

St. Olaf Community-Based Research:

A Study of the TORCH Collaborative Northfield Middle School

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### Abstract

*This community-based research project examines the TORCH (Tackling Obstacles Raising College Hopes) program within the Northfield Middle School. It seeks to highlight some of the lived experiences of Latino students at this school. Data was collected through participant observation at the MSYC (Middle School Youth Center) and from 33 interviews with students, staff, volunteers, and teachers at the Middle School. Through the framework of social capital theory this study seeks to examine the impact of TORCH, specifically on obstacles that contribute to the success or failure of Latino students. Four themes emerged from the findings: Parent-teacher involvement, teacher awareness, student obstacles/needs, and understanding of TORCH. Analysis of these findings aims to offer recommendations for improvements of the TORCH program.*

## **SUMMARY FINDINGS**

- Our participants reported a significant lack of interaction between the teachers and Latino parents. Many teachers perceived Latino parents to be less involved in their child's academic success. There was no consensus among teachers as to the cause of this phenomenon.
- Teachers reported varied levels of understanding of Latino students' experiences. Some appeared to be more cognizant of obstacles and needs than others. The majority of participants agreed that there should be more teacher preparation and education on Latino culture and teaching methods.

- Participants stated common obstacles for Latino students to be limited English proficiency, access to educational resources, and lack of parent involvement.
- The majority of participants other than those directly involved with TORCH knew little about the program, especially its presence at the Middle School. Students were also unclear with TORCH but recognized Susan Sanderson and her role in providing opportunities for them.
- Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) was often noted as a frustrating obstacle to the goals of the Northfield Middle School.
- Suggestions include improving communication between TORCH and the Middle School staff, more educational in-services on Latino culture for teachers, and hiring more bilingual and bicultural staff members.

## **SETTING**

As students of St. Olaf College, we are researching in the Northfield community and are participating in a new community based research program. Our research is focused in the small town of Northfield, Minnesota. Known to some as a town of colleges, cows, and contentment, Northfield may seem like a quiet farming town yet it displays certain characteristics similar to urban and suburban areas. The town hosts exemplary educational systems, from a handful of elementary schools, to the middle and high school, to the two top-caliber private colleges.

Historically, Northfield began as a flour-milling town and later developed into a dairy and beef center (NACC 2009). In the last decade, sprawling suburban developments emerged on the east edge of Northfield where many business people from the metro area rest their heads at night. From the historic downtown strip of Division Street to the new developments and the Viking Terrace neighborhood, Northfield is a surprisingly diverse place. One of the more recent issues is that, like many other cities around Minnesota and the U.S. Northfield has experienced a huge increase in immigration over the last decade. Latino immigration is the primary factor in the diversification of the Northfield demographic. In fact, a grant written by the TORCH program states the number of minority families living in the area has increased sevenfold since 1990. The percentage of Latinos living in Rice County is now twice the Minnesota state average (TORCH 2008).

The structural layout of Northfield has adapted to the recent influx of immigration. The most visible adaptation is in Viking Terrace, located on the edge of

town. Living in mobile homes, many of the Latino immigrants reside in Viking Terrace where they live in proximity to their relatives and other Latinos.

Viking Terrace is indiscreetly separated from the rest of central Northfield. Highway 3, a set of train tracks, and a tall wooden fence that line the back of the trailer park all work to spatially isolate the neighborhood from the rest of the community. Although some Latino students live in a physically separated and arguably neglected neighborhood, they attend public school with the rest of the Northfield population. Even though they go to the same school, certain statistics indicate that Latino students are not performing at the same level as other students.

For example, in the last decade, Latino immigration into Northfield created a new category of special needs students within the district: students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP). On a statewide level, immigrant students' presence in public schools necessitates new structural changes to accommodate their needs. In their most recent publication, the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership (MMEP) addressed the need for a structural and systemic change to improve the achievement disparities among Students of Color. The report claims, "White and minority students enter school with quite different levels of knowledge, but they increase their knowledge by similar amounts in the classroom. The result is that the gap between them remains about the same" (MMEP:2009).

As Minnesota expands its immigrant base of predominantly East Africans, Asians, and Latinos, the public school systems around the state must educate students of diverse and varied backgrounds. Many students in the public school system are now

'Students of Color', part of a trend of rising diversity. A study by the MMEP states that “almost 1 in 4 of all students were students of color or American Indian students in 2008 and, when combined with declining White student enrollments, represent a rapidly growing share of our student population. This figure was 1 in 5 in 2005” (MMEP:2009). In fact, these students represent most of the Minnesotan immigrant population and have an immediate impact on the school system. Data from a recent study finds that “of the 18,254 new immigrants who in 2006 entered Minnesota, 5,656 (31 percent of the total) were under 18 years old, and 3,149 (17 percent) were between the ages of 18 and 24 years” (MMEP:2009).

With the increase of the proportion of diverse students within Minnesota public schools comes an increase of students that are learning English. As of 2009, “31 percent of all students of color and American Indian students are classified as English Language Learners for a total of 61,292 students” (MMEP:2009). Data for Northfield shows in 2008, 115 students out of the 908 that attend the Middle School are of minority status—that is 12.67% of the student body (MNDE:2008). Out of the entire school, 61 (6.7%) students are classified as LEP and 155 students (17.1%) receive free or reduced prices on their lunches (MNDE:2008). Many of the minority students enrolled have LEP and are also low-income students. These circumstances often lead students to be categorized as “at-risk” students, meaning they are disadvantaged to a point of endangering their graduation. A student placed in the 'at-risk' category will likely be tracked by school staff and offered extra assistance with academic and social help.

In the Northfield Public Schools, Tackling Obstacles, Reaching College Hopes (TORCH) is one program designed to specifically target the children of immigrants and low-income students. Established within the Northfield High School and now implemented at the Middle School, TORCH aims to improve the graduation rate and college preparation for the 'at-risk' Latino and low-income students. In order to get at the root causes of the achievement and proficiency gap for 'at-risk' students, TORCH extended its reach to the middle school where our research is focused. This program aligns with the goals of the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership (MMEP) as a way of bridging the achievement gap between White students and 'Students of Color'. TORCH directors look to graduation rates and enrollment in post-secondary institutions to show the discrepancy between these two groups of students.

The TORCH program arose from an awareness of the unsettling achievement gap found between Latino and White students in Northfield. With the intention of providing academic and social support, career exploration, and connections with post-secondary education opportunities, the TORCH initiative focuses on all Latino, English Language Learners (ELL), low-income, and first generation college students (TORCH:2008). It should be noted that our research only focused on the Latino students at the Middle School.

A Minnesota Department of Education data set reveals that 82 out of the 115 minority students at Northfield Middle School are Hispanic (MNDE:2009). Of these students, more than two-thirds are considered Limited English Proficient (LEP) (TORCH:2008).

TORCH partners write that,

As a district, Northfield has a graduation rate of more than 91%, with over 85% of high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary institutions. Unfortunately, in the past, Northfield's Latino children have not experienced this same success. From 2001-2004, only 15 Latino students graduated from Northfield Public Schools, while 27 dropped out – a graduation rate of 36%. During that time, fewer than five of the Latino graduates pursued postsecondary options after high school graduation (TORCH:2008).

The focus of our study is Latino students in the TORCH initiative. We spent the majority of our time at the Middle School's Youth Center (MSYC) program where we observed and interviewed students. The MSYC is an after-school program for students requiring academic help. Many of the students who attend the Youth Center are also involved in the TORCH program.

A typical day at the Youth Center starts right after the formal school day finishes. Anywhere from 15-30 students make their way to the room located within the Middle School. For 15 minutes, the students are free to play games and socialize with their peers after a long day of classes. Activities during this period typically include foosball, air hockey, crafts, and Nintendo Wii. After this community time, the students move to a classroom or computer lab to work on their homework. If students do not have homework, they must be participating in some sort of intellectual activity (crosswords, word finds, puzzles, flashcards, trivia, etc).

Another option is for the students to spend time with an after-school ESL teacher who works on school projects and fun learning activities. When this period is finished, the students regroup in the Youth Center room to continue socializing. At this point, the volunteers begin the daily activity with the students, which range from cooking on

Thursdays, to dodge ball on Wednesdays, with holiday/cultural celebrations in between. The students have significant freedom to do what they want at the Youth Center but the staff and volunteers are a constant presence that encourages academic focus.

The Youth Center functions due to the work of a number of supervisors and volunteers. At least one permanent supervisor is always present and in charge of the Youth Center operations. Most of the supervising however comes from college and high school volunteers. These volunteers work through organizations at St. Olaf College, Carleton College, and the Northfield High School. It should be noted that the majority of volunteers are not Latino and are not proficient in Spanish.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of our study is to qualitatively assess the TORCH program at the Northfield Middle School with an emphasis on the lived experience of Latino students. We seek to analyze the effects of TORCH on the lives of Latino Middle School students and gather descriptive data through observation and interviews. As students in a research methods class engaged in a community based research project in which we gathered relevant information for the TORCH program. We were able to provide our time and knowledge through the medium of required coursework to assist the TORCH program in completing this research. Our findings will contribute to previous research completed by TORCH. This is the first collaborative research study conducted by St. Olaf students for the TORCH program.

Originally, the idea for this research project came from the TORCH team. The coordinator of the TORCH program contacted St. Olaf College about the prospect of a collaborative project and was connected with the professor of the Ethnographic Research Methods class, Chris Chiappari. At this point, our group chose to study TORCH at the Middle School. We cooperated throughout our entire project with the Middle School TORCH Coordinator, Susan Sanderson. Employing principles of Community-Based Research, we included Sanderson in our research and findings throughout the process.

As we conducted our research, we kept these questions in mind:

- How does the TORCH program impact students?
- What factors/obstacles contribute to the success or failure of Latino students?
- How can TORCH be improved?

Ultimately, our goal as researchers and volunteers is to contribute to TORCH efforts to encourage academic achievement for Latino students. We hope that our findings and recommendations will be helpful to the TORCH program and that they might provide insight into possible improvements. In writing this paper, we are conscious of the language we use and hope that we provide a discussion of the situation and circumstances of Latinos without perpetuating any of the inequalities they experience in the US.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### *Assimilation*

Due to the subject of our study, we found literature pertaining to immigration issues and Latino community dynamics useful in guiding the analysis of our findings. Within the discussion of immigration, lies the topic of assimilation. In the dominant American discourse, assimilation is a process that chronologically follows the act of immigrating into a country. In his book *The New Second Generation*, Alejandro Portes writes that assimilation “has always been more than a convenient word to enumerate the ways in which immigrants survive; it has also been a term disclosing hopes about how immigrants 'should' behave” (1996:30). Portes describes assimilation as a process or a rubric for behaving and acting 'American'. But what are the results or products of assimilation? Portes notes that there are many outcomes, but that they depend on immigrant groups' ability to integrate into the larger social network. He notes that assimilation is not a consistent or routine process, but one that takes different forms and meanings for various immigrant groups. He states that immigration adaptation is a segmented process that can lead to different outcomes. When it comes to Latino immigration, Villenas writes, "among the myths in the immigration debate is that immigrants and their children do not assimilate well" (1999:419).

Some of these assimilation myths are further explored by Portes. In his article “Educating the second generation,” he discusses how segmented assimilation can lead to different outcomes for immigrant groups. He writes that some

"are on course for a rapid process of upward assimilation, riding on the strength of family and community resources, while others have a high probability of undergoing 'downward assimilation' because of a compounded set of family and community disadvantages" (1999:374).

Education is especially important in avoiding downward assimilation. Portes notes that because most second-generation immigrants are school-aged children, their "key adaptation outcomes do not have to do with labor market performance, but with educational achievement" (1999:373). Portes states because educational achievement and performance are both predictors "of future career mobility, differences among students of various nationalities point to potential inequalities in their eventual economic and social adaptation" (1999:374). This indicates that the education students receive is a large predictor of their future.

### *Social Capital*

Along with education social capital can potentially help immigrant students avoid downward assimilation. As defined by Portes, Bourdieu and others (1996, 2000, 2001), social capital refers to non-economic resources like relationships, social networks, trust, etc. that help members change their position in society, or accumulate different resources. Many theorists have addressed the concept of social capital, meaning the term is open to multiple definitions and understandings. Social capital is not one specific theory, but rather a collection of ideas that highlight the importance of social relationships. Portes describes social capital as "a process by which individuals use their membership in a

particular group to gain access to valuable resources” (1996:31), and that social capital “originates from shared feelings of social belonging, trust, and reciprocity” (1996:34).

With social capital, resources are rooted in relationships. Theorists who use the concept of social capital believe that social context is important for understanding human behavior. For example, in his paper titled "Two Concepts of Social Capital: Bourdieu vs. Putnam," Martti Siisiäinen writes that "membership in groups" and "the social relations arising from the membership can be utilized in efforts to improve the social position of the actors in a variety of different fields" (2000:12). This shows how social capital aids the process of social mobility.

It is important to note, however, that the social capital theory does have limitations. Relationships are not enough to overcome some of society’s structural obstacles. For example, Portes writes that "what individual immigrants bring along the way of humans and social capital is important, but so is the structural context that receives them and sets them in their course" (1999:392). Discrimination can keep immigrant groups in "conditions of disadvantage" that even the most integrated social networks cannot overcome. It is important to note that although social capital may endow individuals with power to potentially overcome their circumstances, it is not a panacea for all social ills.

### *Social Capital and Education*

We are also interested in a body of research that explores the relationship between social capital and education. Connections between the two issues provide depth to our

study of academic achievement of Latino youth at the Middle School. The elements of social capital that we will focus on are parent involvement, student sense of belonging in the academic community, and teacher expectations/support of students.

A study by Grace Kao (2007) focused on the extent to which immigrant minorities were underprivileged in their access to social capital and how it affects and relates to educational achievement. Her research notes that student achievement is influenced by access to certain forms of social capital. Kao argues that researchers have investigated the effect of social capital on educational achievement of students but that little research has been done with immigrant and minority students.

Kao writes that studies have “consistently found that White children and third-generation immigrant children possess higher levels of social capital than minority and immigrant children” (1997:30). If immigrant children have lower levels of social capital, what effect does this have on educational outcomes? Studies that have looked at the relationship between social capital and educational attainment “report overall positive effects of social capital on students’ average grades, standardized test scores, hours spent on homework, high school completion, and enrollment in post-secondary education” (Kao 1997:31).

One element of social capital in education is parental involvement. Parent involvement can take the form of volunteering in the classroom or on a committee, or simply attending school events like parent-teacher conferences. Kuperminc writes, “Parent involvement can be viewed as a form of social capital, contributing resources that

support students' academic motivation and affirm the importance placed by their families on education" (2008:470).

Research by Brewster shows that parental involvement "is a critical factor in determining many kinds of successful youth outcomes, especially in the case of at-risk youth," particularly in the case of "school engagement on the part of Latino youth" (2004:61).

Previous studies have shown that "working-class parents are generally less likely to know other parents from their children's schools and tend to feel less comfortable interacting with teachers and school administrators than middle class parents do" (Kao 1997:39). Other research by the National Center for Education Statistics reports that "Hispanic parents are significantly less likely than White parents to attend general meetings and school events, act as a volunteer, or serve on school committees" (Kao 1997:471).

This research on parent involvement argues that if parents utilize this resource, they may be able to increase their child's achievement level.

Some research shows that "though their involvement, parents of Latino middle school students can bolster their children's sense of connection to school and their confidence in being able to succeed" (Kuperminc 2008:479).

But what factors influence parent-involvement? Kuperminc writes that "levels of parent involvement are related to socioeconomic status, beliefs about the role and place of parents in school, misunderstandings regarding school officials' expectations, and the

level of comfort with the English language” (2008:471). This suggests that many factors play into levels of parent-involvement in the middle and high school setting.

The 'language barrier', then, is an important piece of parent involvement. Research shows that school involvement is high among parents who do not face a language barrier. For example, Kuperminc asserts that low levels of parent involvement among Latinos are linked to “limited English proficiency and a lack of knowledge of school officials’ expectations of parents” (2008:480). This suggests that limited English proficiency among immigrant parents may account for their lack of involvement in their children's schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to study the role and success of the TORCH program, we gathered ethnographic data through formal one-on-one interviews as well as through participant observation at the MSYC.

### *Participant Observation*

In performing participant observation each of the three researchers volunteered one day per week for an average of 2 hours at the MSYC. This volunteer schedule continued for 11 weeks during the course of the research, except for the two weeks in which the schools had scheduled breaks. One researcher had been working as a volunteer at the MSYC for 2 years, so his previous experience was also included in the data.

While at the youth center, we fulfilled the same responsibilities as any usual MSYC volunteer. These tasks included helping students with homework, talking and playing games with students, and overseeing group activities. The primary purposes of volunteering were to collect observational research data and to build relationships with both students and staff. This practice also served to familiarize us with the community. Although this was the case, our role as researchers did not compromise or take precedence over our responsibilities as volunteers. Students at the MSYC were not told of our research status and viewed us simply as volunteers.

### *Interviews*

Most of the research data for this study was collected through one-on-one interviews. A total of 33 interviews were conducted. Participants in these interviews were divided into three categories: students, teachers (/administrator/support staff), and MSYC supervisors/volunteers. Approximately 15-25 open-ended questions were compiled for each of the three groups. In addition to formal questions, researchers asked additional questions based on the individual responses of the interviewee. Before conducting the interview each interviewee was informed of the basic purpose of the study, their freedom to discontinue participation, and the confidentiality of their identity. Each interview lasted 15-50 minutes based on the responsiveness and availability of the interviewee.

A total of 14 TORCH students were interviewed for this study. A total of 4 female students and 10 male students were represented in the sample. The sample included 6 sixth grade, 2 seventh grade, and 6 eighth grade students. Some of students did not

regularly attend the MSYC. These students were selected based on a list of all TORCH students provided by Susan Sanderson, the middle school TORCH supervisor. From this list, Sanderson selected a group of students who would likely be willing to talk with the researchers. This selection was based on personal familiarity with the students. Ten students were then invited to participate in the interview process during their lunch hour. The interviews took place in the MSYC room. The remaining 4 student interviews were conducted during the regularly scheduled MSYC time. Researchers selected these students based on their availability.

A total of 9 teachers/support staff and 1 administrator were interviewed for this study. 5 were female and 3 were male. Reflective of the overwhelming demographics of the Northfield Middle School staff, all but one of the interviewees was White. The participants represented various academic departments and supportive positions. An email was sent by Sanderson to selected Northfield Middle School teachers and administrators explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Individuals responded to this email and arrangements were then made to interview them. Due to low responsiveness, Sanderson asked additional individuals to participate. These people were selected based on their varying knowledge of and interest in the TORCH program in an effort to gain a more diverse representation in our study. All interviews were conducted in classrooms or offices of these teachers/administrators.

A total of 5 MSYC and TORCH supervisors and 4 MSYC volunteers were interviewed for this study. These participants were selected based on their known involvement with TORCH or their presence at the MSYC. All official MSYC supervisors

were interviewed, while only a convenience sample of the volunteers was interviewed. A total of 5 females and 4 males were represented in the sample. All interviewees were non-Latino. Two of these volunteers were members of a St. Olaf College honor house. These interviewees were chosen based on availability and willingness to participate. Interviews with volunteers and supervisors were conducted during regularly scheduled MSYC time and took place in the Middle School.

Observational notes and answers to interview questions were recorded on paper by the researchers and later transcribed to computers.

After compiling our findings, we presented our research at St. Olaf College on May 7th, 2009. This presentation was given in a forum with other students of the ethnographic research class. It was open to the public and community partners were invited to attend. The research findings were presented again at an informal meeting with community partners and other invited guests. This also was in collaboration with other students of the ethnographic research class. This forum provided an opportunity for researchers and community partners to discuss the research findings and recommendations for the future of the programs. Upon completion of this project a summary report was given to the community partners.

### *Limitations*

One limitation of this study is the small sample size of participants. Due to the qualitative rather than intensely quantitative nature of this study, we were not able to

gather a sample size large enough to be generalized to the entire TORCH or Northfield Middle School population.

Another limitation would be the bias inherent in the selection process of some of the interviewees. A TORCH supervisor was responsible for selecting most of the students and some of the teachers/administrators for participation. Because of the nature of her job and the relatively small population of the Middle School these decisions were based partially on personal relationships and familiarity with the potential participants.

We were also confined to the boundaries of a semester-length course in which we were required to fully complete all research and writing. If we were not limited by this structure, we could have completed more interviews, pursued interaction with Latino parents, spent more time at the MSYC, and extended dialogue of our findings with TORCH and community partners.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Teacher-Parent Involvement*

The role of parent involvement was one source of social capital that stood out in our findings. All three groups of participants interviewed repeatedly mentioned how crucial the role of the parents is in determining the success of their child's education. This theme was particularly evident when looking at the complex relationships between the parents and teachers of Northfield Middle School students. Unfortunately we were not able to speak with the parents of students for this study but our interviews with teachers revealed perceptions of parent-teacher interaction. Although teachers had a variety of

responses to questions about this subject, a theme of parent-teacher disconnection emerged in association with struggling students. Teachers especially noted that many Latino parents did not attend parent/teacher conferences, and there was some confusion as to why this was happening.

Our interviews with students revealed some of the reasons why this might be the case. For example, students told us that many of their parents work evening shifts and were therefore unable to come to conferences. Participants also mentioned how Latino parents struggle to speak English. One teacher said that she Latino parents often need a translator for conferences. Students normally fill this role unless there is a district translator is present. However, in reference to Latino parents she said, "When I do see them they never give me any information. I will give them information, but I never get any in return. Maybe this is a cultural thing."

An interview with the Middle School ESL teacher provided a perspective on what this "cultural thing" might be. This teacher is the only Latino faculty member and self-identifies as Mexican, as do many of the Latino families in Northfield; thus, he is in a unique relationship with the Latino population at the Middle School. During an interview, he offered another explanation for why there might be a lack of Latino parental involvement. He explained that in Mexican culture parents do not feel it is right or necessary to interfere with the work of the teacher. In fact, he said it might be viewed as rude to do so. Mexican families generally cooperate under the assumption that, "I [the parent] do my job, and you [the teacher] do yours." Choosing not to initiate dialogue with

the teacher is therefore not a sign that the parents do not care or desire to know about their child's education, but is instead a way of showing respect for the teacher.

The interviews with other teachers revealed that they too would appreciate this perspective. The majority of teachers expressed a desire to learn more about Latino families and culture with intention of becoming more adept at teaching Latino students. For example, several people reported that although they have lived in Northfield for years, they are unfamiliar with "the trailer park," or Viking Terrace.

Another teacher we interviewed was aware of the compromising circumstances in the homes of Latino students that tended to discourage parent involvement. For example, she talked about the importance of parent involvement, but noted that "parent involvement depends on stability in the parents lives" and that it is difficult to "talk with parents if their phone number changes multiple times." She understood that there were structural forces that limited Latino parents in ways that they would not affect affluent, middle class parents. She was very mindful that circumstances in the home of her students made it more difficult for families to stay connected. Similar to the view of the ESL teacher, she noted this was not because their parents did not want to be involved, but because of factors such as immigration status and work obligations.

It should be noted that we observed a discrepancy between some participants as to the perceived quantity and cause of the "lack of Latino parent involvement." Most participants reported that compared to White students' parents Latino parents were significantly less involved. We observed this notion in our research without exception; however we encountered differences when our participants cited the quantity of parent

involvement they observed. For example, one teacher said that she "rarely sees Latino parents at conferences" while another teacher reported to meet "about 75% of parents." In either case, we found it to be significant that few teachers at the Middle School have contact with Latino parents outside of conferences.

The vast majority of the communication between parents and the school district is through the District Liaison. We were unable to formally interview this person, but conversed with her at the concluding TORCH dinner. Because so few Middle School staff are fluent in Spanish, she serves as the translator and contact point for all of the Latino families in the Northfield District and has done so for the last 14 years. It is safe to say that if not all, the vast majority of parent concerns are voiced via the liaison, partially explaining the lack of Latino parent involvement. Considering the teacher participants have very little if any contact with Latino parents, their rationale for the cause behind the perceived lack of involvement is mostly speculative.

One teacher made the comment that, "in the last three years, parents have been uninvolved in their students' academic success" and that "many parents lack English proficiency—[they] are unavailable to get to school." Another teacher said, "All parents have to be met by the school, and the Northfield Middle School has failed to reach out to Latino parents."

Several of our participants expressed this theme of Latino parents as unable to be involved due to their circumstances. Many cited that parents often do not speak English and have extremely demanding work schedules.

On the other hand, we had some participants suggest that due to “cultural” reasons, parents were less than willing to help their students succeed. One volunteer said that students care about their grades and “wished their parents cared.” Another teacher when asked about parent involvement said, “Parents don’t inspire their students to aim high” and added that parents demonstrate a different plan other than college or higher education. Their message is “you should get married, have kids, settle down, get a job, etc.” With frustration, one teacher said, “We can only meet them halfway.”

Though this is anecdotal evidence, we thought it revealed an interesting discrepancy behind the role of Latino parents in the students’ academic careers. We were not able to interview any parents, but when we spoke with the TORCH coordinators who have relationships with Latino families, they expressed that most families have the desire for their children to be educated, especially to graduate from high school. However, as the coordinators reported, some Latino families need the income of another working individual for their household. Because of their circumstances, these Latino families may influence their children to work after graduation, but this is not a Latino phenomenon. The culture which teachers refer to as the force that limits Latino students from academic achievement is not Latino culture, say the coordinators, but the culture of poverty.

When we shared these findings with the TORCH community, several staff members observed that the families involved are not in fact indifferent to the children's education. Unknown to some, the undocumented parents are sometimes afraid to voice concerns due to their immigration status. A TORCH member explained that many of the families and some of the Middle School students are actually undocumented immigrants.

Though the school district will not cause complications for undocumented immigrants, said the participant, many families "just want to be invisible." This perspective reveals potential factors behind the lack of Latino parent involvement. As for the Latino parents, it is certainly understandable to see why maintaining a relationship with the school would be difficult when many of them constantly fear deportation and family separation.

These interviews provided examples of social capital in the lives of Middle School students. Though we did not investigate the effects of parent involvement on their student's academic success, our participants specifically noted a correlation between struggling students and low parent involvement. This trend seems to indicate that parent-teacher relationships are a positive resource for students.

As previously mentioned, the Latino student population in the Middle School statistically performs below average. Our participants reported that Latino parents are generally less involved. Given the theory of social capital, an increase in Latino parent involvement could produce better academic results for Latino students.

#### *Teacher Assumptions/Teacher Education*

According to Susan Sanderson, there are, "certain teachers with gaps in understanding kids...the majority of them, they don't even think about it. Many of them have lived in Northfield all their lives and they've never even entered the trailer park [Viking terrace]. They can't imagine what a day in the life of these kids would be like." One teacher reflected these sentiments almost exactly. During her interview, she discussed one Latina student by saying, "I can't imagine what her home life is like. I

know it is different than my daughters. What are the trailers like? I don't even know." This teacher happens to have a daughter in middle school and in the discussion of her daughter's experience with the Latino population she said that, "She [her daughter] doesn't even notice the Latino kids. She doesn't have any Latino friends. It's almost like they are non-existent." She talked about the fact that there is one Latina on her daughter's soccer team, but still the two groups of students [Latino and White] rarely interact with each other outside of these rare circumstances. "It would be weird," she said, "to have a sleepover at a trailer house. [In my daughter's mind] it's an odd lifestyle."

Throughout the interview the teacher did not express any judgment or dislike of the Latino population. In fact, she made several comments about the particularly positive interactions she has had with Latino students and families. However, her statements are indicative of the potential lack of understanding that many Northfield Middle School teachers have about the lives of Latino families in Northfield. Furthermore, this teacher's story about her daughter is representative of the fact that this confusion exists not only among teachers but among students and residents of the greater Northfield community as well.

One teacher actually spoke to the fact that some of her fellow teachers are unaware of the circumstances of Latino students. She pointed out that several teachers assign work to their students such as Power Point presentations or poster projects without realizing that many Latino students do not have access to a computer or money to buy a poster board. In fact, this barrier of access to computers and class materials came up in several interviews with teachers, supervisors, and students as well.

Another teacher commented on this lack of awareness. He stated that

The teachers and administrators, they don't see the success of these kids. They are not able to. They see the kids goofing off and running around in the hallways after school, but they don't see the full story. This is where the ignorance comes from. They don't see that they've made the honor roll or that they are on the soccer team. And they're just kids! They aren't goofing off because they're Latino; they're goofing off because that's what kids do.

Some teachers we interviewed recognized that Latino students face different circumstances than other students. One mentioned that the biggest obstacles for Latino students are organizational skills which are difficult when "kids come from chaos or a disordered home." When asked about services on Latino issues for teachers, she said that "workshops on diversity were really well-done," especially the panel of graduated Latino students that spoke at the high school. She noted that she "really learned a lot from that experience" and would be very interested in attending another program of that nature.

When asked about the opportunities available to learn about the needs of the Latino students at the Middle School, teachers again differed on their responses. One teacher mentioned that Northfield Middle School is on AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) watch because of the Latino kids. Despite this fact, the teacher felt that there is no training or leadership at the Middle School on how to get Latinos over the hump. With frustration in her voice, the teacher added, "the [Latino] students are known to be the ones that are failing, yet nothing is done about it."

Another teacher added that his personal interests allow him to be involved in Latino education. However, there are not many opportunities in staff development. The teacher thought that his knowledge of Spanish and Latino culture was helpful and that all

teachers should have some knowledge of Latino needs and how to work with ESL students.

An administrator for the Middle School commented that there are mandatory inservices on gang education, as well as cultural and linguistic workshops for teachers. When asked the percentage of teachers that are aware of the needs of Latino students, he stated that approximately 50% are cognizant of Latino student needs--a significant improvement from the proportion two years ago. The participant attributed this change to the accountability that teachers now feel for student's success--with more staff teaching Latinos they begin to see them as "my kids." Another teacher voiced the opinion that the Middle School had plenty of opportunities to learn about Latinos, yet was concerned that Latino parents did not reach out when the Middle School had already done its part.

Most all participants noted how the addition of a bilingual and bi-cultural ESL teacher to the staff this past year has made significant progress with the Latino students. TORCH Coordinator at the Middle School, Susan Sanderson mentioned, "Without [the new ESL teacher], I don't know where TORCH would be right now. He's amazing." Despite the perceived differences among our participants, all mentioned that more education on the needs of Latino students would be helpful for teachers.

### *Obstacles/Needs of Latino Students*

As previously discussed, it appears that Latino parents are generally less involved in their child's academic life. Some believe that TORCH has taken on certain aspects of this parental role. Susan Sanderson for example, stated that one of her primary duties as a

TORCH supervisor is, “doing what parents would usually do.” This includes arranging opportunities to go to camps, participate in summer projects, or join in extra-curricular activities. Another TORCH supervisor noted that his job is to be, “the third parent of the kids,” because of the particular situations of their home lives.

Sanderson also noted that in some cases the kids themselves are expected to fulfill this role. She said that, “What parents are meant to do, the kids are doing for themselves.” For example, heavy reliance on e-mail communication about sporting events means that parents without computers are left out of the loop. The kids are therefore responsible for keeping track of their sports schedules.

Interviews with students also revealed some of the ways in which they have been required to take on parental responsibilities. Several students, for example, said that they couldn’t get homework help at home. This was often because their parents worked and came home late in the evening. Even if they were at home, parents were often unable to help because they did not speak proficient English. Some parents cannot help with homework because their level of education is equal to or lower than that of their children. In several cases, older siblings assumed this parental role by helping their younger siblings with homework.

One student explained that the most helpful part of interacting with Sanderson was that “she cares about what I’m doing, and how I’m doing in school.” None of her family members have been involved in TORCH, but she has lots of friends who work with Sanderson or go to the Youth Center, and that is how she found out about it. Her parents do not help her with her school work, and she said that she “gets all my

homework help from Jason and the other volunteers” showing how vital a resource TORCH is for students who cannot receive homework help at home.

In another interview, a sixth grade student discussed how she received homework help. She said that her parents do not help her with her schoolwork, because “they do not speak English. I can only get help from my uncle, because he is the only one who speaks English.” One of the reasons she came to the Middle School youth center, was because “Mr. Alvarez and Jason can help me with my homework.”

Documentation was another reported obstacle for many Latino Middle School students, although it was not brought up as often in the interviews. Lack of documentation was an underlying theme in situations like needing transportation to soccer games (when parents cannot own a driver’s license) or moving suddenly in the middle of the night (due to the threat of deportation). According to Susan Sanderson, “the kids labeled as ‘those kids’ are usually not documented. Everything for them is harder.”

On the topic of immigration status, one student talked about her parents expectations for her, and said that sometimes her dad tells her that “she won’t be anything” and that her “reality is working, or marrying an American to get papers.” She was very candid about how this discouraged her, and made her feel very upset. This is evidence that immigration status presents huge stressors on students who are undocumented.

We also received important information about the obstacles of students from MSYC volunteers. For example, one volunteer said that the largest obstacles for TORCH students are "social pressures" and that "they are viewed as separate group" and treated

accordingly. He said that they receive "mixed reactions from teachers" and that Latino students have told him stories in which teachers show a "blatant bias" towards the non-Hispanic students. This perspective was noted throughout the greater Northfield community. One teacher noted that the community is not very supportive of the students because they are seen as "the mysterious people of the community."

One teacher thought that culture could be an obstacle for Latinos at the Middle School. The teacher described certain cultural factors that "work against the Hispanic students." Although "[Latino students] want to do well...they don't fit in," he said. Our participant cited an earlier age of maturation, pressure to pair up earlier, and pressure to act 'machismo' or 'Latina,' as "realities, not criticisms" of Hispanic culture.

Others mentioned that gang participation is a major issue for Latino youth at the Middle School. One said that the pressure for kids to join gangs is intense, even at the Middle School, and that Latino student's biggest need is for "positive role models." This participant alluded to forces outside of the school, individuals in the Latino community that influence students with a different set of goals. While the school is doing its part to be a positive influence in the lives of these kids, he added, more should be done outside of the school to exemplify positive behavior.

These examples show that by giving assistance and providing new opportunities, TORCH prevents downward assimilation of Latino Middle School students. For students TORCH is a social network that provides opportunity. Services such as homework help, grade tracking, transportation, mentoring, and forms for organized activities, have the potential increase both educational achievement and the chance of upward assimilation.

Another theme of our findings looked at participants understanding of the TORCH program. According to our interviews, the majority of teachers and parents did not actually know what the TORCH program was at the middle school. Beyond its existence and primary goals, teachers did not know much about the program. One teacher mentioned a TORCH meeting in the spring and fall of the school year but added, "Teachers are unaware of which students are in TORCH," which would be a helpful tool. Another teacher mistakenly equated TORCH with the Middle School Youth Center (MSYC), which is a separate program. We observed that because there are multiple programs and organizations that serve the same population (Targeted Services, PRIMETIME, TORCH); there is considerable confusion among the Middle School staff as to the functions and mechanisms of each.

Most students recognized Sanderson because she helped them get into soccer or summer camp. However they could not define or identify the TORCH program. Many teachers had a vague understanding that TORCH is associated with helping "at-risk" or Latino kids with college and homework help. Teachers' reported that their interactions with Sanderson were minimal. One teacher did mention that TORCH has connections with Latino parents that he has not been able to make (primarily due to the language barrier). He said that because of programs like TORCH and ESL he has seen more parents at conferences lately.

Nearly everyone who mentioned the current ESL teacher—and many people did—had overwhelmingly positive things to say about him and the work that he has done. Particularly in the short time that he has been at the Middle School, he seems to have

created good relationships with both students and faculty. Several people noted that they have seen concrete changes in students' success because of this. Additionally, interviewees had appreciative comments about other supervisors at the MSYC. Some people noted an improvement in the organization of programs for Latinos (ELL, MSYC) compared to previous years.

The Middle School administrator spoke in depth on the subject of AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) federal standards. He explained how the AYP (or No Child Left Behind) mandates reallocation of funds to problematic areas of the school if AYP is not met. The Northfield Middle School failed to meet AYP in the last two consecutive years, labeling the school as a building in need of work. After studying the results, the administrator all but isolated the problem area to the Latino population; their test scores were the biggest contributors to the failure of AYP. Failure to meet these guidelines affects the entire school because it forces the building to divert more resources to the problem area and away from success areas.

Rather than fight the system, which he believes is "more a stick than a carrot," or, in other words, the system does more to punish the schools than reward them. He believes the best way to achieve AYP and restore funding is by getting the students to pass the MCA tests. The school employs "Push-In" methods, co-teaching with ESL, and immersion classes like Amistades to help improve the test scores, but all interviewed teachers cited MCA tests and AYP as a frustrating requirement for the school. Observing the significance of these tests within the school, we question the effectiveness of teaching curriculum focused on passing students for the MCA tests. One of the MSYC volunteers

even emphasized that homework help for the purpose of increasing test scores needs to be a priority. She said it is unfortunate to have a system like “No Child Left Behind,” but that it is a “reality” that the students need to show improvement.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

Considering the wide range in which many teachers outside the TORCH program answered our questions, we suggest that a better communication system be implemented for the purpose of informing teachers of the goals, accomplishments, and scope of the program. We feel that a school more familiar with TORCH and the other service programs operating inside the Middle School will create better cohesion and cooperation. A new system for communication would hopefully foster reciprocal relationships between TORCH members and the teachers to assess and act upon the students that are struggling. We recommend more meetings between TORCH coordinators and Middle School staff. This will be increase awareness and acceptance of TORCH throughout the school. We anticipate improvements if TORCH collaborators and teachers are able to discuss student needs together.

Another area for improvement concerns the language barrier. This topic came up several times, especially in interviews with teachers. One teacher pointed out that it is difficult to arrange conferences with Latino families because they often need to arrange a translator. He offered, however, that there are plenty of people in Northfield who can speak Spanish and coordinating volunteers should not be difficult. We suggest, then, that

TORCH could coordinate in particular with Spanish classes at St. Olaf College and Carleton College to recruit volunteers to assist with translations at the Middle School.

Another issue was the new online grading system. One teacher remarked that this is a source of motivation for the students. He says that, "They want to check their grades every day...It was the opposite last year, they just didn't care. This year they care about their grades and are doing well. They are getting more support." Another teacher suggested that the TORCH program should work more with this online system. He noted that because many Latino parents do not have access to computers it would be helpful to have a scheduled time during the week for parents to come to a computer lab, learn how to operate this system, and check in on their child's grades. He says this would help the parents to, "be on top of things."

Almost all teachers responded positively when asked if they would appreciate more educational opportunities on subjects like Latino culture, Spanish language, and tools or skills for teaching Latino students. The panel discussion with high school students and graduated seniors was hugely recognized and appreciated by the teachers. In fact, several of them brought it up on their own as a success of the TORCH program. One teacher remarked on the panel saying, "That was really neat! We were mesmerized listening to their stories." Because of the success of this event we would encourage the TORCH program to arrange a similar panel in which students who recently graduated from 8th grade would come back to discuss their experiences with their old teachers and share what was helpful and what was challenging for them as middle school students.

As we've already noted the current ESL teacher has been extremely successful with the Latino students. Another Latino role model in the Middle School who received a lot of praise during our interviews was the community soccer coach. According to one TORCH collaborator, having a Latino soccer coach is "huge!" This coach seems to have developed very positive relationships with the students on his team, many of which are Latino. The collaborator went on to emphasize the importance of having Latino and Spanish speaking staff as role models, authority figures and educators in the Middle School. He stated that hiring more Latino and Spanish-speaking people, "just has to be a priority for the administration." We agree with this recommendation and think it would be advantageous for the Middle School to hire more bilingual and bi-cultural staff members.

## **CONCLUSION**

After completing our research and discussions, we believe that this community-based research project was quite valuable and rewarding. We enjoyed participating in a community organization outside of the typical St. Olaf environment. We strongly recommend that this project be continued next year and in future classes to expand upon our findings. Reflecting on the experience, we admire the goals and are impressed with the achievements of the TORCH program at the Middle School. Our hopes are that these findings will aid TORCH in expanding and continuing their program. While it is clear that TORCH can be improved in some areas, we think that the program is extremely valuable and has an irreplaceable impact on the students' lives.

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