

Growing Through the Cracks: Community-Engaged Education and Countering School Disengagement

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Abstract

In this paper, I lay out the possibilities for community-engaged education as a tool for countering school disengagement with marginalized youth in Toronto. Using interviews and observations with staff, youth, and parents who participate in a community-based tutoring and mentoring program, I explore how the program's grassroots commitments work to minimize marginalization and the pushout of students within the Latinx and Portuguese communities in Toronto. By building relationships based on trust and responding to the community's needs, parental engagement, and academic-community partnerships, the program creates a space of community engagement that involves the whole family in changing narratives about both communities and their place within the public education system. I posit that this type of community-engaged education is effective in increasing access to postsecondary education for traditionally marginalized students.

This paper details how the Our Youth Success¹ (OYS) program counters youth educational disengagement through active community engagement, exemplifying how a community-based education program can bolster student outcomes in marginalized communities. I use principles of community engagement to detail how OYS practices an ethos of community-engaged education that centers the communities it serves and strives to increase academic achievement and access to postsecondary education among their youth.

OYS is an academic support and mentoring program housed in the Family Matters Community Centre (FMCC) in Toronto, Ontario. To situate the importance of this program within the context of both Lusophone² and Latinx communities, it might be helpful to understand where Toronto figures in the Canadian immigration landscape. Along with Montreal and Vancouver, Toronto is one of the main immigrant hubs in the country and receives the largest share (20%) of immigrants that come to Canada each year (Vézina & Houle, 2017). The Portuguese community has been settling in Toronto since the early 1960s, and their arrival was directly tied to the rise of immigration programs premised on manual labor shortages in Canada in the 1950s (Anderson & Higgs, 1976; Clifton, 2010). While the Portuguese community is often referred to as a homogeneous one, historical

tensions between the Azores and mainland Portugal permeate the community in Toronto, which draws distinctions between “mainlanders” and “Azoreans” (Anderson, 1983; da Silva, 2011; Nunes, 2003). In addition, Lusophone immigrants from former Portuguese colonies (e.g., Brazil, Angola) often feel left out from Portuguese spaces in the city (da Silva, 2011) such as OYS, which caters to the Portuguese-speaking community but in practice serves almost exclusively Portuguese families. The case of Brazilians also presents a dilemma for service centers such as the FMCC, since they are considered Lusophone by virtue of language but culturally can be considered Latinx. For the purposes of OYS, they fall into the “Portuguese-speaking” community. However, as stated above, in practice the program ends up serving mostly Portuguese families. This is also in part due to the much larger numbers of the Portuguese community.

By contrast, the Latinx community in Toronto has a shorter settlement history and comprises a much more heterogeneous group, representing almost 20 countries (Mata, 2021). Immigration from Latin America has been shaped by sociopolitical events in different regions, resulting in a highly variable group of immigrants who differ in political involvement, class, education, and race (Mata, 1985, 2020, 2021; Veronis, 2006). Veronis

¹ All names in this article, including programs, institutions, and participants, are pseudonyms.

² The term refers to people who are Portuguese-speaking or linked historically or culturally to Portugal.

(2010) pointed to how legacies of colonialism have permeated relations in the Latin American diaspora, leading to the reproduction of racial and class hierarchies within the Latinx community in Canada. OYS, housed within a community center in downtown Toronto, serves mostly working-class Latinx families.

While the Portuguese and Latinx communities in Toronto have different histories and patterns of immigration to Canada, they share many of the same issues related to their youth and the mainstream education system. In recent decades, reports on the high pushout rate³ of both communities as well as their low access to postsecondary education called media attention to this issue (Schugurensky et al., 2009; Simmons et al., 2000; Toronto District School Board, 2012; Yau et al., 2011). This increased attention resulted in research pointing to the myriad factors that affect early-school disengagement and pushout, including a lack of relevance of the curriculum, relationships with educators, racial stereotypes and microaggressions, familial responsibilities, and economic realities (Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011; Januario et al., 2005; Nunes, 2003; Schugurensky et al., 2009).

OYS arose as a community-driven response to the reports issued in 2006 that focused on the pushout rate of Portuguese youth (Brown, 2006). A coalition of academics, community organizers, and parents came together to collaborate with the local school boards on finding solutions to ameliorate this issue. When these efforts proved unfruitful, the coalition shifted its sights to developing its own solutions. OYS was conceived as the “crown jewel” of this initiative (Januario et al., 2005, p. 34). The community mobilized to develop a tutoring program focused on the Portuguese-speaking⁴ community that employed volunteer youth mentors both to work with other youth on academic support and to act as role models of Portuguese-speakers who had succeeded academically. The program was entirely funded by the community for the first

few years until partnerships with the local school boards secured more stable funding. As Joana, one of the program coordinators, recounts:

I think a lot of programs don't survive because of lack of funding, so this just goes to show how much in demand this program was. At one point, we were sustained solely by the Portuguese community through gala dinners and working with subsidized ... the rest of it— But it was just community business that were—This was before funding [from the school boards] and then finally, it was like “Hey. Help us out, here. These are your students.” I think it's interesting. It started off as sort of our problem that we looked to fix, and then it's amazing how—I love the fact that we then expanded into another community.

In 2008, the program expanded to work with the Spanish-speaking⁵ community and added a Spanish-speaker coordinator to the program staff. Since its inception in 2001, the program has grown from 30 students to over 200 and serves over 100 families. Another 100 students usually sit on a waitlist, giving evidence that the program cannot keep up with the community demand (OYS Program Documents). It has also expanded from just academic tutoring sessions to other activities, including parent workshops, university-visiting days for high school students, and mentor training. The program continues to recruit students mostly through word of mouth and through referrals by school staff who know about the program and recommend it to families. Tutor-mentors are usually recruited through university listservs and rely on the academic relationships the program fosters, which will be expanded on in a later section.

Given its history of community organizing and its relationship to the community, I view OYS as an example of community-engaged education.

³ I use here the term “pushout” instead of “dropout” to highlight the systemic forces that work to alienate marginalized youth from the education system. This discursive change places the onus on the system as responsible for its students rather than emphasizing the students’ individual volition as the cause for school disengagement.

⁴ I use the term “Portuguese-speaking” here because it is the same language the program itself uses. This is a signal to welcome Lusophone speakers from other countries and communities. Throughout this paper, I use Portuguese-speaker when referencing the program, and Portuguese when referencing a participant’s cultural identification.

⁵ The term “Spanish-speaking” comes from the program itself, which mirrored language used by the local school board when it first began reporting on the inequitable outcomes of Latinx students. Since then, the school board census language has changed to “Latin American,” but the program still uses “Spanish-speaking” to describe the community it serves.

The FMCC has partnered with two local district school boards, the school of education of one of the major universities in the city, and the community partnership office of another major university in the city. The program regularly collaborates with colleges in the city for special events, including recruitment of volunteers, mentor training, and workshops for parents and students. These partnerships both advance the missions of the universities and colleges and help to meet the needs of the program as it continues to expand and evolve in accordance with the community's needs. Therefore, I see the work of OYS as an example of a positive community-academic partnership that creates meaningful opportunities for community engagement.

Methods

This paper is drawn from a larger study for my own dissertation research. That research was a qualitative ethnographic study in which I collected semistructured individual interviews; conducted participant observation of program events, including tutoring sessions, parent workshops, and the annual graduation event; and performed document analysis of program documents. Participants were recruited through emails sent by the program coordinators to the families registered in the program and to tutor-mentors. Institutional ethics and organizational approvals were granted, and the participants also provided informed consent for interviews and participant observations. Interviews were transcribed and then coded for salient themes using ATLAS.ti software. When reading the transcripts, narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) was used as an analytical framework to understand how participants were articulating their experiences in the OYS program. The data used in this paper is drawn from interview transcripts of staff, parents, and youth of the OYS program and focuses more specifically on the community engagement aspect of the program.

Given the community-based nature of the program, it is important that I also position myself in relation to the program and the participants. I had been affiliated with the program in a number of different capacities for a few years before beginning my doctoral dissertation, including in the role of a youth mentor. Before data collection for the dissertation project began, I had been working as a volunteer recruitment and program support officer. In this capacity, I knew many of the mentors who were recruited. In addition, I knew them through the trainings that were offered at the beginning

of each year (which I didn't deliver but was responsible for organizing). I was also responsible for organizing the growing parent workshop program, and many of the parents of the program knew me from my continuous presence at program events. I am also from the Latinx community and speak Spanish and a little Portuguese, which gave me access to conversations with parents who might normally not have been inclined to participate in interviews. Therefore, my involvement with the program situated me as a trusted member of the community and gave me some insight into both the discourses that permeated the mainstream education system pertaining to the Latinx and Portuguese communities and how the communities reacted to these conversations.

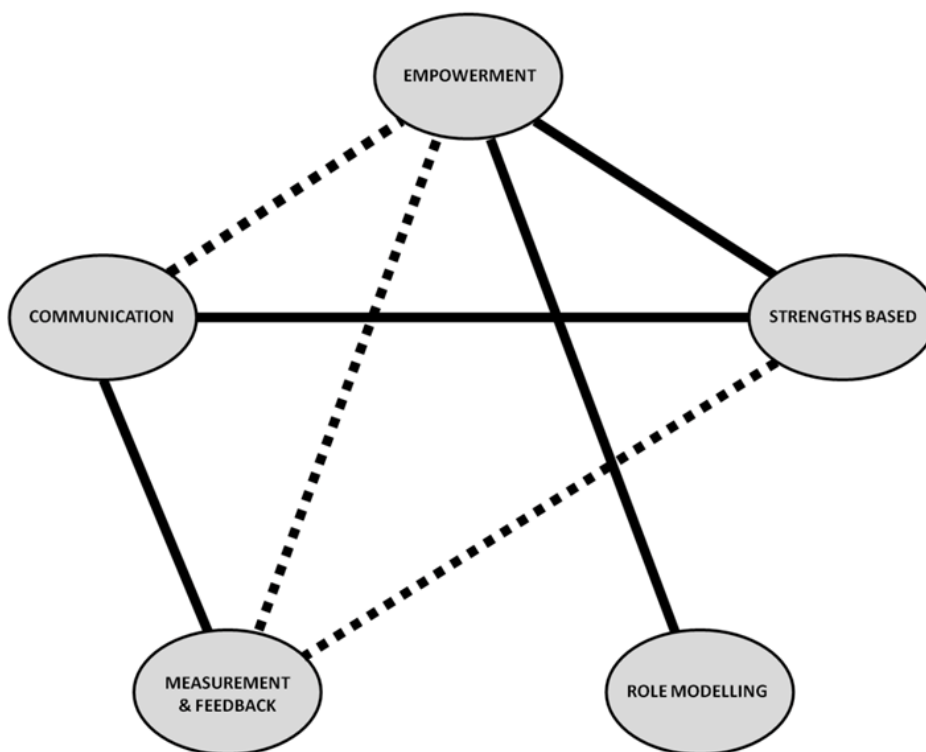
Community Engagement Principles

In order to frame the discussion of the findings gathered from interviews, I used the principles of community engagement outlined by Blythe et al. (2013). I chose these particular principles because they were developed through work in an educational setting that mirrored the kind of work done by OYS. In addition, they aligned with principles used extensively in community health research, such as those developed by the National Institutes of Health (NIH; 2011). Blythe et al. (2013) posed five principles of community engagement: that the project (a) be strengths-based, (b) focus on empowerment, (c) practice role-modeling, (d) have clear communication, and (e) include measurement and feedback. Figure 1 details how the researchers saw these principles acting in complementary ways while existing in potential tension with each other.

While the research presented here does not delve into the relationships between principles, it is important to highlight that community engagement does sometimes exist in spaces of tension. It can be hard to reflect on these because so much of community work relies on a funding structure that prioritizes neat and coherent narratives of deficits and proposed solutions. In this manuscript, I will focus on how OYS practices these principles in its work with the Portuguese and Latinx communities it serves and how its commitment to community engagement has made it a successful program.

By "successful program," I mean that OYS draws from its grassroots nature and community engagement ethos to change the narratives of disengaged Latinx and Portuguese communities in the education system and to counter pushout of youth from high school.

Figure 1. Complementary Principles (Solid Lines) and Potentially Conflicting Principles (Dotted Lines)



Note. From “Guiding Principles for Community Engagement: Reflections on a School-Based Sustainability Project,” by C. Blythe, N. Harré, S. Sharma, V. Dillon, B. Douglas, and A. Didsbury, 2013, *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, 5(3), p. 57 (<https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.5.3.44-69>).

Strengths-Based Programming

Rooted in OYS’s beginnings from a community-engaged perspective, the program eschews ideas of cultural attribution that blame student disengagement on students’ culture and, therefore, on their parents’ or family’s values. The program strives to counter this deficit framework, which is often used by public education systems to explain inequities. Joana spoke to this when she remembered how the school system would talk about Portuguese parents and why this was an impetus for developing OYS:

But a lot of it was “It’s because parents don’t care,” and that’s why. This was the answer to that. ... For those that were saying it, we then showed that they *do* care, and I think that’s why the program was—I think it’s almost like parents were *starving* for a program like this. [emphasis added]

Her description of the need in the community, that parents were “starving” for this kind of service, attests to the urgency that drove the coalition’s work in putting together this program. She went on to speak about the important contribution that an asset-based approach to this type of community program makes:

Instead of just further stigmatizing the parents and further saying “It’s because of this,” let’s do something about it. I think ... the founders who put this together—what they put together—and the fact that that doesn’t happen very often. Often, you have people just talking, and nothing is put into action, and this was put into action and continued.

Joana’s narrative points to the coalition’s intentional approach to developing a program that countered the deficit-based perspective that permeated the discourse about Portuguese

students and their families in the mainstream education system. Instead, OYS was founded on the principle of viewing families within the community as its biggest asset and moving beyond the discourse to action in bringing the program to life. Through its tutor training, for example, the program focuses on ensuring that the service tutor-mentors provide does not reinforce deficit perspectives, which can be problematic with community-engaged learning opportunities (Gordon da Cruz, 2017). As Joana mentions, this approach was not simply put into action; it had been sustained for 21 years at the time of this writing. This continued action is based on and contributes to relationships of trust between the community and the program.

These relationships of trust are demonstrated by actions as simple as using the Portuguese and Spanish languages when communicating with parents. When explaining why her mother signed her up for the program, Anne Marie, a student in the program, noted the difference this can make for families:

I think it probably helped my mom because she could talk to the people, so it's easier for her to communicate with people and the fact that they send Portuguese newsletters, not just English. It's better. That was probably the perk that moved me going there.

Language barriers are known to deter many immigrant families from interacting with public institutions. As Anne Marie noted, just being able to communicate with the program coordinators made the difference in her mom signing up for the program, even though this was a no-cost program offered through a community organization.

It's important to note that the program's work extends beyond recent immigrants. While often the discourse around the Portuguese community and especially the Latinx community centers around struggles stemming from the immigration experience, both communities have been in Toronto for several decades and, as such, have members who were born and raised in Canada. This is significant, as it draws our attention to the structural nature of the barriers facing both communities and other marginalized communities in Canada. Volunteers like Maria see the work of the program as "getting the family involved with the school system and making it less intimidating for the parents." She noted how

important this work is, not just for newcomers but also for "people who've been here forever; they just feel like it's not an accessible thing." Maria's statement reminds us that it is not just newcomers who face barriers to access within education.

The structural nature of barriers within the education system means that certain communities continue to struggle to navigate and survive the system. Therefore, even as communities settle and their children are born and grow up in Canada, future generations continue to face the same issues their parents faced. Portes and Zhou (1993) coined the term "segmented assimilation" to refer to the distinct ways in which children of immigrants become integrated into their host society.

Communication

Being part of a community organization that is not beholden to larger bureaucratic systems (such as school boards) but rather accountable to the community it serves allows OYS to be more responsive to community needs than more institutionalized programs are. It strives to be in constant communication with the community and in turn to use that communication to direct action. From year to year, staff can adjust and shift to make sure they are addressing the issues that are priorities to their families. Joana explained how this has driven the program's evolution over time:

It's changed so much since we started where it was just tutoring, and it's evolved to now parent engagement. A huge part is parent engagement and the mentorship part as well for our youth. That's grown immensely. It's changed based on the community's needs. ... There have been cuts and liaisons [to the school board] so now, we have to subsidize that. We have to fill in for that.

Joana's words gesture to both the benefits of being a community-based education program and some of the challenges and problematic situations that the program faces due to the larger provincial fiscal context in which it is situated. On the one hand, the program has been able to grow its parent engagement offerings based on parents' "hunger" for more information on how to better navigate the province's school and postsecondary systems. This has allowed OYS to more fully address on-the-ground issues that parents need help with and that the school system doesn't have the capacity (or the will, necessarily) to handle.

On the other hand, her narrative also points to the ways the program “fills in” for the system’s inadequacies. When school boards cut positions such as community liaisons, parents rely on the program to fulfill part of that role. This continues a problematic practice of offloading the school board’s responsibilities to community organizations that don’t have the adequate resources to handle them. In addition, many more parents from these communities do not have access to programs like OYS and are left without the support that they need from the school board, further marginalizing them. In the next section, I will expand on how OYS uses parental engagement as a tool for empowerment.

Empowerment

OYS is very intentional about empowering parents to learn about the education system and, therefore, gain tools to be more engaged in their child’s education. The program spends a lot of energy on its parental outreach strategies. One of the ways it begins to engage its parents is by intentionally holding its weekly tutoring sessions and parent workshops within the physical space of the public schools in the neighborhood. Joana pointed to the importance of the space itself:

I think that often for parents, maybe their social piece where they interact with other parents is in a social setting. They go to a Portuguese club or whatever you call it social club. But here, they’re getting together in a social setting, and it’s focused on education, which I don’t think they often get anywhere else.

Part of the intentionality of bringing parents into the space is the program’s view that student disengagement and pushout isn’t due to parental disengagement per se. Joana elaborated that at the time the program was being created, “there was a lot of stigma around parents, around parents not caring and that’s the reason why [there was such a high dropout rate] ... where it’s much more multifaceted than that, obviously.” From the beginning, then, the program has recognized the complexity of the issue when it comes to student dis/engagement. This has fostered an approach that is based on community assets rather than deficits. It puts the community at the center of the work, which means listening to the parents and their experiences.

OYS focuses on building relationships of trust and understanding the perspectives of the families it works with. In part, these efforts are trying to counter the negative experiences that some families have had with the public education system. For example, Adriano, a parent in the program, felt “that [the school] can do a lot more, especially with the Portuguese students, Spanish students, African American students; they can do a lot more. They kind of leave us to the side you know?” Feeling cast aside by public institutions, community members like Adriano gravitate to the spaces created by programs like OYS, where they feel valued and seen. Rosa, another parent, articulated how OYS works to serve her children. She agreed with Adriano that the support at the school is “never enough to attend all their needs, so this program gives [them] that advantage ... you can see the progress.” This progress is not restricted to students’ academic marks but also pertains to the work done with parents and how this effort impacts the family’s relationship to the school.

In engaging parents, OYS addresses a gap in the way that parental involvement is often spoken about, particularly in regard to marginalized communities. In a discourse analysis of the parental involvement policy of the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010), Antony-Newman (2019) pointed to the discourse around barriers and absent teachers that permeates the document. These discourses continue to position parents from underrepresented communities (in spaces such as parent councils) as parents who do not understand the language of the school. In addition, the document speaks of parents’ responsibilities for school involvement but makes no mention of equipping teachers to collaborate or work with parents from different cultures. This discursive move places the onus of parental involvement on the parents, not recognizing the importance of staff and teacher attitudes in making the school a welcoming space for all families. In his evaluation, Antony-Newman (2019) concluded that this policy document and others like it in the United States and the UK deploy narrow definitions of parental involvement that privilege White, middle-class parenting styles and continue to frame racialized communities as deficient. This finding echoed much of the previous research on parent involvement literature (e.g., Crozier & Davies, 2007; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013; Lareau, 2011; Thomas et al., 2015). I see OYS and its practice of creating intentional spaces for parents

within the program as an example of parental involvement done differently. One critical way it has involved parents in engaging and meaningful work is through its parent workshop program.

Parent Workshops. OYS's parent workshop program began as an annual workshop facilitated by volunteer educators, often teachers who donated their Saturday morning and spent it answering questions from concerned parents who felt alienated from their children's schools. Elena, the Spanish-speaking program coordinator, described the workshops as "catharsis session[s]" in which parents used most of the space to vent about their frustrations with a certain teacher or the lack of results they saw from the school. While the volunteer teachers were able to answer some of parents' more general questions, it was obvious to the coordinators, as Elena emphasized, that "the parents needed more, they wanted someone to listen to them, but also they needed advice that went beyond 'talk to your teacher/principal.'"

Therefore, the program moved to create a more comprehensive parent engagement series. It ran six workshops throughout the year focused on more specific topics, including applying to postsecondary school, paying for postsecondary school, and navigating the school system (e.g., who to talk to if you are having issues with your child at school), among others. This gave parents the opportunity to ask more specific questions and receive an answer from someone with intimate knowledge of the system. For Adriano, OYS helps to "open doors" by using the space it has with parents to "explain what you need to do in order to help your kid." The workshops that focus on parent advocacy have helped parents become more actively present in their children's schools, as Adriano noted:

The guidance counsellors, if you don't get involved, if you don't go to the school, if you don't show your face, they don't care about your kid. It's just another number, so this program helps us learn how to get involved in our kids' education and go there and go to school and be like a lever to get the ball in motion to get things going.

Beyond giving parents a place to vent their frustrations, OYS focuses on empowering them with the confidence and tools to self-advocate for their families in their individual schools.

The most immediate goal—and the most direct result—of the workshops is to increase parental involvement, as parental involvement is directly related to student engagement and academic achievement (Epstein, 1987; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004; McNeal, 1999). However, I also see the work OYS does through its parent workshops as a mechanism to build the cultural capital of the families in the community, giving them knowledge and skills they need to access spaces where they did not feel welcomed or listened to before. These spaces also function to create counternarratives about the communities. Instead of beginning from a place of deficit (e.g., "These parents don't care"), the program has an asset-minded starting point, as noted by Joana:

So, here was a program and then from that, we took advantage of the fact that we have these parents that care, that bring their child, rain or shine every Saturday or every Friday after school. So now, let's make use of that. Let's use them. Now, let's get them engaged. Because they needed the program. They wanted it. And that's what I sort of—When people would say "Parents don't care." They do care. I have thousands of parents that I can introduce you to that do. It's just that we provided them with information, tools, access.

This does not mean that being an educator prevents Joana from communicating with parents about their children's educational experiences as she tries to help them advocate for their families in schools. She was careful to note that it must be on "their own level, understand where they come from, speak the same language, and try to explain to them. See in Portugal, the way we used to do it is this way, but here, they want it this way." Without being condescending or admonishing them, she tells parents what their children are struggling with in their sessions and how best to approach this with teachers at school.

She explained that in engaging with parents this way, she can see that for these Portuguese parents, "more even than Canadian parents, education is very important. They will leave everything else. They will pay for tutors if they have to. They want their kids to learn." This has completely upended her initial characterization of Portuguese parents as not being involved with their children's education. By posing it as a

communication issue, parents are positioned as caring “even more than Canadian parents,” which is understood to be the standard against which Portuguese parents are found to be lacking.

Student/Family Workshops. In addition to the parent workshop series, OYS also facilitates workshops for students in high school or about to enter high school. These workshops focus on applying to postsecondary education and course selection in high school, respectively. The workshops offered by OYS to both students and parents aim to dismantle some of their negative beliefs about education by providing both information and a space for community members to collectively organize and receive support. According to Adriano:

This year you enlighten me, like with these workshops I’ve learnt quite a bit. I know where to get the information to prepare, because my kid’s in grade 10 and two more years and she has to start figuring out what she wants to do with college or university and this is going to help me. Through all these seminars, it helps me to try and guide her and even OYS has helped her. Because I came to one last time where this lady was here from Seneca College, I’ve already listened to this. You guys had one for students, and I came to that one as well because I wanted to hear about what her options were because she doesn’t know what she wants to do after high school. So, I wanted to be there and see what she thought about it. It helped me to start preparing for her future.

Maria reflected on this workshop as one of her favorites as well:

There’s something very exciting about just education. I think that’s the real equalizer, has the power to be like an equalizer. So, here’s a community that tries to share wealth, right, resources and like through education and helping families navigate through that education system and instilling confidence. What was her name, Margot was it? The lawyer who came in and did that. I’m like wow—I didn’t know OYS was doing that sort of thing ... but it was great to see that. She’s trying to instill confidence. I don’t know how confident

these families are. I’m sure I’m projecting a lot of what I felt what my family did, but I know I didn’t feel a lot of confidence going through usually my last year of high school and like university.

The workshop that Maria referenced is run by a community member, a Portuguese lawyer who is a longtime supporter of the program. This is just one example of how OYS leverages community assets for its programming. Having a community member serve as the facilitator for the student workshop not only responds to the program’s immediate needs but also fulfills its mission on a much deeper level. First, as we see in Maria’s reflection, it empowers families to navigate the education system with increased confidence. Like Adriano shared in his narrative, it gives parents the information and tools they need to make better choices for their children and help them access postsecondary education, even if this means just learning about options available to them that they may not have known about before. Second, leveraging community assets speaks to the labor stereotypes and aspirations of both Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking communities. Having someone from the community who is a lawyer come and speak to students about their experiences helps to show them not to limit their career ambitions. This continues to be an issue within the Ontario education system as marginalized students are streamed into lower-level secondary classes, limiting their options for postsecondary before they even graduate (Clandfield & Martell, 2014; Galabuzi, 2014; Kinnon, 2016).

Family Empowerment and Role Modeling.

OYS has cultivated several community-academic partnerships that have helped to fulfill its mission. Through its academic-community programs, OYS fulfills the empowerment and role-modeling principles set forth by Blythe et al. (2013). OYS has partnered with the two biggest school boards in the city, the city’s three major universities, and local colleges to run tutoring, workshop programs, and special events. In this section, I will highlight some of these to exemplify the power of community-engaged partnerships.

As mentioned above, the workshops for families highlight the importance of cultural and social capital to access and demonstrate that community-based education initiatives can be organic and powerful sites for building that capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The acquisition of knowledge

about the education system, its processes, and how to navigate them is key to breaking down the barriers that make schools inaccessible to many parents. OYS's workshop on academic pathways, for example, gives families and tutors a common language to speak about course selection and its impact on postsecondary options, making it easier for parents to have this conversation with their children. These conversations have been shown to be a major stumbling point for parents of racialized and low-income students who may lack knowledge about the system (Social Planning Toronto, 2017). It also shows parents how to access funding, which is another major barrier for these families (Antony-Newman, 2019). These workshops are effective in preparing parents to be community advocates (Burbank & Hunter, 2008). In addition, by partnering with families and community organizations, the workshops reach families in ways that the mainstream education system can't; it also responds to recommendations made by parents in marginalized communities looking to close achievement gaps (Hurt et al., 2022).

OYS has intentionally cultivated partnerships with local universities and colleges through institutional community engagement offices or, in cases where no such offices existed, through cultural student associations. In conjunction with both major universities as well as a local college, OYS runs an initiative called "Adopt a Student Day" during which junior and senior high school students are paired with college and university students for a day. OYS organizes applications to the event as well as transportation to and from their site at the community center. The universities/colleges organize the activities on campus. The day usually includes presentations from the community engagement offices and social activities with the university students that allow OYS students to ask questions about what it is like to be a university student. In the past, some students have been able to attend lectures with their hosts as well, allowing them a glimpse into university learning. This day is well attended every year, with OYS students rating it highly on evaluation forms filled out at the end of the day according to OYS program documents. The opportunity to be on a university/college campus with other students and "live a day in the life" can increase feelings of belonging, which are critical to increasing access to postsecondary institutions for marginalized communities (Martinez et al., 2015). In addition, as reported by Martinez et al. (2015), the use of mentors for the day was also a

highlight for OYS students. It was a way for them to see themselves on campus.

The academic relationships fostered by OYS also enable it to grow its large volunteer base of tutor-mentors. When the program first began, it recruited from university language departments that taught Spanish and Portuguese. As it began expanding its relationships with other departments and community outreach offices, OYS had the opportunity to recruit tutor-mentors from other departments and majors. The volunteer tutor-mentors are a critical part of the program because their volunteer labor has allowed the program to continue to expand year after year. Official partnerships with schools of education also allow OYS to provide practicum opportunities for teacher candidates. These practicum opportunities are reserved for site coordinator positions, which carry more responsibility than the tutor-mentor positions and therefore are a bigger commitment. This has been especially important for teacher education programs with a focus on equity and urban education. As Joana recalled, when the partnership first started, "some of these teacher candidates had never even been downtown! They were driving down here completely clueless."

OYS and its parent organization, the FMCC, also partner with the school boards of both main districts in the city as well as other advocacy organizations to collaborate on more structural change. First, the school boards give the program space to run tutoring sessions, workshops, and special events inside school buildings after school hours and on weekends. Having this space is integral to the program's growth, as the FMCC does not physically have capacity for the over-200 students that OYS serves. This partnership is a formal agreement that is part of the school boards' commitment to equity in student outcomes. Most of the collaboration and contact occurs with the office of the superintendent in charge of equity for the boards.

Second, FMCC or OYS staff members are part of task forces at both district school boards focused on the Latinx student achievement gap and are responsible for making recommendations to address it. This partnership echoes the parents in the study by Hurt et al. (2022) and the authors' recommendation for enhancing racialized student success through structural change. The collaboration has resulted in some policy changes regarding language use as well as cultural appreciation events. As part of their work on enhancing Latinx students' success, the FMCC

began running a parent advocacy program and collaborated with school boards on a steering committee for that program based on empowering parents to better navigate the school system. This collaboration was also integral in helping undocumented families access education in the city. The FMCC partners with other community organizations to tackle specific issues that affect youth in racialized communities, such as streaming (Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education, n.d.).

The partnerships and their resulting events and programs, therefore, focus on empowering parents and students to better navigate the education system and access postsecondary education. They provide role models for students of what being a Portuguese-speaking or Spanish-speaking university student is like, and they also provide role models for potential future educators who can reach populations they have never worked with before through community organizations like OYS and the FMCC. This kind of experiential education is important for both the teachers and the future students who will come from these communities. The impact of such community-engaged education programs may be felt in future generations and create the kind of systemic change that the FMCC envisions.

Measurement and Feedback

The last principle outlined by Blythe et al. (2013) pertains to measurement of and feedback on ongoing research. In OYS's case, I see this principle as playing out through program evaluation and monitoring of student academic success. The program sets out to use measurement and feedback in its operations in a few ways.

First, OYS collects a lot of feedback data from its tutor-mentors, parents, and students. After every workshop and event, participants are asked to complete evaluation questionnaires, which serve as OYS documents. The results of these evaluation forms are used for developing new workshop topics (in the case of parent workshops, for example) or making changes to existing events (i.e., Adopt a Student Day). OYS therefore tries to use feedback to respond to families' needs and improve the program experience for everyone.

As a grant-funded program, program evaluations must be done periodically for external funding partners. These evaluations also serve to give feedback to the program and can be used to direct improvements and ensure continuity of funding. The program evaluations are used

in conjunction with the monitoring of student academic success to measure the program's impact. Every year, students send in progress reports and report cards. Because many students come back to OYS year after year, this has allowed the program to chart these students' academic outcomes. While a full analysis of these documents is outside the scope of this article, students' academic reports do show improvement year over year. Joana noted how this impacts her own work:

When looking at some of these students that have been here, you know, for so many years. We see their report cards and see how their grades go up and it just reminds you, yes, this is why we are doing it! You know?

The monitoring and feedback the program gets from tracking its students not only exemplifies the immediate impact on the students and their educational trajectories but also keeps program staff motivated year after year to continue working to make a difference.

Conclusion

OYS clearly practices principles of community engagement in educational spaces in its programming and design. The program is founded on a strengths-based approach that sees its communities as an asset instead of a deficit. This vision has led it to develop relationships of trust with the communities it serves and create spaces where parents and students feel welcomed and empowered. Its communication with families allows it to listen to families' needs better and respond in kind. This strategy has further cemented families' trust in the program and developed into a reciprocal relationship that continues to offer new directions for OYS programming. The work put into partnering with organizations has also allowed the program to collaborate more closely with institutions on policy recommendations or organize around particular topics, thus fulfilling its mission of structural change. More importantly, it has created role-modeling opportunities for students, who can begin to see themselves in postsecondary institutions by learning more about the system and by physically going to campuses in the city. Partnerships have also created in-service learning opportunities for university students who volunteer at events and tutor students. Through measurement and feedback, the program can also monitor its success in increasing academic achievement. That

measure is important for both funding and impact. However, it is only a short-term indicator for what OYS hopes to help achieve in the long term, which is increasing access to postsecondary education to traditionally marginalized youth in the city.

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