LATINO-HISPANIC STUDENT VOICES AND SELF-REPRESENTATION THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT
Forty percent of Portuguese and Spanish speaking students in Toronto do not complete high school (Brown, 2006). This daunting statistic motivated Pueblito Canada, a Toronto-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) committed to Latino-Hispanic1 children, to initiate collaboration with the local Hispanic Development Council, a community activist agency, and the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB). The three partners developed a project that engaged Latino-Hispanic students in telling their own stories of schooling. The project’s Participatory Action research (PAR) approach encompassed a series of workshops in which participating students learned the techniques of storytelling and then narrated their everyday experiences of schooling. With the support of a videographer, students moved from documenting their stories through workshops focused on their writing to producing digital stories they had authored. This article considers the emancipatory processes that facilitated students’ coming to voice. Additionally, the silences that contributed to their subjugation in the school system are problematized. Simultaneously, the participating teachers, moved by these stories as they emerged, engaged in a series of workshops that the Pueblito team called “Becoming Cultural Allies” and developed a curriculum enriching toolkit designed to provide classroom materials that reflected the historical and cultural background of their Latino-Hispanic students.

1 Latino-Hispanic serves as an inclusive term for all students who identify as Latin American, who consider Spanish as their mother tongue, or both. More recently the term Latinx has come into usage; however, because this paper analyzes events in the 2012-13 period, we will use the term favoured at that time by the Hispanic Development Council and used throughout the documents that emerged from the Our Voices in School project.
INTRODUCTION
The Our Voices in School (henceforth Our Voices) project was an initiative undertaken by Pueblito Canada in partnership with the Hispanic Development Council (HDC) a Toronto-based Latino-Hispanic deviancy organization, and the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB). The authors served on the advisory committee for the project and thus did not have a hands-on engagement with the process. Rather, the advisory committee met from time to time. Dolana, who attended from February 2011 to June 2013, had responded to a call from Pueblito for volunteers to serve on the advisory committee, while Mike joined the committee as a member of the Pueblito board. Together, we were motivated to write this reflection on the project because it provides a positive example of building community and school relations through Participatory Action Research (PAR). We therefore were not instrumental in conceptualizing and implementing the project but were, in effect, observers and advisors to this process of community groups working to redress the plight of marginalized students in schools today.

In this article, we provide a focused discussion of Our Voices, which emerged as the project’s “product” (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, 2013b). The Our Voices project details the process that resulted in digitally recorded student testimony and outlines suggested strategies to help district school boards and classroom teachers more successfully meet Latino-Hispanic students’ needs. It also provides an extensive cross-curricular list of resources that can be infused into classroom instruction that focuses on Latino-Hispanic heritage. The project was based on a PAR study conceived by the project partners as a vehicle for gaining insiders’ understanding about Latino-Hispanic youths’ schooling experiences in Toronto. In using the PAR project approach, students were supported in self-authoring their own narrative autobiographies that were then digitally recorded. The integration of PAR with storytelling provides an innovative approach to facilitating and supporting students’ authentic self-representations. Their narrative storytelling signifies inroads into their self-understanding and meaning making that was derived directly from their educational experiences.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT FOR THE INCEPTION OF THE PROJECT
Pueblito has provided educational opportunities for children and youth in Central America since 1974 and, as Casa-Pueblito, it continues to engage in overseas community development work. Pueblito also recognized that Latino-Hispanic youth in the greater Toronto area were experiencing marginalization and oppression, and it decided to support such youths locally as a logical extension of its work in Central America. As a result, Pueblito initiated a partnership in 2011 with two agencies that are particularly well-placed to address key issues affecting Latino-Hispanic youth: the HDC, which gives voice to Toronto’s Latin American Spanish-speaking community, and the TCDSB, whose student body comprises a significant number of Latino-Hispanic young people.

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2 Pueblito Canada subsequently amalgamated with its sister organization Casa Canadiense and is now known as Casa Canadiense–Pueblito Canada, or more simply as Casa-Pueblito.
The particular problem that the tripartite initiative wanted to remedy was the disproportionate number of Latino-Hispanic students who failed to complete their secondary school studies. According to a study conducted by Dr. Robert Brown (2006), approximately 40% of Latino-Hispanic students in Toronto who enter grade 9 drop out before graduation. Brown noted that the data for students of Portuguese heritage are virtually identical. This is well above the average non-completion rate in Toronto which itself is alarmingly high at 23% (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 27).

The tri-partnership applied for and received a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation (a provincial government agency), which enabled the Our Voices project staff to work with teachers and students from three TCDSB secondary schools. The project set out to identify Latino-Hispanic students who would be willing to digitally record their stories to highlight key areas of difficulty they experienced during their transition to Canadian secondary schools. The project’s final report noted that these testimonials served “as a starting point for educators to begin to address the needs of their students” (Pueblito Canada, 2013b, p. 23). A toolkit (discussed below) was developed in collaboration with the participating teachers, based on areas of concern identified by the students and designed to provide teachers with the knowledge, values, and skills to become “cultural allies” (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 27) of their Latino-Hispanic students.

EMERGING INQUIRIES REGARDING CANADIAN LATINO-HISPANIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research literature on Latino-Hispanic high school students in Canada is emerging. We highlight how the Our Voices PAR project redresses the gaps in the research literature in a Canadian context. However, it is important to understand how and why the research literature is emerging. We point both to the reports and social action on the ground from 2006–2012 that are relevant to the inception of the project in 2012. We argue that the Our Voices PAR as well as this burgeoning area of research inquiry on Latino-Hispanic students in Ontario high schools operated in consort with one another. This article considers the uses of PAR as an emancipatory process that can facilitate any group of marginalized students coming to voice about their experiences of schooling (particularly in relation to exclusion).

Findings from Brown’s (2006, 2008) reports problematized the alarming dropout rate among Hispanic and Portuguese speaking students attending high schools in Toronto. Further, the report galvanized Latin American community groups, community educators, and university researchers into building an alliance for social change (Arraiz Matute & Chica, 2014), which in turn directly resulted in social action orientated research projects (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2011; Mantilla, Schugurensky, & Serrano, 2009; Pueblito Canada, 2013a, 2013b).

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3 While we recognize that Brown’s two TDSB reports are dated and that a similar in-depth study would be a most welcome addition to the tools available to researchers and practitioners, the two Brown reports were the only serious studies available to the Our Voices team when they initiated the project.
In "Methodology and Practical Application of the Social Action Research Model," Fleming and Ward (2004) provide an extensive discussion about key principles in social action research. Social action research not only seeks to understand why conditions exist but also asks people in the community being studied to define the problem as it exists so they too can participate in changing these circumstances (Fleming & Ward, 2004). Social action projects based in Toronto identified key issues such as the hidden curriculum, lack of access to ESL programs, teacher–student power relations, and students’ immigration-related socioeconomic inequalities as areas of concern for Latino-Hispanic high school students (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2011; Mantilla et al., 2009; Pueblito Canada, 2013a, 2013b). This growing body of research highlights a two-phase approach that (a) identifies Latino-Hispanic youths’ experiences in the school system that contribute to their high dropout rate, and (b) suggests a course of action to redress the problems and concerns identified in the first phase. The Our Voices initiative contributed to the twofold phases identified by the literature as areas of importance for rectifying the inequities Latino-Hispanic youth face in Ontario schools.

In this article, we discuss the Our Voices project’s use of PAR as a vehicle for Latino-Hispanics students to speak from their authentic experiences of schools. We argue that because PAR legitimizes students’ voices, the Our Voices project becomes a powerful approach through which to re-examine the gaps in the teaching and learning environment that students themselves identify. As such, PAR provides a mechanism for students to develop agency in using their voice to contribute to curriculum change. For example, recommendations arising from the PAR study were used to develop a teaching toolkit that was widely disseminated across school boards through teachers’ professional development workshops.

A review of the emerging research on social action (specifically focused on Latino-Hispanic youth in Ontario, Canada) reveals that Latino-Hispanic youth are recognized as being “disadvantaged” and indeed marginalized in schools. Such studies have at least two overarching aims that are germane to the two phases of the Our Voices project. The first phase provides legitimacy to the voices of Latino-Hispanic students by: documenting the experiences and factors that impede Latino-Hispanic youths’ successful completion of schooling in Toronto, Canada; placing their narratives at the centre of the research inquiry; and highlighting the barriers that Latino-Hispanic youths self-identify as obstacles to their success (e.g., inadequate access to second language programs, disinviting school climates, inequitable teacher–student power relations). The second phase provides recommendations and interventions that will support: critical reflection on the school processes that lead to lower success rates among Latino-Hispanic students; teacher development through dialogue and workshops; youth involvement in their own self-efficacy; and community involvement through alliance building.

In Part A of this article, we discuss the uses of PAR as an emancipatory approach for inserting students’ voices within the larger social concern for equity in educational outcomes for marginalized students in Toronto schools. Six females and two males from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru engaged in the PAR digital
storytelling project. These students ranged from having lived in Canada for as little as three months to as long as 14 years. We extend the discussion of PAR by mentioning its link to Participatory Research (PR). We borrow from Kindon, Pain, and Kesby’s (2007) view that there is an overlap between the terms and that distinctions are blurring (p. 11), in that we saw elements of PAR and PR employed throughout the process that the participating students and teachers followed. Ultimately this work discusses both the correspondence and convergence of PAR and PR. In Part B, we discuss students’ actual digital stories and the recommendations made by the project staff and the participating TCDSB teachers as they sought to address issues that students raised in their digital stories.

**PART A: PURPOSES AND USES OF PAR AND PR**
An important claim of PAR is that production of new knowledge is democratized through the PAR process. Both Foeday (2011) and McCartan, Schubotz, and Murphy (2012) analyze the work of researchers who have made a substantive contribution to a shared understanding and definition of PAR. Foeday notes that PAR is research “done with rather than on people” (2011, p. 4) and has emancipatory aims for community members. PAR is “value laden” in that its primary purpose is to gain insider knowledge of the community; it explains “causality in terms of local realities and macrostructures” (Foeday, 2011, p. 4) and develops partnerships that support the redress of significant problems that community members face. While the community members’ lived experiences are featured at the centre of the research inquiry, so too do the community members become researchers. As such the advocacy lines become blurred and participants become democratic contributors to the research process. PAR researchers Stahl and Shdaimah (2004) argue that “collaboration between the researchers and community-based groups and/or members is an effective way to study social problems” (as cited in Foeday, 2011, p. 5).

McCartan et al. (2012) substantiate such claims with their assertion that “participatory research methods can be seen as an effective and more inclusive way of engaging excluded or hard to reach populations in the research process” (p. 2). However, McCartan et al. extend the argument by including a discussion on the functional or applied aspects of participatory research in relation to marginalized children and youth specifically; they point out that participatory research supports “the global framework for the involvement of children and young people in decision making [that] is provided in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child” (2012, p. 2). McCartan et al. argue that the increased interest in involving children and youth in participatory research has gained strength, importance, and influence among governments and researchers alike because it invites and “encourage[s] the voice of children and young people in policy making and hence ultimately in social research” (2012, p. 2). Involving young people and listening to their voices in the research process provides an avenue to comment upon, reshape, and improve policy delivery that affects their lives. The participatory research method is inclusive because it supports young peoples’ rights to participate in and contribute to social and political issues that influence their quality of life, such as education. What is common between PAR and PR is the action-oriented research practice that has a “political
commitment, collaborative processes and participatory worldview” (Kindon et al., 2007, p. 11). These points of convergence are evident in the Our Voices project.

PAR Legitimizes Latino-Hispanic Students’ Voices
The aforementioned purposes and uses of PAR correspond directly with the advances made by the Our Voices project partners. The project’s PAR paradigm seeks to “improve human life” among Latino-Hispanic youth and is the most salient aspirational characteristic germane to advocating for this group of people.

PAR also employs reflection and action that are both bifunctional and bifocal, in that PAR “empowers participants as well as fosters policy reform or social change/transformation” (Foeday, 2011, p. 2). In the case of PAR with Latino-Hispanic youth, it promises to provide an effective means for collaboration and to build knowledge about youths’ lived experiences of schooling that the students themselves speak about. Ten themes developed from students’ narratives are provided in Part B. Still, there are important limitations. PAR is not generalizable, and we cannot expect the students involved in the Our Voices project to represent all students from the Toronto Latino-Hispanic community. At the same time, proponents of PAR argue that we can learn from experiences derived even from a small sample. Furthermore, as Foeday (2011) points out, “PAR attempts to empower research participants so that they can influence decision making for their own aspirations and for the attainment of social justice” (p. 6).

PAR projects often involve alternative means to report back to the community (e.g., performance, photography) that validate arts-based approaches. The digital stories recorded by students provide a rich story and visual-text exploratory opportunity that is both engaging and of great interest to community members. It has higher impact value because it can reach audiences that go beyond small academic circles that are typical of traditional academic research dissemination processes.

PART B: PROJECT RESULTS—DIGITAL STUDENT TESTIMONIES AND A TEACHER TOOLKIT
The Our Voices project extended over the 2012–2013 school year and had two main components:

First, a series of 15 participatory action research workshops were run with eight Latino-Hispanic students in Grades 9 through 11 at three TCDSB secondary schools. These students created eight digital stories to express their individual experiences, perspectives, and challenges at school and define best practices for teachers who are working to build classrooms that support and nurture diversity. (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 27)

In response to the student testimonials, a toolkit was developed in collaboration with the participating teachers. This toolkit aims to provide educators with valuable knowledge on student-centered teaching strategies and how to act as cultural allies in order to better
reflect the diversity of their classrooms and make it more inclusive of traditionally underrepresented or marginalized groups. (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 27)

The eight testimonials were produced by the six female and two male student participants. A review of the testimonials by the project staff led them to identify 10 themes that the students indicated were challenges during their transition to schools in Toronto:

- Academic expectations;
- Prejudice;
- Fairness and acceptance;
- Importance of family;
- Valuing diverse experiences;
- Challenging curriculum;
- School support systems;
- Social connections;
- English as a Second Language;
- Personal attention. (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 28)

Some of the 10 themes were more commonly conveyed than others, while some were unique to individual students. Themes identified by at least three of the eight student participants were:

- Academic expectation: “Many students feel that teachers expect less of them and underperform and disengage as a result” [Stories 3, 6, and 8];
- Prejudice: “Many stories mention the need to dispel cultural stereotypes and assumptions that paint a negative picture of cultures while obscuring their distinctiveness and diversity” [Stories 1, 3, and 7];
- School support systems: “Students share mixed reviews of whether they receive adequate support and encouragement at school. Students expressed that the period of early arrival is particularly challenging. Students who have newly immigrated to Canada have left behind friends and family and face the difficult challenges of adapting to a new linguistic environment and school system and of building new social connections. In many cases, students articulate finding this period of adjustment to be difficult and discouraging. As well, students who do experience problems at school may feel that they can’t discuss this with their parents or teachers” [Stories 2, 4, 7, and 8];
- ESL: “Students articulate feeling helpless about their ability to communicate in English and its implications for academic success” [Stories 3, 5, and 8];
- Personal attention: “Some students express feeling that school in Canada is impersonal, repetitive, and rushed, while others indicate feeling tremendously supported and encouraged by their teachers” [Stories 5, 7, and 8]. (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 28)

We consider the themes identified in the final report and the recommendations that were made to advocate for a transformational pedagogy which support students in developing:
1. Their critical thinking skills;
2. An enhanced capacity for social and institutional analysis; and
3. Their expression of student agency.

**Interpretation of Critical Thinking through Storytelling**

In authoring their own stories, students develop and use critical analytical thinking skills in relation to race, class, and gender stereotypes. Students’ voices are featured as resisting stereotypes and assumptions about Latino-Hispanic personhood. Gender and cultural stereotypical norms about Latino-Hispanic people are challenged. For example, it is our interpretation (as readers of the students’ narratives) that the notion of the Latino-Hispanic male pipeline (National Council of La Raza, 2011)—from dropping out of schools to joining gangs and incarceration—is challenged as participants draw from their own personal memory of their family’s resistance to the pipeline narrative. Similarly, the notion of early pregnancies that is linked to irresponsible young motherhood is disrupted. Cultural stereotypes and racism that are reproduced in the media are questioned. Students are critical of being judged in relation to cultural tropes featured in the media and the perceptions people may have of them as members of a “Hispanic culture” rather than as individuals.

**Social and Institutional Analysis Evident in Storytelling**

Social relations are critiqued by students; for example, they highlight the self-fulfilling prophecy that results from teachers’ low expectations. They provide a first-hand account of how disengagement resulted from teachers’ lack of efficacy for Latino-Hispanic students. Contrary to such experiences, students were able to point out how having a supportive and caring teacher can help students develop self-esteem and self-efficacy needed in order to believe in their ability to take on challenging learning materials.

**Student Agency in the Struggle for Curricular Change**

Students “focus on constructing knowledge of self, the social world, and culture” (Reeves, 2013, p. 55). These personal narratives have the effect of supporting students toward conscientization (Freire, 1970)—a term that is used to explain not just awareness but also action that is based on critical awareness of the individual and society. Storytelling helps students develop critical analytic thinking skills that are in line with principles of transformative pedagogy. Producing the digital narratives became transformational learning as Dirkx (1998) describes it:

> Education, through praxis, should foster freedom among the learners by enabling them to reflect on their world and, thereby, change it. For Freire, transformative learning is emancipatory and liberating at both a personal and social level. It provides us with a voice, with the ability to name the world and, in so doing, construct for ourselves the meaning of the world. (p. 3)

McLaren (2007) argues for the primacy of student experience, meaning that teachers should take students’ needs into consideration as the starting point to develop teaching and learning contexts in classrooms. Teachers should help working-class and marginalized
students examine their own experiences and subjugated knowledge basis. The Latino-Hispanic students speak out about the problem of being typecast with negative assumptions by teachers who believe them to be products of a disadvantaged school system in “poor, underdeveloped” countries. Students problematize and counter the self-fulfilling prophecy about Latino-Hispanic “failure” in social relations with teachers.

The most powerful reason for creating digital stories is to support a narrative account in which students provide personal stories that document significant incidents in their educational lives. It is noteworthy that the teachers involved with the Our Voices project recognized the validity of these student narratives and, through the “Becoming Cultural Allies” process that they engaged in, came to an awareness that allowed them to develop curricular materials that were inclusive of Latino-Hispanic history and cultural values. We will now turn to the curricular “product” (the toolkit) that these teachers developed in response to the student narratives.

Curricular Additions to Existing Courses
Following the process that culminated in the production of the digital stories, the project staff and the participating teachers identified the 10 themes (or problem areas) raised by the students and strategized how to develop resource materials that would help teachers address or even avoid these issues. In response to these student experiences, a toolkit was developed which, as noted earlier, sought to encourage educators to “act as cultural allies in order to better reflect the diversity of their classrooms and make it more inclusive of traditionally underrepresented or marginalized groups” (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 27).

The toolkit contains transcripts of the eight student testimonies that were shared with the teachers both privately as they emerged and at an end-of-project public meeting attended by the students, their parents and friends, the teachers, senior TCDSB officials, and other members of the public. The toolkit also contains the curricular materials from grades 9 to 12 that the teachers developed (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, 2013b).

The suggested curricular materials are presented as the third step in the process of “Becoming Cultural Allies,” following the initial workshop on “Unpacking Privilege in the Classroom” and “Understanding Latino-Hispanic Disengagement.” The session on curriculum is titled “Culturally Responsive Teaching” and is designed to explore pedagogic strategies that are “culturally sensitive and inclusive.” The last session—“Putting it All Together”—involves developing curricular materials that apply the learning that resulted from the first three sessions.

A grade 9 and 10 English unit addresses the Ontario expectation that students “Identify and analyze the perspectives and/or biases evident in texts, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, commenting with growing understanding on questions that they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power” (as cited in Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 52). The resources recommended for this unit are books by two Mexican Americans: The Earth Did Not Devour Him by Tomás Rivera, and The Rain of Gold by Victor Villaseñor.
Two units for grade 11 and 12 English are outlined. To fulfil the *Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 & 12, English, Revised* expectation for this course that the students be able to “identify the important information and ideas in both simple and complex oral texts in several different ways” (as cited in Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 49). One unit that was developed includes the work of, and information on, the lives of two of Latin America’s leading writers, Chile’s Pablo Neruda (a Nobel laureate) and Cuba’s José Martí. An investigation of their work and lives allows for a study of Latin American history and culture that could be expanded and deepened in other courses, such as the grade 12 World Studies course.

In the second proposed unit for the *Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 & 12, English*, the expectation is that the students “read student- and teacher-selected texts from diverse cultures and historical periods, identifying specific purposes for reading” (as cited in Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 49). The materials suggested include a novel by the Mexican writer Ana Castillo—*My Daughter, My Son, the Eagle, the Dove: An Aztec Chant*—and Francisco Jiménez’s book *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*. The former deals with Aztec culture while the latter touches on contemporary issues facing rural Mexicans. Interestingly, too, the unit suggests using a TED talk by Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which deals with her struggle to find her “cultural voice” in the face of the “single story” that many people in the global north have of the Other.

The grade 12 Canadian and World Studies: A Geographic Analysis offers numerous possibilities to include material relating to Latin America. Numerous specific expectations can be fulfilled and the activities suggested include the Guatemalan Mayan people; the Aztec people of Mexico and their descendants; and the various aboriginal peoples of South America who live in high concentrations of population in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil. Suggested resources include Ronald Wright’s *Time Among the Maya: Travels in Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico* and Matthew Pallamary’s novel *Land Without Evil* about the arrival of the Spanish and the impact on the Guarani people. Other themes conducive for this course include migration patterns to Canada, which would allow students to study settlement patterns in their local area and to research the reasons why people immigrate.

The grade 11 and 12 Workplace Preparation course: The Environment and Resource Management include the expectation that students “identify the ways in which Indigenous peoples interact with the natural environment” (as cited in Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 55). Suggested activities include exploring “how indigenous peoples of Central America interact with their natural environment” and “investigate the impacts these interactions have on current social, political, and economic climates in South and Central America” (as cited in Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 55). A number of online resources are suggested in the toolkit to support this unit.

**CONCLUSION**

The *Our Voices* project undertook through PAR the interrelated goal of equipping teachers to empathize with and take up the challenges facing Latino-Hispanic students in their schools and in their classes. It also empowered those students to act as agents of change in
their own struggle to ensure that their schools understood and respected their values and would prove to be safe places for them to learn while making the adjustment to life in Canada.

As successful as the Our Voices project appears to have been, we recognize that a single, limited initiative cannot provide measurable achievements on its own. It does, however, demonstrate the potential for positive outcomes should more widespread initiatives be undertaken. Such initiatives, as demonstrated by the Our Voices project, should involve outside facilitators (in this case, it was the staff of Pueblito Canada) who all participants trust, the collaboration of caring and highly professional teachers, and courageous students from a marginalized community whose lived experience provides evidence of an urgent need for school reform.

The Our Voices project demonstrated a very powerful path through which Latino-Hispanic students can best negotiate the school system while school boards simultaneously produce increasing levels of equity and success. For example, recommendations from the Pueblito Canada PAR project were used to inform professional development materials for teachers. Following that, teachers’ participation in workshops facilitated the production of culturally relevant curriculum, anti-oppression teaching approaches, and socially conscious positive relations with Latino-Hispanic youth attending schools in Toronto (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, 2013b). Emergent themes from the student testimonials that were identified by the project facilitators provide nuanced critical insight into larger complex issues and relations, some of which are still to be identified by researchers in the future. The resounding importance of the Our Voices PAR project is the answer to the question: What can be done for Latino-Hispanic youth given what we now know? Based on our understanding of the Our Voices project, we offer the following summary response.

Such an initiative is very important given the fact that many, indeed most, of these challenges could have been avoided or their impact lessened had these students been in a more supportive school environment from the very beginning. An important component of such an environment is teachers’ ability to welcome and support new students—especially those whose first language is not English and who come from a culture very different than the dominant one practised in their new school. It is worth noting that “only 25% of educators in Toronto feel comfortable teaching students who are identified as visible minorities” (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., as cited in Pueblito-Canada, 2013a, p. 43). Of course, feeling comfortable and doing a good job of teaching students of diverse backgrounds are two very different things and so professional development experiences that serve to better prepare teachers to more effectively welcome and support students from a range of backgrounds is essential if we are going to meet the needs of all students.

The workshops designed by the teacher participants and the project staff to address the themes raised by the students were oriented to sensitize educators to cultural issues that in turn would assist them to become “cultural allies” (Pueblito Canada, 2013a, p. 27) to their Latino-Hispanic students. By extension, teachers who took these workshops would be better prepared to support any students, regardless of their country of origin, who were
experiencing difficulties in adjusting to their Canadian school experience. While the workshops did not seek to make teachers aware of the specific history and culture of the many Latin American countries from which their Latino-Hispanic students came, it did seek to encourage teachers to integrate Latin American literature and key historical events into their teaching. What emerged is material that could be integrated into specific Ontario curricular outcomes and, in fact, provides a model whereby similar literature and history from other parts of the world could be integrated over time.

REFERENCES


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