students felt that they could voice their perspectives and be heard.

Also important was the incorporation of varied approaches to the course activities and tasks that would accommodate the learning needs and styles of all students. Every week, the class meeting opened and closed with a group activity, integrating different team-building exercises as well as opportunities for discussion about course issues and planning. Through these opening and closing activities, the group engaged in open discussions about important issues and decisions that affected the group as a community, such as: evaluation schemes and breakdowns; scheduling of activities and course details; and addressing conflict as well as sharing aspects of the participants' lives beyond the course. Lunchtime was also an important time for collective engagement and community building. Every Saturday and during extended Sunday "camps" students and facilitators would share meals together, allowing for time to relax together, build relationships informally, and get to know each other in a more holistic and profound way.

While at first glance the three course co-designation of the *Proyecto Latin@* credit course program seemed to comprise three times as many course expectations, a careful examination of the pertinent Ontario Ministry Guidelines revealed significant overlaps that would fulfill course requirements for all students. For example, the guidelines for all three courses required student learning and critical application of social science concepts such as epistemology, prejudice and discrimination, and social structures and institutions. At the beginning of the course we introduced the notion of knowledge and asked the students to consider what it meant to have and apply knowledge in different contexts. In response, the students shared their experiences and ideas about knowledge and how knowledge operates within different social institutions. They also considered how categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, and occupation influenced

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[3] See Stoudt, B. G. (2009). The role of language & discourse in the investigation of privilege: Using participatory action research to discuss theory, develop methodology, & interrupt power. *Urban Review, 41*, 7-28.

perceptions of knowledge. The dialogues and activities that ensued addressed topics like agents of socialization, social challenges, and their rights and responsibilities as students and co-researchers. These interactions then set the stage for the core of the program and a key overlapping curricular requirement, which was the research and inquiry process.

To address the vast amount of content to be covered in the program while attending to the students different learning abilities and orientations, we integrated a variety of print (i.e. *Our social world: Introduction to anthropology, psychology and sociology*, an excerpt from Gloria Anzaldua's *La frontera*), media (i.e. video clip of an interview on *The Agenda*, online resources related to YPAR), and community resources (i.e. organizers from Barrio Nuevo, guest speakers, and members of Radio Voces Latinas) throughout the semester. While the credit course program was not explicitly divided into units, it proceeded in an approximate sequence that began with an introduction to the issues and theories relating to Latina/os from sociological, philosophical, and cultural anthropological perspectives. This first stage was followed by a project conceptualization stage, in which the students expanded their engagement with social science issues and theories to reflect upon, devise, and revise research questions. The students then began the process of learning multiple modes of data collection, making connections between their research questions, different methodologies, and analytic approaches. This second stage of the process constituted the core of the work we did together and was perhaps the most challenging conceptually. As the project evolved, students put together research proposals, engaged in the process of obtaining approval from the "Research Ethics Board," and began to collect data. They processed the data through transcriptions and data entry, which they then categorized and analyzed, identifying important themes and coming up with key findings. The final stage of the course involved identifying dissemination strategies and organizing a public event during which the students presented their research findings to an audience of more than 100 people, including fellow students, teachers, parents, and other members of the community.

Through the research intensive camps, class activities, and community guest presentations that we organized and scheduled during the semester, the students experienced varied opportunities to learn about and pilot different components of the research process. In the first research camp for example, the students circulated around five stations representing five different research methodologies. At these stations they viewed samples, discussed, asked questions, and in some cases even practiced using the methodology. The guest presenters also helped to deepen the students' engagement with research on the Latina/o community; while one guest presenter presented an interactive workshop in which the students learned about and practiced maracatu[4] as an artistic and political means of expression, another guest shared her research methods and findings on street youths in Ecuador. Such community interactions also led to the establishment of new alliances from which the students were able to extend their research and action. Two students from the class teamed up with Spanish language radio station *Radio Voces Latinas* and now facilitate a youth radio show on Thursday evenings. This kind of active and involved learning in various settings and formats has helped to inform the students' work not only throughout the research process but also in terms of fostering community awareness of their endeavours.

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[4] Maracatu is an Afro-Brazilian genre of music that involves singing, dancing, as well as a variety of percussion and other handheld instruments.

The students collectively pondered the social, academic, and economic issues affecting the Latina/o community and devised their key research question, which was: "How do social institutions such as the government, mass media, and the school system impact the happiness of Latina/o students in Canada?" Although all the students wanted to explore experiences and strategies addressing the levels of happiness and satisfaction among the Latina/os community, they also expressed a wide range of research methodology interests. After a great deal of deliberation, the students decided to engage in four interrelated sub-studies that would employ different research methodologies and address particular aspects of the overarching research question. While the first sub-study incorporated mixed media collages and round-table discussions to examine the happiness of Latina/o youths in Toronto high schools, the second sub-study involved drawing self-portraits to represent Latina/o youths' perceptions of happiness inside and outside the school setting. The third sub-study sought to explore the relationships between identification as Latina/o and academic success through individual interviews and focus groups. The fourth sub-study was a detailed printed survey that aimed to compare the levels of happiness and satisfaction that adult Latina/os experienced in their home countries and in Canada. Each of the four course co-facilitators worked closely with one of these four sub-study groups and served as a guide in the organizing, research proposal writing, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination processes.

Although particular aspects of these research and inquiry processes were specific to each group, some of them were addressed with the class as a whole. Details about tasks such as the research proposal, participant recruitment, and consent forms took place in a class-wide setting, as did guidance on the mechanics of group facilitation and video- and audio-recording. The students were also provided with the time and opportunity to pilot their data collection instruments with their peers and garner their feedback before the actual data collection sessions. Once the data was collected, our work with the students on data analysis involved activities that included a research camp that addressed transcription and theme generation as well as the selection of participant quotes, audio, and video footage. Each group was responsible for the processing, organizing, categorizing and analyzing of the data they collected, which provided opportunities to develop ancillary skills. For example, during the long process of transcribing interviews and focus groups, the students began to develop language skills in both languages, often correcting each other's grammar and pointing out spelling errors. In analyzing the survey data, students also learned basic statistical techniques, including descriptive statistics as well as the basics of correlation and distribution analysis.

The findings of each group, pointed to the need for further research and work with, by, and for the Latina/o community in Toronto and across Canada. While the self-portrait group found that a sense of community and belonging at school (the classroom, team sports, and the music and art programs) promoted higher levels of scholastic success among Latina/o students, the collage group found that family, friends, and activities such as sports and music were the key contributors to the happiness of Latina/o youths. When asked why school was not considered as a factor that made them happy, the collage group's participants responded that bullying, discrimination, and the lack of curricular connections to advances in technology were sources of disillusion. The students conducting the interview and focus group sub-study found that more teacher, administrative, guidance and social service support for Latino students was necessary in secondary schools, particularly for recent immigrants. Through a statistical analysis of over 160 surveys, the survey research group found that Latina/o adults cited "quality of life" as a key

reason for immigration. When considering their levels of satisfaction related to education, the respondents tended to be more satisfied with the opportunities available in Canada. However, those who had or were going to school in Canada were less satisfied with their relationships with peers and teachers, in comparison to their country of origin.

Although the students worked on four sub-studies, the organization for the dissemination event at OISE/University of Toronto on Saturday June 25th was a joint endeavour that involved members of each project group. One student took on the task of designing several versions of the Proyecto Latin@ logo and posting each to the class Facebook page for everyone's deliberation. Once the logo was chosen two students then made the arrangements to have it imprinted on t-shirts that we would all wear at the dissemination event. An events committee for the dissemination comprised representatives from each sub-study group; the committee collaborated on tasks such as creating and distributing personalized invitation letters, e-mails, and Facebook event announcements.

The public presentation was a success and included an audience of close to 100 attendees, including TDSB school administrators, representatives from the TDSB Equity, Curriculum, and Trustee offices, and members of Toronto's Latina/o community. Of the utmost importance to us is the personal success and sense of accomplishment that each student researcher gained. Each and every student had the opportunity to express, in their own words, what they learned, by engaging with members of the public in an event that was organized by them in order to disseminate the knowledge they had constructed. These experiences have not just culminated in a senior social science credit; they have helped the students fulfill the needs for self-worth, respect, creativity, autonomy, and the ability to make meaningful and relevant contributions to the lives of others. This work has demonstrated what the students themselves suggested in the first phase of Proyecto Latin@, that when students are supported to engage each other through peer-to-peer interaction in a context that takes their cultural experiences seriously and allows them to express and construct their own knowledge in their own language, they can succeed, even when the demands are high.

Assessment and Impact Indicators

In this section we offer an assessment of the impact that the program had on the participants, and offer excerpts from the students' final written reflections that point to both short-term as well as long-term indicators of success.

Short-term Impact Indicators

By traditional educational standards the students have displayed many short-term indicators of success. Out of the initial 20 students registered for the course, 18 of them successfully completed the course with a B+ average and over a 90% class attendance average. At least six students from the program will be pursuing post-secondary education next year and two students have decided to stay in school due to the impact of the course. Through networks created during the program, two students have become more involved with Toronto's Latina/o community, facilitating a youth-led radio show every Thursday at 6pm. Four students voluntarily developed and facilitated their own YPAR workshop for other youth at the TDSB Latina/o Youth and Equity Conference in May, 2011. Two students have also had the opportunity to network in their

chosen career field (Visual Arts) and have obtained valuable work contacts through the course's community building initiatives and final public presentation. Numerous students have also indicated their motivation to work towards sustaining the project into the next phase, whether or not a future course credit can be obtained. In addition, six students presented their findings at the Curriculum and Pedagogy academic conference last October, 2011.

The dedication, openness, and excitement that the youths brought to every class exhibited their engagement and success. As the following students indicate, the practicing and sharing of research as well as the opportunity to foster community relationships created a sense of accomplishment and empowerment:

> *My most memorable moment was when I went to San Lorenzo church to conduct our survey with my fellow researchers and I had to talk to people and explain what the project was about. Many people congratulated me and this made me feel happy.*
> *-Omar Vasquez-Gomez*

> *My most memorable moment during the course was when I met the people at Barrio Nuevo and they helped get into doing a radio show ... thanks to this opportunity many doors have opened up for me, in terms of our project and my musical career. In addition, I have also made new friends and have met good people.*
> *- Erik Trejo*

Some students valued the interpersonal and academic skills they learned with and through everyone and recognized that they could transfer them to their future endeavours. For the following students, these skills broadened their understanding of social issues and research methodology:

> *For me, as a future university student, I would say that the most important skill/knowledge I learned was about all the different kinds of research methods that exist out there. This gives me security in the future to go about a project or research in many different ways*
> *- Santiago Arboleda-Lopez*

> *My expectation for this course was to understand the reasons of why the drop-out rate for Latinos is above other races. This course met my expectations. Latinos in Canada are faced with many problems and there isn't enough help provided ... [I gained] communication skills and a lot of dedication. It will help me a lot in the future and benefit me in any job I decide to take.*
> *- Carlos López*

Another student viewed her experiences with the Proyecto Latin@ YPAR program – credit course as one that would help advance her preparedness for researching other groups of people:

> *My expectation of this course in general was to at the end create an excellent final project (research) that will somehow impact peoples' views on Latin American people ... one skill/concept that I learned from this course was learning how to do research itself,*

the different methods and how to use that information for analysis. This skill will be useful for my future because I can conduct other research, since I am interested in studying different cultures and people.
- Valeria Castillo

Long-term Impact Indicators

My expectation for this course was to release our research findings directly to the Ontario Ministry of Education, where real change can be made."
- Fabian Castillo

At this juncture the long-term indicators of the project's success are unknown. However, we are confident that the short-term results demonstrate a positive future impact for all those involved, (student researchers, facilitators, administrators alike). We are interested in actively measuring the long-term indicators of success and we look forward to the opportunity to continue working in partnership with the Continuing Education Office in order to do so. At this point the student researchers have completed their projects. The next phase would include drafting up concrete recommendations to be brought forward to the board on how the TDSB can best support and serve the Latina/o youth community in Toronto. One important question is whether and how projects like this pilot phase of Proyecto Latin@ can be expanded and sustained in the long term across the TDSB, so that students in many other schools and communities can benefit from the experience. In tandem, we would like to continue the dissemination of the results of the project to other High Schools and Educational Forums, as well as actively support other student populations/groups and educators who are interested in teaching and learning using a YPAR framework.

Through this experience it became clear to us that there is a need and potential space for YPAR in our High Schools, demonstrated by the large outside interest the project garnered over the course of the semester including the media, (e.g. the Globe & Mail, The Star, CTV, CBC) the board, (e.g. the Equity Department and other Toronto High Schools with a significant Latino/a student population) and other Toronto youth community organization initiatives, (e.g. Frontier College working with the United Way's Youth Challenge Fund).

What is necessary now is a sustained commitment to this project. We have created one of the only opportunities right now in our school curriculum where education and the active creation of policy can meet. It is an exciting time, and it's the possibility of working towards tangible results that ultimately engages students in this process. Especially, when it can impact not only their own success, but that of other Latina/o students as well.

This endeavor also paves the way for future youth participatory action research courses that can serve as a rich educational opportunity for Latina/o students, TDSB educators, and policy makers. The students' commentaries also point to the need to engaging Latina/o youths in credit course programs that are relevant to their lives and involve their active input in working for the success of their community. In this regard, the Continuing Education Office and the Board can continue to show their active support and service to the Toronto Latina/o community.

> *I enjoyed all of the classes, but I will never forget when were collecting data. To be in front of people, facilitating the focus group and listening to their needs, and to know that all the work I am doing right now will hopefully be able to help these people in the future is unforgettable."*
> *- Zandra Trejo Oropeza*

Pedagogical Considerations

> *The best moments in the class were when everyone was able to talk and be taken into consideration, which was all the time.*
> *- Philip Bertrand*

> *The moment most memorable for me was when one Saturday we did a workshop on gender ... we looked at all the challenges we [women and men] face as well as discovering the generations of prejudice that has affected us. I think it was memorable in my life because I finally got to know myself, and the rest of the group, and we became united. It was in this moment that I really felt like we were a family, or a community that thinks and feels the same, but that is working towards change.*
> *- Jenifer Solorzano*

We believe the success of this course stems primarily from the philosophical and pedagogical approach of YPAR. While the lesson plans and course outlines can be replicated, it was the relational work the facilitators and student researchers undertook together in order to create a consensus-based community that lie at the root of its success. The idea of "teaching" YPAR is one that entails careful consideration and attention. While facilitators bring in their own personal knowledge and life experience to help guide students through the process of research, the ultimate teaching and learning goal in YPAR is when each person, student and facilitator alike, becomes conscious of the teaching or learning they are responsible in making happen at any given moment, knowing that the roles are always changing. This way of teaching and learning relates closely to theories of critical and transformative pedagogy. It is also rooted in the practice of anti-oppression education, where we are encouraged to question and reveal latent power dynamics in our everyday interactions, in order to contribute to a more equitable society.

As facilitators, it is important to us to remain heedful of philosophy and pedagogy behind our educational practice. First we aim to create a space for equity and community, in order to learn and teach together, while embracing the personal and professional challenges that come along with it. As the project continues, in lieu of packaging or making our lesson plans and outline available, we would prefer to share what we have learned with other educators and education projects in a way that is reflective of YPAR, so that they will know first hand what this kind of work entails.

In helping to support this work of creating a new space for teaching and learning in Toronto schools right now, we want to extend our gratitude to the Administration in the Continuing Education Office. In wanting to best support our student researchers, your openness and

willingness to share and learn throughout this process helps inspire everyone who has been involved in this project to work together to build a strong and equitable community.

Learning from our Challenges: Considerations for Future School-Based YPAR Work

In spite of the successes that our YPAR work has achieved with the student, at the school and community levels, we would like to emphasize that each YPAR project is unique and brings in different people, foci, and outcomes. When YPAR work involves school credit and institutional sponsorship, the responsibilities associated with such contexts require a great deal more time, commitment, as well as human and material resources. Here we discuss six categories of challenges that accompanied our responsibilities as YPAR practitioners working within a school-based context in the TDSB. Through this reflection on our challenges, which encompassed institutional, bureaucratic, and professional considerations, we would like to highlight the importance of ways in which careful planning and collaboration with our institutional partners helped us to successfully navigate through the implementation of this important project.

We begin by describing the early stages of our work, the process of gaining institutional approval and some of the professional considerations that shaped the way the program was initiated.

Project Initiation, Institutional Approval, and Professional Considerations

Toronto District School Board External Research Review Board
Practitioners wishing to engage in school-based YPAR must first obtain the written consent of the TDSB's External Research Review Committee (ERRC), preferably prior to approaching the School Principal for approval. TDSB staff and teachers are not exempt from this requirement if they are working in conjunction with outside agencies or for the purposes of coursework; this criterion is explicitly stated on the External Research Review's guidelines webpage, which can be found online at:
http://www.tdsb.on.ca/about_us/external_research_application/docs/rrc/_guidelines.pdf

This review process entails a significant amount of preparation as well as consideration of the pertinent submission deadlines. The application and its accompanying documentation entail a detailed format that includes copies of forms such as parental consent and information letters, outline of recruitment procedures, data collection instruments, and plans for dissemination. These applications should be prepared and submitted well in advance, since the wait time for written ERRC approval can take as long as a school year. This approval, however, does not include the research that students involved in the YPAR will develop and implement. The facilitators of the YAPR must obtain permission from the ERRC to ensure that all subsequent research projects are consistent with the ethical conduct of research. As students develop their own research agendas, their proposals must undergo ethical review by the teachers and other adult collaborators in the project, as long as the ERRC has granted this permission to the facilitators in advance.

If any of the facilitators are affiliated with other academic institutions, such as a University or Research Institute, they must obtain approval from the Ethics Review Boards at the own institutions. ERB's may also require the submission of amendments to approve the projects

implemented by the student participants. All researchers are strongly encouraged to review the ethical guidelines of their particular institutions and to work with the relevant ERB's. This is particularly important if the researcher expects to use the YPAR project as a platform for further research.

School Principal Approval

Once a YPAR initiative obtains written consent from the ERRC (and the appropriate ERB's), the ERRC Chair provides the School Principal with the project details, including the names of the practitioners. The Principal then decides whether or not such work will take place in the chosen school. As the signing official to the school's resources, space, and personnel, the school Principal plays a pivotal role in the implementation of the project, including participant recruitment, and as a valuable liaison to other school personnel, who also contribute to start-up tasks such as the booking of school space and permits as well as the organization of information sessions and field trips. We must underscore the critical important of having a supportive Principal who is committed to the implementation of a YPAR project, and without whose suppose, it would probably be next to impossible to implement such a project.

The genuine involvement of the Principal at our school site (Central Technical School) exemplifies how such support and commitment can contribute to the success of a YPAR project. Whether through a Saturday morning visit to greet the students or through facilitating a pizza lunch, the Principal consistently demonstrated her genuine regard for YPAR in her school. She even expressed her support of Proyecto Latin@'s YPAR work during the regular school week and invited some of the students on more than one occasion to share their experiences with the teaching staff. While the Principals of other schools doing YPAR credit courses may not be as hands-on or as involved with such work, we would like to emphasize how a positive rapport with school administrators can contribute to positive results with such an endeavour.

OCT Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and YPAR

Teachers interested in practicing YPAR in a course credit context will encounter numerous potential tensions between the Ontario College of Teachers Ethical Standards and the youth-centred principles underlying YPAR work. These tensions may become even more pronounced when teachers attempt to balance their commitment to a student-driven process with their responsibilities to fulfill provincially mandated curriculum guidelines. In our case, balancing YPAR with the curriculum guidelines for *three* social science courses created an especially complicated process. To fulfill both the curriculum guidelines and to facilitate collaboration between students of different grade levels, we carefully planned our course activities around the theories and topics that overlapped between the three courses. An especially important factor in our work was the heavy emphasis that all three courses we chose placed on the Research and Inquiry strand in their respective guidelines. It is of crucial importance that the courses for which the students will receive credit be carefully selected.

A key tension between YPAR and the Ontario College of Teachers Ethical Standards involved student-teacher relationships. While the Ethical Standards mandate a clear hierarchical separation between adults and students, the ongoing research process inherent to YPAR work requires a more horizontal relationship between adult facilitators and students during and between classes. In addition to addressing each other by our first names, we regularly

communicated with the students between classes through various means, including e-mail, telephone, and even online conversations. These ways of communicating were essential to maintain not only the flow but also the commitment to a democratic process for decision making. The Proyecto Latin@ Facebook page was a particularly useful source of communication with the students on both individual and group terms, particularly for posting announcements, homework documents, and photographs, as well as for discussing alternative choices and making decisions collectively. Given that these non-traditional practices may place teachers in a particularly uncomfortable or even contentious position, they must also bear in mind that if they are to truly engage students with YPAR, they must work within more horizontal power structures and yield some of their authority to students.

Teachers should also keep in mind, however, that the students may also experience initial discomfort at having more input in their course practices and decisions. In our work, for instance, the students initially had reservations about referring to us by our first names, particularly when it came to addressing the two TDSB teachers. Once they recognized that the power dynamics between students and facilitators were more horizontal than those in traditional classroom settings, they became comfortable with addressing us by our first names.

Logistics: Project Space and Resources

YPAR practitioners must consider numerous factors with respect to the physical space in which school-based YPAR projects take place. We encountered the following issues that future practitioners should consider:

After-hours Access to School Space
After-hours YPAR work in schools requires an official space permit. For our weekend sessions, the School Principal provided us with a permit to have access to the school 30 minutes before and 1 hour after our scheduled meeting times. This access, which included the washrooms and photocopying facilities in addition to class and library space, necessitated on-site caretaking staff. For the protection of the school and library staff's property, the librarian's office and the technology rooms generally remained locked until we requested that they be opened. We communicated with the caretaking staff via walkie-talkies, which was a useful resource for obtaining assistance.

Establishing cordial working relationships with the school's caretaking staff was integral to the logistical aspects of our work, especially with respect to our many requests for their assistance. This was not always easy, since the custodial staff were on rotating schedules, which meant that we often had different caretakers that were sometimes unaware that we also used the library technology rooms for our meetings. While the school walkie-talkies facilitated our ease of communication with them, we would sometimes have to wait a long time to obtain assistance, and some times the caretakers were not just unaware, but unable to give us access to certain spaces, or they were in a different wing or on another floor in the large school in which we did our work. This was a consistent challenge in our work.

Available Resources within the Project Space
Because of the type of work involved in our YPAR course, it was crucial that we obtain a space that would facilitate a variety of facilitation and learning styles. Equipped with a variety of

technology and print resources, such as a class set of computers with internet access, a working printer, a projector, a screen, and a plethora of books, the library was the ideal locale for the course. The library floor-space also worked to our advantage, as there were both open room in which to engage in kinesthetic activities as well as enough tables and chairs for the students to spread out to do their work. The one challenge we encountered had to do with all facilitators having access to the school computers, which was limited to the TDSB affiliated staff. Because of the close working relationships between the four facilitators, the two TDSB staff facilitators allowed computer access to the two non-TDSB facilitators through their user names and passwords. In the future, we recommend that all the facilitators involved in the project should be granted individual (and perhaps temporary) usernames and passwords for access to the TDSB computers and network.

Secure Storage Space

Given the vast amount of supplies and research data that would be produced by a group of 20 students over the course of the semester, it was of utmost importance to obtain secure storage space that would be easily accessible to us during our meeting times. This data security became even more important when the students engaged with their data collection and analysis, particularly because their data incorporated the work of other youths who participated in their research projects. While we were fortunate to have secure storage space in the librarian's office, the extensive amount of materials that we needed to store within this space presented us with the minor challenge of maintaining its organization. We did, however, do our best to optimize our corner space by labelling all boxes and keeping them together. We also rolled up the work done on Bristol board and chart paper so that we would not lose or damage them. Access to a more secure and organized space would be of the essence for future projects.

Catered Community Meals

Perhaps one of the most integral – and successful – components in our YPAR work was the relationship building that was fostered through our meal times together. Indeed, the majority of the students' final course evaluations directly addressed these meal times as one of the most meaningful parts of the course. Through terms such as *"comunidad"* and *"familia,"* the students described how these meal times worked in powerful ways to create bonds and friendships that went outside the course context and into their everyday lives.

We should emphasize, however, that providing catered meals for 20 students and 4 facilitators over the course of a semester comprised a significant portion of the project budget. We were fortunate to have had the sponsorship of both the TDSB and the Centre for Urban Schooling with respect to these meals and recognize that other YPAR projects will have more limited resources for their meals. For these future projects, obtaining the resources to engage in community meals like the ones in Proyecto Latin@ may present significant financial challenges. In addition, organizing meals sometimes presented logistical challenges, related to the location of our meetings, which sometimes shifted to the University, or the timing, which was sometimes adjusted to fit guests and special events. In a few occasions were also experienced challenges related to securing access to the building for caterers during the weekend, or shifting the provider of the lunches. It is imperative that the organizers have a clear plan for facilitating meals together.

The Role of the Course Teacher

Although the planning and facilitation of the YPAR course was a shared process between the four facilitators, the credit-bearing nature of this work necessitated that one of us become the "official" instructor who would be paid by the Board to evaluate student work as well as submit attendance records and grades. Although we were lucky to have two Ontario Certified Teachers with teaching qualifications in the social sciences, the group decided to assign one of them as the teacher that would take on the role of the "official" course instructor. This person was certainly well suited for this undertaking, as she had already developed a positive rapport with Central Technical School through her previous volunteer experience in the first phase of Proyecto Latin@. Additionally, her 7 years of experience teaching in TDSB alternative high schools was an asset for the kind of work that we aimed to do. It is of central importance that the "official" teacher assigned to the project have a clear understanding and a strong commitment to the pedagogical principles of YPAR. This means understanding the importance of a democratic teaching practice committed to a horizontal pedagogy in which *all* decisions are made in consultation with the students, including decisions about assessment.

Furthermore, it is important that the "official" course instructor be at arms length from the research component of the program. Having a teacher who does not have a vested interest in the outcomes of the research aspect of the YPAR project is important to avoid potential conflict. For instance, one of our facilitators was also writing a thesis about the research being done through Proyecto Latin@, and while she was also accredited to be a teacher, we felt that this would create a conflict of interest, and chose specify her role as a research facilitator, rather than an "official" teacher. This type of situation is certainly one that future YPAR practitioners should seriously consider, particularly if they are teachers who are pursuing university studies in education at the same time.

While our staffing arrangement was suitable and ideal both institutionally and professionally, we would like to point out two particular challenges that we encountered with such an arrangement. The official course teacher, who was also one of the four facilitators, encountered a particularly unique set of challenges related to her responsibilities to the students and to the TDSB. In her teaching role, she spent many hours outside of her regular full-time teaching job with tasks such as planning activities, marking, and complying with the Office of Continuing Education regulations regarding hours of instruction, attendance, and marks submission deadlines.

Her facilitator role, however, was at times contradictory to the Board and Ministry of Education-regulated role that she had as the course "teacher." While she worked with the students in important decisions, she had to carefully strategize these processes so that they would be in line with both the principles of YPAR, the Office of Continuing Education course granting requirements, and the provincial curriculum guidelines. When obtaining the input of the students in the course marks breakdown, for example, she employed it in such a way that balanced all principles to which she was responsible to adhere. In this case, she reminded the class that the final course marks breakdown would encompass the 70 percent term work and 30 percent summative formula. In conjunction with her strategic planning and presentation skills, the positive rapport that Mónica maintained with the students aided in the balancing of her multiple

and fluid roles. This process involved a great deal of negotiation with the students and consultation between the facilitators.

Timing and Tracking: Hours of Instruction and Scheduling

For our project to obtain approval from the Office of Continuing Education as a credit course, we were required to schedule 92 hours of instructional time. Because of this requirement, our initial course calendar, which was scheduled to begin two weeks into the Winter-Spring 2011 semester, fell short of the Board-mandated credit hours. To meet the Board-mandated number of hours and thus approval as a credit course, we scheduled two Sunday "research camps" as well as a special end-of-semester session for course evaluations and final presentation preparation. In conjunction with the time that the students and facilitators spent working on research projects at the school after the official dismissal time, our total instructional time exceeded 115 hours.

We were initially concerned with the scheduling of these additional sessions because the students had other work and family commitments that they worked around in order to participate in our course. For example, one student would leave her toddler son with her family in Brampton while another would often work the night shift in a cleaning job that she did with her mother. At the same time, we were committed to making the course happen for the students. In consideration of this commitment and in keeping with the principles of YPAR, we deliberated with the students with these scheduling decisions.

Despite these initial concerns, we are delighted to report that the students were enthusiastic contributors and participants in all additional meetings. In fact, a key topic that they addressed in the end-of-semester focus group and in their final written evaluations was the desire for more time to engage with their YPAR projects and the community around them. The students expressed their pride in the amount of work that they had done in less than a semester, and considered the directions of that work if they had more time. In one of the focus groups, a student suggested formatting future YPAR work as a 2 credit module in which the first credit would entail theory while the second would entail action research. These commentaries, which point out student engagement with YPAR in addition to their insight on ways to implement future YPAR work, highlight the necessity of such emancipatory school and Board-wide initiatives.

Despite our collaboration with the students in many of our decisions, our relationship with the TDSB in a credit-course context meant that there were particular decisions that none of us had the authority to make. The "official" course instructor was required to accurately track each student's attendance and submit these records to Continuing Education, which were also used to calculate each student's pay every month. Students could not accumulate over 3 absences, and 3 lates counted as an absence. The course experienced a 90 percent retention rate, meaning that 18 students out of the initial 20 registrants completed their credit requirements.

Confronting Public Expectations and Balancing Power Dynamics

One of our greatest challenges involved our concerted attempts at eliciting public perceptions of "Proyecto Latin@" as an egalitarian process between its facilitators. Despite our best efforts at embodying the power-sharing principles of YPAR, our professional titles, institutional

affiliations, and even gender influenced the disparate perceptions of and interactions with each of us. These incongruities were especially manifest with regards to perceptions of the University Professor who was part of the team. His privilege as the only male and as a professor with a doctorate from Harvard University consistently positioned him as the centre and authority figure of the project. While in some instances his positional authority was necessary for bureaucratic and public relations tasks relating to the University, the stark differences in the ways that others individually regarded us created tension.

A prime example of such tensions and contradictions with our YPAR philosophy occurred during a visit from a Toronto Star reporter. During this visit, the reporter spent the majority of her time talking to the two male adults present, the University Professor and the TDSB Superintendent, who was visiting that day. Despite attempts to get the reporter to converse and consult with the two (female) teachers, the reports only briefly spoke with them, and her questions were limited to recommendations on students to interview. The blatant differences in others' perceptions of us became even more apparent when the photographer asked one of the teachers to suspend her lesson and to move aside, so that the University Professor could be photographed while "delivering a lesson." When she refused his request, the photographer asked the Professor to stand by a group of students at a nearby table, circumventing the teacher.

While this particular incident was not an isolated one, it presented us with the realization that people continue to have difficulties comprehending YPAR and its implications on the education of youths. In fact, the published newspaper article, entitled "Saturday program pays Spanish-speaking students cash to study their peers," made no mention of YPAR or even of the fact that the course was facilitated by four people. With the accompanying photograph in which the Professor is standing and smiling with a group of three racialized youths at a table, our YPAR work, at least in this instance, was reduced to a traditional school space resplendent with hierarchies between the adult figure and the students.

Another way in which perceptions and expectations from the public manifested in our work was through our interactions with other educators. For instance, two of our students were invited to speak at a panel for teachers at Central Technical School about their experiences in the course. While many teachers were impressed and appreciated what the students had to say, some teachers insisted that these two students were exceptions and did not reflect the eloquence and commitment to education of other Latin American students. Needless to say, such racist expectations illustrated precisely what the students often insisted were stereotypes that they to confront in school. It as also interesting, in addition, that when we submitted the mid-term grades for the course, there was incredulity among some administrators about the fact that all of the students enrolled were in fact passing the course with excellent marks, a reflection, again, of the assumption that these students are not capable of doing excellent academic work at high levels of expectations.

Sustainability

As a key tenet of YPAR is sustainability, we would suggest that future YPAR practitioners consider the after-effects of the work they do with youths. While we recognize that our YPAR work was implemented as a pilot study, questions about our next steps have repeatedly been raised by various parties, including the students, who continue to ask when Proyecto Latin@ will

happen again, even as we complete this report. Such questions require focused attention and concrete planning, particularly with respect to the commitment that the TDSB has pledged to its Latino/a students.

The words of the students themselves provide strong support for the continuation of YPAR work in TDSB schools. Their oral and written evaluations of the course demonstrate the ways in which our work has influenced not only the ways in which they approach research, but also the powerful ways in which community and youth-led endeavours impacted the ways in which they perceive themselves academically and personally. While one student indicated that the course influenced his decision to continue his studies, another student revealed that the course provided her with a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem as a Latina and as a researcher. These commentaries reveal that YPAR work is not only an alternative manner of engaging youths with their education, but also an emancipatory means of nurturing community networks and alliances committed to social justice. With these ideas in mind, we emphasize the importance of maintaining the momentum of our work.

Since the end of the course in June 2011, we have maintained contact with the students through e-mail and Facebook. The TDSB and the Centre for Urban Schooling have continued to provide its support for our work, and have provided a group of students with the means to travel to Ohio to present their work at the Curriculum and Pedagogy Conference. While we were prepared to take the entire group of students to Ohio, some students were unable to travel with us because of factors such as their post-secondary school schedules or their refugee status, which prevented them from leaving and re-entering Canada. The students continue to garner the attention of other academics and educators, and have recently been invited to present at the American Educational Research Association Conference, which will take place in Vancouver in April 2012. Once again, the TDSB and Centre for Urban Schooling are providing their generous financial support, and we are currently in the planning stages for the conference presentation.

Concluding Thoughts

During a recent conversation with the Principal and member of the Guidance Office at Central Technical School, we discussed the impact that the work we did during the YPAR project had on the students who are still at the school. The staff described the ways in which students who were part of the program had become active participants in the school community, advocating for their own educational rights, and pursuing their educational dreams. We also heard about the numerous students who had come by the Guidance Office asking when *Proyecto Latin@* would begin next term. In our conversation, we talked about the important ways in which the students in our project had discovered a new voice with which to advocate for themselves and for others, and to feel that they, too, deserved to receive an excellent education. We were excited to hear these reports and this underscored our conviction that such projects needs to continue, not just to the Latin American community, but for all students who experience marginalization and silencing in schools. We trust that the TDSB will continue its commitment to these students and that our work will serve as an example of what is possible as a new educational alternative.