

An Ethnographic Analysis of the Northfield High School TORCH Program

Authors:

Kaitlin Lytle, Tessa Johanson, Paul Peterson, and Lyndel Owens

SOAN 373

Professor Chris Chiappari

May 2009

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Abstract

Since its origination four years ago, TORCH has caused the Northfield Latino graduation rate to rise from less than 30% to above 90% in addition to facilitating post-secondary enrollment. This paper examines and contextualizes the mechanisms that contribute to TORCH's success. Applying theories of social capital and ideas from contemporary education, our findings indicate that TORCH operates in a manner that supports students academically and personally. This purports a "student centered" approach that empowers students to self-actualize their goals by providing them the necessary social capital through relationships and interactive experience. The findings of this paper indicate that TORCH has narrowed the education gap at Northfield High School through the extension of social capital to Latino and underprivileged students.

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Tackling Obstacles and Raising College Hopes (TORCH) is a program that operates with the intention of increasing “the high school graduation and college attendance rates of...Latino and ESL students, as well as students who would be first-generation college attendees” (TORCH Brochure 2008:). Developed in 2004 with the support of a renewable grant, TORCH improves student performance through individual tutoring, group homework help, summer academic experiences, and assistance with achieving post-secondary goals. Originally based at the public high school, four years of successfully raising graduation rates among the Latino population encouraged TORCH expansion to the middle school level for the 2008-2009 academic year. The focus of this project is an appraisal of the program as it functions at Northfield Public High School.

Our investigation revealed five main themes that symbolize the mechanisms underlying the valuable results produced by TORCH in its brief duration. These are an emphasis on academic performance, the holistic nature of the program, filling the gap, role of program coordinator, and the tangibility of higher education for TORCH students. Each theme, derived from conversations with community members, serves to buttress previous statistical data that quantitatively reflects program support. The findings of this ethnographic inquiry provide a qualitative aspect that opens discussion for the future development of TORCH.

Theories of social capital and contemporary education characterized our analysis. A combination of the two helped us approach and make sense of the stratified academic results present in Northfield High School. After reviewing discussions between modern educators, we found that the mechanisms of success present in national programs are also present in TORCH.

Therefore, we chose to research the mechanisms of the TORCH program that help it successfully narrow the education gap.

Community Setting¹

Northfield is a small town located in south central Minnesota. The town, which consists of 19,331 residents as of 2007, is continually growing in population and development. With two colleges situated within city limits, Northfield experiences an influx and outpour of 5,000 student residents each school year.

Northfield is a mostly homogeneous population with 89.4% of its residents being Caucasian. The second largest group (5.7%) in Northfield is the Hispanic population. This group includes 1,062 foreign-born residents as of 2007. This small town attracts many individuals for service sectors including education, food services (Malt O Meal, and numerous other factories including food production), and agriculture. These industries appeal to a variety of individuals of different socioeconomic standings and ethnicities creating a diverse town.

The median age of an individual living in Northfield is 23 years old. 7.2% of the population lives below the poverty line. There are many reasons why the average age of individuals is so low in comparison to the remainder of Minnesota and this could be partially due to the two colleges in the town. Amongst those living below the poverty line in Northfield, 6.7% are children. These children attend four different elementary schools, four middle schools and three high schools. On an average, 25% of these students are eligible for free or reduced lunch cost at these schools.

TORCH is conducted at the middle school and high school level in the Northfield school district. These schools are located near the downtown commercial district. The high school and

¹ All statistics included in this section are from <<http://www.city-data.com/city/Northfield-Minnesota.html>>.

middle school are on the same campus only separated by sporting fields. This proximity allows easy coordination and transition from middle school TORCH to high school TORCH. This program works with students who are of low socioeconomic status, ethnically diverse, or first-generation college students. Mentoring and tutoring services are offered as support to students on an individual level. This allows students to improve on specific subjects and learn at their own pace. High school TORCH students participate in various activities that are geared toward preparing them for higher education. The director of the program, Beth Berry, helps student see their true potential and guides them through high school and onto higher education. Ms. Berry typically interacts with students in the cafeteria, ESL room, and her cubical. She has a practical yet aggressive approach toward the students that enables her to subtly interact with them without disrupting their normal social networks.

Methodology

Our primary method of gathering data on TORCH was qualitative in nature. Accordingly, we conducted eight interviews with Northfield High School staff members and one focus group with five program participants. Our interviews typically fell between the “semistandardized” and “unstandardized” categories that Bruce L. Berg identifies in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (2009:105). We approached our early interviews without any predetermined questions (unstandardized) but with the intention of simply opening a dialogue with individuals with regard to TORCH. This resulted in a better perspective on the types of topics that yield particularly comprehensive responses. For the rest of our conversations with school employees, we used five standard questions to stimulate discussion but also maintained enough flexibility to use any spontaneous probes that came to mind (semistandardized). These questions were:

1. What is your understanding of the TORCH program’s goals?
2. How has the program influenced your interactions with students?
3. What differences have you noticed between the periods before and after the implementation of TORCH?

4. What do you think are the strengths of the program?
5. What are areas that need improvement?

If an interviewee was unable to answer one of our questions due to lack of relevant experience, we adapted our interests to be more compatible with his/her history with TORCH. We deviated from this query list during later interviews with the program coordinator and ESL teacher. The reason for this is that their positions enabled them to share unique and constructive ideas only available from professional TORCH associates. Nevertheless, we discovered that an obvious advantage to using a consistent set of questions allowed us to recognize more easily attitudinal patterns among individuals from a variety of fields.

Although we were anxious to investigate as many opinions on TORCH as possible, time constraints made it difficult to fairly represent all parties that have a stake in the program. As such, we decided that a focus group would be one of the more efficient approaches to discover how students perceive TORCH. Again, we did not have a set list of questions to ask students. Instead, we broached broad topics that we felt might elicit a response on the personal level, instead of rote answers. Student replies to our questions often built on one another, gaining energy and inspiration from others' reactions. However, one weakness in our focus group arose because certain topics seemed slightly too sensitive for some individuals to comfortably offer an answer with their peers present. Fortunately, the atmosphere created by interviewers and students was relaxed enough that there were no moments of outright distress for any participants.

Another method of exploring TORCH operations presented itself in the form of participant observation at a local school, Greenvale Elementary. Although this project focuses on TORCH at the high school level, it is important to acknowledge that students receive academic assistance from the program in preparation for their secondary-level education. Mainly, TORCH has an affiliation with several tutoring and mentoring sessions that meet on a regular basis. Our

group members volunteered at the elementary school as tutors for the twice-weekly Evening Homework Help. While it would have been more useful to participate in a similar capacity at the high school, this experience gave us a glimpse of the distance that many children travel before they mature into engaged learners with higher academic ambitions. Additionally, current high school TORCH participants were responsible for obtaining the grant that financially supports Evening Homework Help. Consequently, our group volunteer sessions allowed us to bear witness to further evidence of the inspirational impact of the TORCH program.

Most importantly, our overarching method of research was collaboration. We began our project with the intent of working within and for the community of Northfield. From our original introduction to TORCH, we learned that state funding for the program was under threat due to shifting political priorities in this economic recession. Although program coordinators had plenty of quantitative data to support their argument for a renewed grant, they were eager to collect the personal stories of individuals connected with TORCH. After gathering our qualitative data, we were able to provide different suggestions for program development. We discussed both the data and our suggestions at a public presentation and during a dinner with our community partners. This was our method of giving back to the city of Northfield. We did this in gratitude for local contributions to the project and in an effort to make a real difference for a valuable social service program.

Problem

The main goal of our project was to provide “ethnographic data” for the TORCH program. Although leaders of TORCH assured us they wanted any information we could give them, good or bad, objectivity was tinged by our overall approval of the program. When we saw TORCH in action and the opportunities it provides, it was difficult not to like the program and

admire those who have worked so hard for its success. However, after recognizing the crucial role this program plays in the lives of many students, we were able to explore some areas for possible improvement.

At the start of our study on TORCH, a lack of pre-exposure to the program made it difficult to identify an ethnographic dilemma. From the outset, our initial understanding of the program was that it is primarily geared towards Latino and low-income students who, in the past, had low graduation rates and seldom attended college. Understanding that TORCH is geared towards a group of specific socio-economic status, questions of ethnicity and class would be relevant to our research.

As we began to volunteer at Greenvale and conduct interviews at the high school, our understanding of TORCH dynamics progressed. We learned that our initial confusion about TORCH is not unusual. Since the program functions in a variety of ways in the public school system, we learned that student participants often do not realize the role it plays in their lives. Once we began to understand the immense benefits of TORCH for the students involved, we raised questions regarding accessibility and knowledge of the program among faculty and students. We began to ask a number of questions pertaining to student and faculty conceptions of TORCH and its accessibility as a resource.

Because TORCH is often a resource for children of immigrant families, we realized questions of family life would be important in understanding the success of the program. Through volunteering, it became obvious to us that there is a strong cultural contrast between many of the students in TORCH and the typically Caucasian student volunteers. Students in the program often speak English as a second language. Our tutoring sessions with students led us to observe that Latino students lead lives fused with two different cultural aspects. One is being a

student in Northfield, Minnesota, and another is being a child of immigrant families from Latin America. Since many of these children come from cultures with different educational values, we wanted to explore the role that students' families play in their high school and potential college experiences.

Finally, it was almost impossible to conduct interviews about TORCH without mention of Beth Berry, the TORCH coordinator. It became apparent that she is an essential driving force behind the program and its success. Many students perceived Ms. Berry to be like a mom or their nagging aunt who was impossible to ignore. Other faculty members expressed immense gratitude for her work because she serves as a resource they otherwise would not be able to provide. Ms. Berry plays such a central role in the program that we could not help but recognize the staggering workload she must undertake. As a result, we asked questions about her work and explored ideas of ways in which more support could be provided for her as the program coordinator.

Findings

Throughout our research project, we continually looked for patterns in attitudes that provided an understanding of the TORCH program. Specifically, we were interested in the mechanisms that enable the program to function as successfully as it does. We discovered five main themes: academic performance, the holistic nature of the program, filling the gap, role of program coordinator, and the tangibility of higher education for TORCH students. By investigating these ideas, we were able to recognize how influential they are in the lives of students and staff.

During the information-gathering phase of our project, we spent time at Northfield High School in order to conduct interviews and enhance our understanding of the environment in

which the TORCH program operates. Members of our group made their first ventures into the school either independently or in pairs. Commuting to the school posed little challenge since the building is located on Division Street, the main road that runs through the small downtown commercial district. As with most secondary schools, the building layout seems slightly confusing for the first-time visitor, especially when the visit happens to coincide with a surging mass of students rushing home for the day. Nevertheless, kind hall monitors were well positioned to direct two of our members to the main office. After signing in and explaining the reason for our presence at the school, an office administrator pointed us down the hallway to a science classroom for our first interview.

After taking a moment to help two students begin a make-up lab, Mr. X explained that his main understanding of TORCH is as a resource that he is able to utilize for struggling students. Specifically, he identifies the program with tutoring and mentoring services that provide area-specific schoolwork assistance. Before the implementation of TORCH, Mr. X relied on an ESL teacher at the school for additional student support. However, the background of such an educator does not necessarily translate into scientific expertise nor does it always provide the type of one-on-one attention that leads to concept comprehension. Mr. X emphasized the value he finds in the availability of concrete science coursework help for his students. He said that his students are all bright and capable of understanding assignments but some need more time than he is able to devote to each individual. Consequently, TORCH provides the resources that compensate for the limitations of his situation.

In practice, Mr. X e-mails TORCH program coordinator, Beth Berry, at any time that he has concerns about the progress of his students. This communication typically results in the student's participation in tutoring sessions that normally produce improved academic

performance after at least two months or two topic units. Additionally, Mr. X expressed that he found it highly beneficial to have structured periods of time during which he knew where and how to contact students. While this is certainly a strength of TORCH, we also encouraged Mr. X to share his thoughts on areas of the program that could use any level of improvement. After taking a moment to reflect, he cautiously responded that the visibility of TORCH is one possible area that could use development. However, Mr. X was careful to note that this increased visibility should be more for faculty than student awareness. This would encourage more teachers to use the program's resources and prevent students from being socially labeled as "TORCH students."

From the perspective of a teacher, TORCH is a resource that can be used for struggling students. Programs including tutoring and mentoring services for these students have shown to improve academic achievements. Services of this type offer support on an individual level, allowing students to learn at their own pace. These tutoring sessions are tailored to specific subject areas such as chemistry or calculus. This stands in contrast to traditional support services provided by public school ESL programs. It was stated by several teachers that TORCH participants benefit holistically from the program.

Similar to her colleague in the science department, Ms. Z also found it difficult to identify a major area in need of improvement within the program. As one of three guidance counselors at the high school, she praised Beth Berry and suggested that additional assistance for the program coordinators would be advantageous. Ms. Z was unable to share personal observations of the differences between the periods before and after the implementation of TORCH, but she was well aware of the "dramatic change in the number of students pursuing post-secondary education" since the initiation of the program five years ago.

Ms. Z augmented our understanding of TORCH beyond the classroom perspective that Mr. X offered during his interview. Sitting in her small office, we learned that the program plays an integral role in expanding students' perceptions of life beyond Northfield High School. Ms. Z explained that Ms. Berry provides students with "a lot of hope" and "opens eyes" by keeping them aware of the opportunities that exist for their future. We were surprised to learn that Ms. Berry personally drives students across the state of Minnesota for visits to different college campuses. Furthermore, Ms. Z commented that Ms. Berry constantly researches the availability of programs geared towards minority students – many of which she was unaware despite her position in the school.

Considering the impact of TORCH on her interactions with students, Ms. Z replied that the pressures of her workload are lower. The reason for this reprieve is the result of the diverse efforts of Ms. Berry. Specifically, Ms. Berry assists students with basic college applications, FAFSA forms, and any related questions. Additionally, Ms. Z stressed the fact that Ms. Berry follows up on students' progress in these areas and holds them accountable for any commitments that they make. Although Ms. Z is able to begin conversations relating to college, she is rarely able to make sure that these discussions produce substantial action on the part of students. As such, TORCH again fulfills a necessary role that assists at-risk students in their efforts to move into higher education.

Reflecting on our interview with Ms. Z, it was apparent that the TORCH program moves beyond the academics to focus on social barriers that prevent students from performing to their capacity. While guidance councilors want to encourage their students to pursue higher education, their efforts are spread too thin on a regular basis. Consequently, a gap develops between students who take advantage of their privileged social capital, assume they will receive higher

education without formal intervention, and those who go unnoticed. The school system and administrators do not purposefully neglect such students, but due to needs that stem from social barriers that go unrecognized, these students academic and personal wellbeing is challenged. TORCH bridges this gap by believing in the ability of each student, opening doors to college, and holding these individuals accountable for their future.

The next week, we returned for a third interview with an art teacher. With the assistance of a school secretary, we navigated our way to the offices of the art department faculty. After waiting for a short while, Ms. Q breezed into the room only to explain that she really needed to take care of one more piece of business before she could speak with us. Clearly, this woman was very busy and eager to continue with her daily work but she also demonstrated a definite appreciation for TORCH. Once she sat down and opened herself to our questions, she easily explained the reasons for the enthusiasm that she has for the program. As with the our other subjects, Ms. Q was highly impressed with the efforts of Ms. Berry, who “single-handedly began to work with Latinos to get them excited and ready for higher education.” After the initial stages of the program, Ms. Berry expanded student eligibility to include “any student on the bubble.” Although Ms. Q does not use specific TORCH resources for her students, she was quick to note that the program has positively influenced her pupils. In particular, students exhibit higher levels of academic engagement and an increased willingness to take responsibility for their actions.

As a lunch period monitor, Ms. Q is a primary witness to the work that Ms. Berry does on a daily basis. In fact, the lunchroom is one of the main spaces in which TORCH is most visible in its operations. However, Ms. Q sounded pleased to explain that TORCH participants are well integrated into the general student body. As such, Ms. Berry has to wind her way through many tables in order to check in with each of her students. Her purpose generally entails reminding

them of application deadlines, making sure that assignments are not forgotten, and providing praise for jobs well done. According to Ms. Q, Ms. Berry accomplishes this task with a great deal of respect and professionalism.

The difficulty is that TORCH is “a lot of work for one woman.” Accordingly, Ms. Q believes that increased funding is of the essence. Not only would this provide the means to develop better structural support for Ms. Berry, it would also ensure the longevity of a program that Ms. Q believes is essential for bridging a cultural gap between family life and the ambition to pursue higher education. She explained that TORCH “helps [students] navigate that bumpy road, it smoothes it out for them.” Furthermore, Ms. Q surprised us with the level of admiration that she has for the program. It is not often that one hears a program described as “the best thing since sliced bread” and worthy of being “taken all over the United States.”

It was evident from the interview that TORCH is synonymous with Beth Berry. Ms. Berry’s initiative has resulted in a successful program with an emphasis on the logistics of exploring higher education. Her practical yet aggressive approach enables her to subtly interact with students without disrupting their normal social networks.

The following day, our entire group returned to Northfield High School to conduct a focus group with five students involved in TORCH. We met in a small conference room located in the guidance office. As the students ate their lunches, we asked about their experiences with the program. Their understanding of TORCH was similar to what we had learned from past interviews. Mainly, the purpose of the program is to help students get involved with and get ahead in their academic life in order to pursue studies past the secondary level. Although one student identified TORCH as a program for “Hispanics,” another amended the statement to include other individuals with lower socioeconomic standing. From a practical perspective, the

students credit the program as a provider of financial support for college fairs and graduation fees. However, one sophomore student pointed out that these extracurricular events typically target upperclassmen. In his experience as a younger student, he “just does what [Beth] Berry tells me to do.”

Once again demonstrating the integral role that Ms. Berry performs for TORCH, the students expressed sincere admiration for her daily efforts to “care for so many kids and get them through high school and into college.” According to these students, Ms. Berry undertakes an incredibly heavy workload every week (one junior even remarked, “you should see her desk,” in reference to stacks of papers and files). More importantly, these students feel the effects of Ms. Berry’s efforts. As one young woman put it, “She’s like a nosy aunt who you can’t say no to.” The group emphasized that Ms. Berry provides the means to succeed during and after high school and continually pushes students to do their best. Reinforcing the statements made by Ms. Q, the students explained that Ms. Berry makes the process of applying for college much easier than if they were to have attempted it independently. In fact, two students stated that they would never have considered higher education if not for the influence of TORCH.

Despite their recognition that the program has made a positive impact on their lives, the group freely acknowledged their ambiguous understanding of TORCH in and of itself. All of the students wondered about the significance of the letters in the acronym TORCH. Their confusion is reasonable since they and others within Northfield High School have a propensity to equate the program with the passionate efforts of Ms. Berry. Additionally, the group explained that their friends (non-TORCH participants) have no understanding of the program – only that a woman tends to run up to them with assignments, applications, or information on campus visits. This idea of the program coordinator specifically seeking out students for individualized attention to

their needs was repeated enthusiastically. In an amused manner, two seniors exclaimed, “Berry goes hunting for you!” and “You never know where she is, but she *always* knows where *you* are!”

In addition to spending time before, after, and during the school day working with students to achieve their academic goals, Ms. Berry is often the official figure that either supports the college hopes of a student’s family or provides an alternative and optimistic perspective on a student’s scholastic potential that might be lacking within the home. Two of the students indicated that their parents were supportive of their ambitions. As such, both families were highly appreciative of Ms. Berry’s work with their children. This is because their parents simply lack an adequate knowledge base to help with questions concerning applications and sources of financial aid. Another student indicated that Ms. Berry was instrumental in convincing her to apply for college despite her father’s opposition. The gratitude that this group felt toward their mentor and TORCH was evident in their wishes for other generations of program participants.

We asked these students their opinions on creating a mentoring group for incoming classes that will be involved in TORCH. They responded positively, encouraged by the thought that older students might have an opportunity to share the wisdom that their experiences have produced. Most notably, the group thought that it would be important to let younger students know that Ms. Berry provides a valuable service that should not be taken for granted. This is an echo of advice that they learned from former students who returned to discuss TORCH.

To wrap up our conversation, we asked students their opinions on ways to improve the program. They were hard-pressed to find an answer, replying that the program is fine as it is now. The suggestion of creating even one assistant for Ms. Berry was met with skepticism

because they witness first-hand the nearly-fused connection between program coordinator and daily operations. They emphasized their conception of Ms. Berry as the embodiment of TORCH by dramatically proclaiming, “It’s chaos when she takes a vacation!”

In agreement with past interviews conducted with faculty, students recognized the positive impact of the TORCH program on their lives. Their willingness to work diligently has increased with their participation in the TORCH program. Furthermore, students have a greater tendency to believe in their capacity to move beyond a high school education. In line with a holistic attitude, TORCH moves beyond the traditional academic support program. It makes college a more tangible goal by lessening the amount of intimidation that a student may feel when applying to schools. It does this by providing a clear route, with guidance from a knowledgeable individual.

The next week we met with Mr. K during an afternoon study hall period. As a long-time faculty member at Northfield High School, he has witnessed student demographics develop an increasingly greater diversity of cultural backgrounds since the 1980s. As such, TORCH is a useful tool that satisfies an obvious need for academic support. From one perspective, Mr. K looks at TORCH as “an expansion of the ELL program.” However, he emphasizes the ability of the program to operate well beyond school walls, introducing students to the physical realities of the college experience.

Again, Mr. K cites Ms. Berry as his contact with TORCH. When he identifies a student that could potentially benefit from the program, he communicates with Ms. Berry in order to determine whether or not the individual is eligible to participate. Mr. K has observed that TORCH has “an academic impact” and “gives students a push in the right direction.” Using the example of his athletes, Mr. K stated, “TORCH keeps students from just sliding through school”

and transforms college from a sports scholarship dream into a genuine possibility based on academic performance.

In daily TORCH operations, Mr. K observed that the program is non-invasive with regard to the classroom. When students leave class for TORCH-sponsored field trips, he does not find it upsetting because he understands the value of those experiences. Furthermore, Mr. K acknowledges that such trips are the result of efforts made by Ms. Berry. In fact, he commented that her “leadership” and “energy” were responsible for the many “creative connections she’s made” for student opportunities.

In one of our final interviews, our entire group spoke with Ms. G, an ESL teacher at Northfield High School. As a staff member able to bridge the language barrier to Latino students, Ms. G offered invaluable commentary on the challenges that confront students participating in TORCH. Reflecting on the transition that many students must make between their home countries and the United States, she stated, “When kids talked about the future they’re talking about tomorrow, the immediate future. Through TORCH the future has been extended beyond the diploma.” Ms. G explained that students benefit from this type of “mental shift.” In order for students to believe they can succeed in the United States, the self-actualization TORCH imparts is necessary and empowering.

This is especially relevant since few Latino TORCH participants were born in the US and do not have access and connections to social capital. Many come from Vera Cruz, Mexico, sometimes arriving as late as age 15. Consequently, we were curious about the involvement of families in their students’ educations. Ms. G informed our group that the ESL program schedules one to two home visits each year, sometimes more often when the student is closer to graduation. She commented that these visits were “difficult to schedule” but “absolutely important.”

Additionally, Ms. G noted that, “Parents are really good about coming in for conferences, one on one. It’s more difficult to get them in for fun group events.” Later conversations with our fellow classmates and TORCH program coordinators indicate that this apparent lack of parent interest in recreational activities at the school may be the result of cultural differences. For example, Mexican society places a practical emphasis on the strict divisions between mind, body, and soul. Unfortunately, this philosophy tends to remain largely ideological in the US. As a result, American educators may have the misconception that Latino parents have insufficient interest in their children’s education. In reality, they have placed their trust in school faculties to accomplish the goal of enlightening and preparing student minds for their lives outside of academic institutions.

Other interviews suggest that many teachers have plenty of good intentions, in line with parent expectations, but lack the resources and time to address the needs of each pupil. With TORCH, students receive increased and tailored levels of attention. As Ms. G observed, the program helps its participants to learn self-regulation. Namely, they become attentive to their grades by regularly checking their progress on a school website. Almost by rote, Ms. G acknowledged that TORCH has been successful in achieving its goal of raising the graduation rates of Latino students.

However, she does believe that there is room for potential program development. First, Ms. G suggested that an assistant to the program coordinator could be beneficial. If this were to occur, there would “be more people checking in on the kids.” While this may have an academic impact, Ms. G also had an idea to address other student needs. Namely, she promoted the addition of a therapist to concentrate on the mental health of these young adults, many of who

are still dealing with conflicting cultural messages and emotional separation from their home countries.

Ms. G's Spanish speaking abilities allow her insight into non-academic aspects of student's lives. She knows who is dating and those who are related. In addition, she is attentive to students' psychological well-being. She understands the importance of recognizing and helping students deal with challenges in their personal and academic lives stemming from being present in two cultures. Interviewing her, it was apparent she valued TORCH's work for the positive "mental shift" students make in their perceptions of their future.

In our final interview, coordinator Beth Berry described the origins of the program, how it operates, challenges, and its longevity. As a former elementary school counselor, she was invited by the ESL teacher to work with two students who had college potential. Each was accepted to college. Unfortunately, the undocumented student was required to pay out of state tuition while the other student, who had arrived in the United States months before, received a full ride to a state school. Upset by this injustice, Ms. Berry organized a well-attended conference on the plights of undocumented students in Minnesota. From this, she and other participants wrote and received a renewable grant that supported the creation of TORCH.

Opening herself as a resource for students, she tailors her work in relation to their goals. She values "going out and trying to find something for the kids depending on their needs." This propels her to investigate programs and resources that could assist her students, uncovering more each year. Some examples are the MMEP and MCAN² networks for minority students as well as www.navigatemn.org, an online resource developed by undocumented students to assist undocumented students. Since payment can be a huge obstacle for students ineligible for in-state

² See <<http://www.mmep.net/>> and <http://www.mncollegeaccess.org/Minnesota_College_Access_Network_MCAN.html>.

tuition (FAFSA forms require a social security number), Ms. Berry has employed creative methods to ensure students overcome this barrier.

Ms. Berry outlined the program's successful mechanisms including summer programs and extra help in the ESL classroom. According to her, 100% of students who have participated in a summer program on a college campus are on track and currently pursuing post secondary opportunities. Additionally, grant funds support part of the fulltime employment of an ESL classroom assistant who is knowledgeable of student assignments and helps with basic homework. Besides in-school assistance Ms. Berry personally chaperones students across the state to tour campuses. Instead of using a bus service regularly, she prefers to drive them because it is more personal and "she gets to know them better."

Close interactions with students enable Ms. Berry to maintain sharp awareness of the distinction between national cultures and the culture of poverty. This latter culture prevents students from prioritizing their education because their families are 'just struggling to get by' in their daily lives. Ms. Berry distinguished this obstacle from the erroneous, stereotypical perception that *Latino* culture undervalues higher education. In order to combat this misconception, TORCH 'bumps Latinos to the college prep track from basic and remedial courses.' As a result of this and other efforts, "families have been very appreciative" of TORCH involvement in their children's lives.

Ms. Berry's ideal scenario is to have the program regenerate itself even if not in the TORCH name. She recognizes that "funding isn't going to stay" and that 'TORCH' will not always be present. Consequently, she thinks it is, "Their best bet to empower [the] kids and get them to come back" to Northfield High School. Ms. Berry remarked, "We've already changed the expectation" among students. She told a story in which a second grader recognized a high

school TORCH participant in a photo and exclaimed, ‘She’s going to college and so am I!’ In fact, mentorship is already present as evidenced through different partnership opportunities between older and younger program participants. For example, twenty-four high school students applied for twelve positions to mentor younger students during the 2009 summer.

While “being on a shoestring budget is not so bad,” Ms. Berry would expand the program to include more group outings, help for academics, and involve more students that are underprivileged if the funds were available. For instance, she would have enjoyed bringing her female students to the musical, “Legally Blond” to provide them with an example of a strong, successful female and strengthen bonds between the girls. Her sentiments reflect the consensus that TORCH is effective as it is, but the program would benefit exponentially from more financial and volunteer support, which would translate into more time and focus on students.

Ms. Berry’s interview encompasses each of the five themes that, we found, define TORCH: academic performance, the program’s holistic nature, filling the gap, the role of program coordinator, and the tangibility of higher education for TORCH students. The fact that TORCH originated from joint efforts between concerned educators, citizens, and activists testifies to the power of an attentive community to ameliorate injustice. This macro example of disparity recognition and resolution in education demonstrates the determination that is present and effective on an interpersonal level in the TORCH program. Through its emphasis on interaction and relationships, TORCH shows that the most crucial resources are time and attention.

This attitude enables people to move beyond stereotypes and appreciate the complexity of these students’ situations. Moreover, educators recognize that underperformance does not directly correlate with personal ability. In turn, teachers are able to encourage students to

overcome false internalizations that may be the result of a culture of poverty. Some of the ways these internalizations can be dispelled is through personal relationships, whether through role models, peer support, or mentorship. The emphasis on relationships as an enriching tool speaks to the reciprocal nature and community-building inherent in the program. However, Ms. Berry realizes that the person-to-person interactions TORCH facilitates are predicated on the ever-present need of monetary support.

Summary of Findings

After numerous interviews, we have concluded that the TORCH program has successfully achieved its goals. Specifically, student academic engagement and confidence levels have improved significantly. These factors, along with the support of faculty, staff, and families, have increased these students' likelihood of completing high school and continuing their education.

According to several teachers, TORCH has made a positive impact on students in a variety of ways. Interviewees reported that the program increased student awareness of higher education and their motivation to pursue this attainable goal. In light of this, students exhibited greater interest in their schoolwork and class participation. TORCH achieves these results through its dedication to individualized attention. While faculty and guidance counselors may lack the resources and time to assist students who they assume are less likely to pursue higher education, the TORCH program provides consistent attention to these students who have the potential but lack support. The program directors seek out students on a daily basis to ensure they are responsibly handling their commitments. This works as a support tool through the presence of a caring adult who holds them accountable for their actions.

During our focus group, students expressed high admiration for the program. While some students always intended to go onto tertiary education, others revealed that TORCH made college a realistic goal. In both scenarios, students were emphatic that the program has significantly eased the transition between high school and higher education. Students claim that the various programs that TORCH offers have opened their eyes to different career paths. Furthermore, they expressed an awareness of the possibility of giving back to their community. For example, three current TORCH students developed the Greenvale evening tutoring group – concrete evidence of leadership skills. This demonstrates student belief in the efficacy and longevity of the program.

One of the major topics that continuously arose during student and staff interviews was the tremendous efforts and integral role that Beth Berry plays in the TORCH program. In students' eyes, Ms. Berry appeared as a compassionate advocate in whom they placed a great deal of trust. Northfield High School employees consistently described Ms. Berry as a diligent professional who believes in the work that she does every day. In all of our interviews, no one had a negative comment regarding Ms. Berry, personally or occupationally. Faculty and staff were particularly apt to recognize the intensity of her job.

Our final thoughts left us with the belief that TORCH is a holistic program that goes beyond typical academic support services. In addition to providing assistance with schoolwork, TORCH also has a social function. The program supports students' college hopes, even when they face daunting opposition from family and peers. TORCH does not intrude on students' social networks. Most importantly, the program gives these students the resources they need to obtain the social capital that accompanies a college education.

Theoretical Connections

Education is heavily associated with living the ‘good life’ (Loza 2003:43). This normative assumption informs why school attendance is mandatory in the United States and why some consider education to be a human right. While schools are invested with the responsibility to impart education, the benefits received differ among students due to inequality in social capital. Students share a mascot, sports teams, and facilities, but persistent socio-economic “divisions within U.S. society are duly transmitted to the schools” and affect students’ experience (Noguera 2008:146; Bourdieu in Loza 2003:47).

Social capital theory was our overriding perspective because it allowed us to recognize the social distinctions present in Northfield Public High School, how they impact the students, and how the institution reconciles inequalities. It also characterized our understanding of TORCH as a key instrument that transfers social capital. Social capital is a powerful, often unrecognized, component to educational success. This power is manifested in one’s claim to “rich and dense networks of social interaction” that are the “linchpin” for success found amongst groups sharing similar cultural norms (Hero 2007:20).

Across the nation, Latino students have the highest high school dropout rate and the lowest college attendance rate (Noguera 2008:43). Until recently, Northfield High School’s Latino student population mirrored that statistic. Why the drastic departure? Often, cultural and racial barriers present invisible obstacles - obstacles that can be internalized - to prevent students achieving their educational potential. For example, a school’s “middle class” orientation may alienate students who cannot decode the rules of the game as easily as their peers who benefit from the structure (Aronson 2008:42).

If allowed, this stratified education can thwart self-actualization, academic achievement and reproduce class structure (Loza 2003:47; Aronson 2008:42). These damaging results and the bias of social capital are exactly what TORCH works to reduce. By creating resources of capital for students, TORCH extends the networks of social capital to include first generation or low-income students. Using social capital theory, informed by contemporary education theory and research, our investigation focused on the mechanisms that make TORCH successful.

We found a slight resemblance between the education gap present in Northfield High School and a two-school³ idea articulated by Noguera and implicitly present in the case studies other researchers examined. Various studies examining retention methods and post-secondary attainment emphasized the importance of relationships and interconnections as the fiber of a student's experience. Accordingly, social capital was the key device that motivated students and successfully guided them to their high school graduation and/or continuing education. This is true nationally and at TORCH.

Though many TORCH participants know one another, the program solidifies these bonds through group activities (of which summer camps have proven the most indicative of post-secondary achievement). By fostering peer connection against the backdrop of academic success and/or fun, these programs help students develop support networks that encourage achievement through education (Denner et al. 2005:46). Conversely, an unsupportive atmosphere often dissuades students from fulfilling their potential. In addition to formative peer relationships, our findings correlate with national trends that highlight the importance of role models in students' lives (Denner 2005:22; Fashola and Slavin 1998:159). As program coordinator, Beth Berry constantly monitors the success of students individually and relationally. TORCH participants

³ Noguera uses the sorting (tracking) present at Berkeley High School in California to demonstrate how one school functions very differently between different culture groups, thereby creating and perpetuating an education gap (2008:132)

testified that they have developed a close relationship with Ms. Berry, likening her to a pestering and seemingly omnipresent aunt. This type of relationship building, though not explicit, has tremendous latent value. As Fashola and Slavin write, it helps personalize the high school experience for students “with an expectation that increasing attachments to valued adults in the school or giving students high-status roles in the school will reduce disaffection and dropout” (1998:161)⁴. Clearly, the relationships TORCH builds are the backbone of transferable social capital.

As discussed in the findings, 100% of TORCH students who participated in summer academic experiences have pursued post-secondary opportunities. The informing theory, as Fashola and Slavin write, is that students realize college is an attainable goal once they “see people like themselves and experience some of the pleasures of college life” (1998:179). This shift in mentality and conviction in the possibility of college motivates students, providing them with a reason to perform well in school. Moreover, students begin to perceive a previously unrecognized future in the collegiate world. This strongly contrasts to the more common situation in which these types of students are often socialized to lower expectations and even considered inferior to their peers (Aronson 2008:42).

By cultivating a sense of the possible, TORCH empowers students to personally reject stereotypes. The connection between school success and motivation, and attention to non-academic factors that influence academic performance are hallmarks of successful retention and post-secondary programs for first generation college students. TORCH replicates these mechanisms and thereby works to enable the students to self-actualize their goals through providing them the necessary social capital through relationships and interactive experience. The

⁴ Fashola and Slavin term personalization as the act of “trying to increase the holding power of the school by creating meaningful personal bonds between students and teachers among students” (1998:178).

presence of core TORCH components in nationally established programs like Upward Bound, Trio, ALAS, etc. speaks to the program's success in identifying the challenges so often overlooked⁵, addressing them, and equipping students to overcome obstacles on their own accord (Denner et al. 2005). TORCH deserves praise because its approach to raising graduation and matriculation rates incorporates mechanisms that address personal and academic factors. Overall, the program's success is predicated on a structure that recognizes the mutually informing relationship between academics and non-academic factors.

Recommendations

Expanding Mentorship

Expanding mentorship opportunities among TORCH students would benefit all of those involved. Since TORCH's financial resources are limited, using volunteer based community partners could be an economical solution. Having navigated the college application process, college students could offer advice from their experiences, and, most importantly, help better conceptualize their college aspirations through friendship. Essentially, they would be relational resources for TORCH students.

At the end of the semester, our group met with TORCH coordinators to discuss our research findings. We began a dialogue to consider how each college in Northfield could be utilized for program support. With their ability to transcend language barriers, the St. Olaf and Carleton Spanish departments have the potential to offer a steady supply of tutors and mentors, all with a current focus on the liberal arts. Since Nate Jacobi has been working with several academic departments to create more community-based components for classroom research, we recommend that TORCH request a similar component be formed with Spanish classes at St.

⁵ So often the challenges Latino students face are non-academic. For example, "unlike their parents, immigrant Latino youth often find themselves caught between two worlds, neither fully American nor fully part of their parent's country" (Noguera 2008:76).

Olaf. Additionally, TORCH activities could be advertised through St. Olaf's Volunteer Network to involve more student leaders.

A Torch Website

A program website would increase the accessibility of TORCH for both students and parents. As a method for centralizing secondary and post-secondary support services, a website would also establish a working basis for future TORCH coordinators upon the departure of Ms. Berry. Even more significantly, the site could also function as a networking springboard in the Northfield region for others similarly interested in assisting minorities and low-income students realize their college hopes.

Student resources on the site would include summer program announcements, homework help sites, college search links, tools for the college application process, links to explanations of financial aid, links to programs such as MMEP or MCAN, and contact information for program coordinators. Because this site would also benefit the larger high school population, it may be advantageous to coordinate with Northfield High guidance counselors and even with guidance counselors in region.

Additionally, a website would assist in familiarizing parents with the college application process. Recognizing that many TORCH families may lack home internet, in-school workshops or individual meetings that incorporate the website's functions would be an ideal way to introduce parents to the tools available for students beginning their college journey. The construction of this website could be undertaken by an Americorp Promise Fellow, or even designed as a community-based project by a St. Olaf or Carleton computer science course.

Addition of Bicultural and Bilingual Staff Member

The ideal scenario for TORCH would be if a bilingual and bicultural individual joined TORCH staff or filled the role of coordinator. Hopefully, a graduate of the TORCH program will eventually rejoin as a staff member. Without a bicultural and bilingual resource, a disconnect may exist between coordinators and students. For example, during our volunteer experiences at Greenvale Elementary, we noticed that Spanish-speaking students interacted in a realm distinct and removed from the English-speaking homework-help environment. Spanish was spoken casually and uncensored, while English spoken by the students usually maintained some formality in the context of the school setting. The reason for the differences of demeanor in each language was most likely that the volunteers of the homework help program did not speak Spanish.

Our interview with Ms. G gave us the most compelling evidence for this recommendation. While many faculty members recognized the importance of TORCH, they rarely said so based on personal narratives of the students. After speaking with Ms. G, it became evident that she is in tune with the personal stories of TORCH students, likely due to her ability to communicate with students in their first language. Noguera summarizes the necessity of overcoming a divide between personal and school life, perpetuated by language barriers. He states, “Employing staff with language and cultural skills to work effectively with immigrant youth and their families is also of vital importance if trust and respect between home and school are to be established” (2008:77). Consequently, we believe a bicultural and bilingual staff-person would also have greater ability to readily access and inform TORCH parents.

Development of a Mental Health Resource

While TORCH caters well to academic needs of students, personal needs are not always addressed. When Ms. G discussed students' academic performance with consistent reference to their non-academic lives, the close interplay between the two factors became clear. Since students' involvement in TORCH often stems from different cultural and socio-economic factors, the disjunction can weigh heavily on students. Consequently, these worries may ultimately affect their academic abilities. As a result, development of a resource geared specifically towards mental health is crucial. TORCH should consider this component and work to integrate wherever possible in further academic program developments.

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