Freedom, Opportunity and Child Well-being:
Enhancing Educational Mobility For Disconnected and Immigrant Youth

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Introduction

How do policies and institutional practices create or impede opportunity, or what Amartya Sen (1992,1995) calls “real” freedoms to achieve for economically poor, disconnected, and immigrant youth in the United States? Although the specific obstacles to creating greater educational opportunity for disenfranchised youth varies widely from one country to the next, the concern for increasing basic capabilities and enhancing the life chances of young people through education and other vital human support service organizations unites many researchers and educators around the world (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; Larson & Murtadha, 2002). Education is vital to increasing critically important life skills and competencies. Children and youth living in low wealth communities have limited opportunities for increasing their life chances or for pursuing the lives they want to live without education. Martha Nussbaum (2011) argues that education is a foundational capability, meaning that without access to quality education and the opportunity to acquire capabilities to read, develop computational skills and access knowledge and skills needed to pursue lives they want to live, the freedom and opportunities that poor and immigrant populations have are severely constrained. Injustice in educational opportunity is a global problem. Many nations do not adequately support or provide universal education, and in some places education is intentionally withheld from women and girls. However, as crucial as education is for developing important skills and competencies, access to education alone is not sufficient for paving effective pathways for capability development. When education policies and institutional practices are not targeted to address the real and varied needs of children and youth, particularly for youth who struggle at the marginalized edges of our schools and classrooms, the mere ability to access education is not sufficient for increasing real opportunity for many young people (Anderson & Larson, 2009).
The failure of education to enhance the life chances of many low wealth and immigrant youth in the U.S. schools today is due in part to problematic and inappropriate federal, state and local policies that overlook the particular needs of children and families who are not middle class, white, U.S born or English language speakers. Education policy and practice in the United States today is increasingly driven by high stakes reform efforts and mandated standardized testing policies that better align with the learning trajectories and life needs of middle class children and youth who speak English as a first language. In an era of “No Child Left Behind,” which some scholars have renamed: “no rich child left behind,” schools are being driven by achievement mandates that are not only inappropriate for many immigrant and poor children, but often harmful (Anderson and Larson, 2009; Wells & Larson, 2004).

For example, in an effort to enhance the performance of immigrant children on standardized tests and move them more quickly into speaking English, the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* mandated that all English Language Learners be tested in English just one year after entering U.S. schools. Given that research shows that it takes 5-7 years to learn a new language, this policy has closed rather than opened many doors to opportunity for immigrant populations. Worse, some local policies, like those adopted in New York City made this policy more damaging for many immigrant youth by adding a high stakes performance standard which mandated grade retention for any child in third grade that did not pass both the English Language Assessment test (ELA) and the Mathematics exam, regardless of classroom performance (Wells, 2004). This policy decision overlooked decades of research that argues against using retention as a path toward increasing educational achievement as it fails to recognize the critically important role that social, emotional and economic factors play in student academic achievement. Karp (2004) explains: “Inequality in test scores is one indicator of school performance. But test scores also reflect other inequalities in resources and opportunities that exist in the larger society and in schools themselves” (p.94). Hauser (1999) notes that high-stakes testing and accountability standards “have a much greater impact on minority and poor youths than on majority, middle-class children. Therefore, he argues that high stakes testing “decreases educational opportunity, and makes opportunities less equal among groups” (p. 64).
Academic achievement policies are being implemented throughout the United States as politicians are seizing control of school systems with promises to “get tough” on low performing schools and students. Political talk about education today often blames educators for student “underachievement” and disregards a large body of research that has reliably and consistently found that educational failure cannot be adequately addressed for children in low wealth and English learning communities by focusing on academic achievement alone. Research reveals that the social and emotional handcuffs of poverty and the pressing need for a different educational achievement trajectory for many ELL students must also be addressed if immigrant and poor populations are to thrive in U.S. schools and classrooms (Larson and Murtadha, 2002; Rothstein, 2004).

Increasingly, schools and other not for profit support organizations in the United States are understanding the importance of taking a more comprehensive human approach to educational reform. Some schools and not for profit organizations are recognizing that focusing on academic achievement alone will not create greater freedom or real opportunity for children who are not middle class, white, and do not speak English. These organizations are shaping their policies and practices around the unique needs of impoverished and immigrant children and youth. The two case studies examined in this paper are: Achieve Now (a pseudonym), a not for profit school-to-work program and the Internationals Network for Public Schools (INPS), a consortium of high schools dedicated to educating immigrant youth. We selected these two organizations because both of these organizations have programs that: 1) exist to serve impoverished and immigrant youth; 2) have been publically recognized as very effective in increasing educational opportunity and the life chances of the young people they serve; and 3) put capability development and child well being at the center of their programs. Through these case studies, we examine how the broader needs of immigrant and impoverished youth are being addressed in these two programs. We use the capability approach and Nussbaum’s discussion of child well-being as lenses for understanding how the many and varied needs of impoverished children and immigrant youth are being addressed through the policies and practices of these programs.

What policies and practices do these organizations adopt to identify and address what Sen calls the “real” needs of the young people they serve? These case studies shed
light on how organizations are striving to create real opportunities in the lives of the youths they serve. Through these case studies we found that both programs clearly recognize that education access alone is insufficient for increasing the life chances of their students. Both programs also effectively put the embodied child at the center of policy, therefore, each program provides a unique portrait of what a human and embodied approach to educational reform looks like in two organizations serving impoverished and immigrant youth. Several key research questions guided our inquiry: How are non profit organizations attempting to increase educational opportunity and enhance mobility for impoverished and immigrant youth? How are the real needs and capabilities of these young people being supported through policy and practice? How are these approaches impacting real opportunities to succeed in school and in life? And finally, what pressures do these organizations encounter in their efforts to serve the young people in their programs? In the next section, we provide an overview of the capability approach and then present each case study in turn.

**Education as Human Development: The Capabilities Approach**

Social justice researchers argue that the purpose of education, particularly for children and youth living in under resourced communities, is to develop human capability so that poor and immigrant populations can improve their chances, pursue lives they want to live, and break free of the hardships arising from economic instability. Capability researchers recognize that enhancing children’s freedoms and capabilities to achieve through education requires a fully human approach to reform. Current utilitarian reform efforts in the United States focus on achievement alone and fail to identify or address the many obstacles that severely undermine immigrant and impoverished youths’ abilities to focus on and benefit from education. Further, educational policies and practices that are poorly aligned with the real learning and human support needs of poor and immigrant populations too often undermine rather than enhance opportunity. So, although universal access to education in this country is something that many nations across the world aspire to achieve, access to education alone will not enhance the life chances of many immigrant and impoverished youth in the United States.

Capability researchers argue that serious educational and social reform efforts must do more than focus on academic achievement if impoverished and immigrant
children in the U.S. are to benefit from universal access to education. Aligning with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, many researchers across disciplines argue against universal accountability mandates based on standardized testing and for a human development approach to educational and social reform.

A human development approach to educational reform recognizes that the problems that immigrant and impoverished children and their families encounter in life are not educational or academic only. Capability researchers argue that achievement, or a lack of achievement, in education cannot be separated from the pressing life circumstances and conditions that shape human lives. In fact, for many children and families, academic problems pale in importance when children and families encounter immediate threats to family security and survival such as: loss of a job or lack of access to work; economic instability; homelessness; serious illness and lack of access to health care; immigration problems or fears of deportation; and debilitating gaps in cultural and language understanding to name a few. Although some of these hardships initially impact adults only, such as the loss of a job, each one can quickly swamp the entire family’s abilities to focus on education.

The a human development approach to education addresses all dimensions of child well being, not just education alone or education in isolation. In different countries and in different communities within countries, the real needs, capabilities and opportunities of individuals vary greatly, therefore, capability assessment is not universal, but particular and individual. From a capability perspective, policies are evaluated according to their impact on people’s actual capabilities and on the new freedoms that policies and practices produce in the lives of people in need of support. Capability researchers ask, for example, do people have access to a high-quality educational system? However, they also ask: What must a high-quality educational system do if it is to adequately serve and support the specific groups and individuals before them.

Sen argues that poor populations need much broader and more integrated social and economic support systems and services as well as policies and practices that adequately address the most pressing needs of young people and their families. Without that, children’s opportunities to thrive in school and in life are diminished. In the United States, education policy makers, politicians and researchers often fall into deficit metrics
when finding poor and immigrant populations wanting when test scores, school attendance records, and grades to name a few, are compared to middle class children and families. Without an understanding of how the lives and life circumstances of immigrant and impoverished youth impact their freedom to focus on and do well in school, people often blame children and families for their failure to thrive instead of identifying and addressing the obstacles that undermine their opportunities for both school and work.

Poverty is driven by insecure access to: education, housing, income, health and food. We know that poverty often impacts children’s abilities to focus on and remain in school (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Poverty and immigration insecurities shape the life choices individuals feel forced into making. Nussbaum reminds us that rather than free choice, poor and immigrant populations are often forced into making choices they would not make if they had a real choice, instead they are often forced into doing what they do not want to do, making a deformed choice. For example, if parents cannot earn an adequate income to pay the monthly rent, or if family sickness demands that someone stays home to care for an ill child, this task can fall to teenage youth in the family because parents can not afford to miss work and the cost of a baby sitter is prohibitive. This does not mean that poor families are any less dedicated to the education of their children, they just experience far fewer freedoms than middle class families to focus on education (Anderson & Larson, 2009).

Capability researchers recognize that educational reform efforts to develop the minds of children and youth through academic achievement can not be separated from their embodied human needs. Nussbaum reminds us that the minds of children cannot be educated when their bodies are threatened. Humans are embodied beings with physical and material needs. What human beings experience emotionally and physically shapes how we think, what we view as rational, and what we choose to do as well as what we are actually free to do in life.

The important role that mind, body and emotional well-being plays in human sense making is being illuminated in the findings of cognitive science (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). All human thought is mediated first by the human body. All human beings experience their lives and respond to their experiences and environments in fully
embodied ways. Life choices that seem rational and obvious to some people are often inconceivable and entirely out of the realm of possibility for others given vast differences in the social, emotional and material realities of people’s lives. However, federal education reform in the United States consistently overlooks how disparities in material support and child creates inequities in both learning and opportunity. We expect all students to perform equally, based on age and grade level, despite wide disparities in their freedoms to do so. However, there are schools and educational support programs that recognize they must do more than focus on academic achievement if they hope to increase educational opportunity and enhance the life chances of the young people they serve. In the next section, we introduce our first case study, Achieve Now, and examine how this organization seeks to create greater opportunity in the lives of young adults.

Enhancing Mobility and Opportunity for Disconnected Youth: Achieve Now

Achieve Now is a large national not-for-profit organization headquartered in a major city in the Northeastern United States. Currently, it has program sites in 10 cities across the country, serving 3,000 young adults each year. For over a decade Achieve Now has designed its programs to address the needs of “disconnected” young adults. In the United States, approximately 5.5 million young adults are labeled disconnected or 1 in 7 young adults (13.8%). These young people are described as being detached from mainstream institutions and opportunities that would allow them to develop the knowledge and skills they need to transition into meaningful work. Millions of young adults are labeled “disconnected” because they are not attached to established institutions, such as schools or the workplace. Without access to meaningful work, many young adults are pushed to the marginalized edges of society at a very young age. (Social Science Research Council, 2015). These young people have dropped out or have been thrown out of school and have experienced chronic unemployment or cycles of incarceration. Therefore, it is difficult to identify these young adults or track their progress in any sustainable way. Hence, many disconnected youth fall victim to the criminal justice system, with the financial costs to the U.S. running into billions of dollars (Social Science Research Council, 2015, pg. i)
The vast majority of disconnected youth are disproportionately African American and Latino and live in metropolitan areas where housing and educational segregation are acute. For instance, within the largest cities, African Americans are 10 times more likely to be disconnected than white young adults (Social Science Research Center, 2015). Although, the “disconnection” of young adults is a global phenomenon, the U.S. is a leader in this area within the western world. (Social Science Research Center, 2015).

Over the last two decades, organizations like Achieve Now have grown with the explicit mission to serve this expanding population of disconnected youth. In the Northeastern city where Achieve Now started and is headquartered, for instance, there are approximately 180,000 young adults classified as disconnected.

The students who participate in the Achieve Now program are primarily African American and Latino from low-income communities. Given the program’s focus on reconnecting youth to education and creating opportunities for work, Achieve Now serves young adults who are 18-24 years old and possess either a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or high school diploma. This group is a segment of the larger 16-24 year old disconnected population. In fact within this number, many young adults are further classified as “chronically disconnected,” meaning they are: older (21 to 24); two or more years beyond having attained a high school diploma or GED; without steady work experience or prospects, and; not engaged in college or university education. Michael Stoll points out that when low-income young people are disengaged from both school and work for extended periods of time, it not only negatively impacts their social and economic mobility, but also has disastrous effects on the communities in which these young people reside (Gaston, Anderson, Su, and Theoharis, 2009).

Disconnected Youth, School and Work: Creating Bridges to Opportunity

Achieve Now’s mission statement is to “bridge and eventually close the opportunity divide” for disconnected young people. The opportunity divide is characterized, metaphorically, as the cleavage between 5.5 million disconnected young adults on one side and opportunities for developing valuable competencies
through education and employment on the other. It is estimated that over 5 million entry and middle skill level jobs that require a GED or high school diploma and some post-secondary college experience go unfilled each year because there is a limited pool of adequately trained workers. Achieve Now recognizes that disconnected young adults have unequal access to the economic and educational mainstream for several reasons, including: limited viable opportunities in their own communities; weak or non-existent professional networks; insufficient work experience; and poor educational opportunities. Achieve Now seeks to expand both educational opportunity and access to meaningful work for these young adults.

Achieve Now provides access to: job training; college courses; social and emotional support services and professional networks. The goal of this 12 month program is to assist young adults in acquiring new skills and opportunities through education, internships, and placement in the workforce. The ultimate goal for each student is job placement, which links previously disconnected young adults to work and to a steady income in areas of business and technology where jobs are plentiful and skilled workers are needed.

Achieve Now’s efforts to close the opportunity divide is visible in the thousands of young adults it serves each year who are successfully accessing work opportunities in the mainstream, earning a living wage, often for the first time, supporting a family and contributing to their communities and the larger society. Achieve Now envisions itself as a “bridge builder,” bringing talented and well-trained young adults to companies that are eager and prepared to hire them upon successful completion of the program.

To enhance the life chances of these young men and women, the program reconnects them to both education and work. Program participants are placed in job-training classes and in courses relevant to their job aspirations through a local community college. The students receive college credit for courses that enhance their knowledge, capabilities and employability. The program also provides networking and job information events so that their students can meet corporate leaders and employer partners, increasing their opportunities for employment upon graduation.
The year-long Achieve Now program is broken into two components. The first 6 months provide classroom based training for middle and entry level jobs in employment growth areas like information technology and a broad array of business related occupations. However, program participants are also supported in learning and understanding the culture of work and in developing crucial intra and interpersonal skills which are vital to ensuring that students will be hired, and be capable of keeping their jobs once they have been placed in an organization. In the second half of the program, students are matched with appropriate internship opportunities in business settings that partner with Achieve Now. However, to ensure that each student thrives in the program, program staff pays considerable attention to how they screen and select their students.

**Selecting Students to Enhance Program Outcomes**

Achieve Now has an extensive student selection process. Young adults hear about the program through local community high schools, various local advertisements, such as newspapers and billboards in train stations and referrals from current students or recent alum of the program. Prospective students apply to the program’s local training center and must go through several steps in order to be selected for the fall or spring class. Approximately 150 students across the nation are admitted each year, but as the reputation of this program has grown, competition for one the few seats in the program has become quite fierce.

The only stated requirement for admission to the program is a high school diploma or GED. There is no admission test, however, candidates are screened for other factors in an attempt to assess their “preparedness for the program.” The process from completing a written application to being admitted to an incoming class requires about 20 hours of a student’s time.

After completing a written application, program candidates participate in two formal interviews before an admissions decision is made. Recognizing the importance of supporting the broader human and life needs of disconnected youth, licensed social workers are involved in the student selection process, serving on the admissions teams, conducting interviews with candidates and using a readiness
inventory to assess the support needs of the young adults applying to the program. By having the program’s social workers involved in student selection, they are immediately aware of each student’s social, emotional and material support needs.

The “readiness inventory” is used during the interview process. During the interviews, candidates self-report on their current living situations and past histories. This inventory lists approximately 10 “indicators” of risk for the program, and interview candidates are rated, unknowingly, on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 being the least risk to 4 being the highest risk). The 10 indicators of risk are related to issues of: housing; transportation; work experience; criminal history; physical health; mental health; illegal drug use; GED or high school diploma; citizenship status and childcare arrangements (for parents applying to the program). For instance, if a candidate currently has an unstable housing situation (i.e. itinerant or limited time in current housing) he or she is assessed as having “lower readiness/higher risk”, since persisting and completing the program requires students to show up to the program on time, complete assignments in a timely fashion, etc. The program may admit such students, but through this inventory, they are more aware of how they must support this student and work with their relevant program partners to ensure that he/she thrives in the program.

Over the past fifteen years, the staff has gathered data on the indicators that diminish students’ abilities to persist in the program. For example, these internal data indicate that students who are not in stable living arrangements drop out of the program in higher numbers than those with more secure housing. However, little to no data has been captured on how many students entered the program with stable housing and then became unstable, or how many students were admitted with unstable housing, but were supported by Achieve Now in finding permanent housing, and, as a result, were able to persist and complete the program. Further, many students rely upon the program for support services during the program, even though they did not enter with high risk indicators. In general, however, candidates who rate high in several “risk” areas tend to not be admitted to the program. Therefore, the most chronically disconnected young adults in the U.S. are not seen as good candidates for Achieve Now.
Learning the Culture and Expectations of the Workplace

Students attend program activities from 8:30 in the morning until 5pm in the evening each day of the week. This replication of the business work day is vital to helping students who often have little work experience discover what is expected in the workplace and what it takes to adapt to a daily work schedule given transporation constraints and other life issues. The students are also required to wear appropriate business attire so they become accustomed to the culture of dress expected in the places in which they hope to work.

Achieve Now locates their programs in the business districts of major cities, believing that bringing Black and Latino young adults into these business districts is good for both the students and the business community. By having more young adults into the center of business communities, Achieve Now hopes that business leaders will get to know talented young men and women who generally do not enter these professional communities, and that these interactions will create work opportunities for these young, motivated and newly skilled adults. The concern for exposing poor and working class young people to middle or upper class environments and immersing them in wealthy business contexts as a means of sparking motivation and confidence and facilitating greater social capital is complicated and students report mixed feelings about the experience. However, Achieve Now recognizes the importance of not just immersing their students in these work settings, but also helping them to understand and feel more comfortable in cultural contexts where they aspire to work. These business communities provide real world access to contexts that are not familiar to most of these youths and Achieve Now supports their students in learning how to “border cross,” so they can become employed members of the workforce. Achieve Now wants to ensure that their graduates will have real opportunities to secure and keep good jobs. And they have been effective, placing 85% of their graduates in either college degree programs or in the workplace.

Addressing the Broader Life Needs of Disconnected Young Adults

Disconnected youth encounter many obstacles to completing the Achieve Now program. The leaders of this organization recognize that their students’
broader life needs must also be addressed if they are to complete the program and successfully enter the workforce or continue on to college. The aspirations of highly motivated young adults living in low wealth communities can be derailed by unforeseen social, emotional or financial problems. The ultimate goal of this program is to give students a much needed foot up on the economic ladder, and when poor their students run into hardships that inevitably arise, the program provides direct assistance to help them get through a variety of difficulties.

For example, in this program, students must travel daily to the program and given escalating transportation costs in major cities, students who live in low wealth families and communities can encounter difficulty in paying transporation costs to and from the program. Public transportation costs are escalating in major urban areas, making it difficult, and at times, impossible for some young people to travel for education and work purposes. Young adults in Achieve Now were spending more than 40% of their weekly stipend (i.e. $150 per week for 52 weeks) on daily round-trip bus and subway fare. Achieve Now staff recognized that students were often late or absent from the program because they did not have money for transportation. Recognizing financial contraints as an obstacle to program completion, the program gave financial aid to students as well as additional monetary stipends over the course of the year to offset travel costs and other financial support needs.

Beyond financial support, the program identifies and addresses other support needs as well. Social workers provide valuable referral services for students in need of housing, health care, food and clothing. These social workers regularly meet with students who are either identified in the admissions process or during the program as needing social support services. They meet regularly with these students for individual and group counseling sessions and when necessary, they refer students for additional services through partner organizations in the city.

According to Sen, programs seeking to increase opportunity for people living in low wealth communities must do more than focus on achievement only. Nussbaum concurs, arguing that human beings are embodied beings, which means that the mind of the child cannot be educated if the social, emotional or physical
needs are not met. Therefore, from a capabilities perspective, providing support for the bodily needs of poor populations is central to enhancing their real opportunities to pursue lives they want to live. Achieve Now’s attention to social support services creates greater opportunities for young adults in their program to pursue both education and work. Without needed links to social services like those provided through Achieve Now, students often feel forced into dropping out of programs like this one, even when they do not wish to do so (Anderson & Larson, 2009). Young people with limited social and financial resources are often forced into making choices they would not make if they had a real choice. Nussbaum argues that poor people often are not free to choose what they really want to do, and do not have real choice, but instead are forced into making “deformed choices.”

Achieve Now recognizes that the most difficult challenges students encounter in completing the program and finding employment often emanate from problems arising in under resourced, poor and immigrant communities. Therefore, they design their program around identifying and eliminating barriers that will allow students to persist and complete the program.

The social services provided through Achieve Now have been instrumental in reducing many hardships that become barriers to education and work for disconnected young adults, including obstacles that predominantly impact young men. For example, a significant number of male applicants have criminal records for low level offenses. Having a criminal record is considered “high risk” in the program as internship partners often reject interns who have criminal records. Because of concerns ofemployability, a number of these program candidates are rejected outright. In a growing number of cases, however, students who do not have criminal records upon admission to Achieve Now, may acquire one due to petty infractions such as failure to pay train fare or riding a skateboard or bicycle on the sidewalk. Each criminal infraction is increasingly being punished with an arrest and conviction. The over policing in urban schools and communities has led to treating what were once considered minor offenses or youthful transgressions as punishable misdemeanors. Further, more and more minor infractions are being punished with jail time (CSS study citation). Thus, young Black and Latino men applying to the
program were being assessed as high risk and excluded from consideration based on frivolous infractions and unreliable records.

Achieve Now staff saw an escalation in this troubling pattern and took it upon themselves to gather more information about the nature of the criminal record. They partnered with a local legal rights group to help students’ assess their criminal records for errors or omissions. As a result of their work, 70% of the students who were aided identified errors on their criminal records such as wrong information or juvenile records that should have been erased or sealed but were still on their record. The legal rights group, subsequently, reduced or eliminated errors or misstatements on students’ criminal records (known as “scrubbing”), which freed many of these young adults to go on to education, internships and paid employment.

Consistent with Sen, Achieve Now expands real freedoms for the young people they serve by assessing and addressing their individual constraints to freedom. By identifying limits to freedom, this program is devising important ways to enhance real opportunity for disconnected young adults. Without a close examination of the specific barriers that are hindering opportunity, researchers and policy makers can make mistakes about what is needed to create real opportunity for young adults. For example, in a recent report looking at poverty and education in six countries, researchers found that providing a particular vaccination to young children produced greater educational outcomes than providing school uniforms and supplies (Banerjee, Duflo, Goldberg, Karlan, Osei, and Pariente, et al, 2015). This study revealed that limited access to health care (and not just limited access to school uniforms) usurped childrens’ real freedoms to focus on education and remain in school.

Understanding the impact of poverty on life outcomes, the Achieve Now program also refers students to free or low cost health care services or housing. Achieve Now partnered with the medical school of large local university that provided free health screenings, including a physical exam, blood tests, and eye and hearing tests for newly admitted students without medical coverage. Health issues can quickly prevent young people, especially those growing up in poverty, from
thriving academically. In addition to these screenings, medical staff also provide counseling services for students to review test results and address health needs as they come to light. Through these support services, Achieve Now staff learned that about 40% of the young adults being screened had a previously undiagnosed health concern, and many realized for the first time that they needed eye glasses. These identified health issues led the Achieve Now staff to link with additional partners who, for example, now provide low cost eyewear.

After over a decade of providing social support services to young adults in the program, Achieve Now staff saw a pattern emerging in these data. The greatest percentage of support service referrals could be aggregated in four key areas: Transportation, Housing, Health and Criminal Background. Young adults were accessing services in these key areas and were relying on the program to assist them in finding the help they needed. Partnerships, such as joining with a legal aid organization to correct criminal record or working with the clinical staff of medical school to provide health screenings, became the primary focus of the student service teams, and, subsequently, these services helped young adults to tap avenues of support they were not aware of before.

When people are deprived of adequate support to pursue lives they want to live they often develop “adaptive preferences,” and feel forced into making “deformed choices.” In such situations, people come to accept their deprived state as being “normal” or resign themselves to intolerable situations and circumstances because they can see no way around the obstacles in their way. Having licensed social workers on staff at Achieve Now, who were capable of identifying and then facilitating vital support services for young adults in the program, and having other staff leaders who are in tune with the daily lives of the students in the program, helped to create a context where students are supported and real obstacles to opportunity are identified and addressed.

**Program Success, Shifting Directions and New Demands**

Achieve Now is clearly a resounding success with its graduates. Over 80% of the program participants receive job offers from partnering companies, connecting previously disconnected young adults to the world of work. Over 200 companies
across the country provide internship opportunities and/or employment for Achieve Now students, and 20% of these students opt to continue their college education upon completing the program, seeking advanced certifications or degrees. The metrics for determining success for this organization, however, are narrowly focused on three basic questions: How many students enter the program? How many persist through the program? And how many get jobs upon completion? Based on these metrics, the program is a resounding success. In fact, the program’s success has gained national attention from policy makers and large funding organizations due to the impressively high program retention and job placement numbers, which are standard measures for assessing success in the funding world. Because the program’s output measures have been consistently strong, funders are pushing Achieve Now to scale up, pushing beyond beyond the 3,000 students they currently serve to over 100,000 students per year and replicating the program in more cities across the country.

Achieve Now has always been fairly selective when choosing students for the program, using the “readiness inventory” to increase the likelihood that students will be capable of persisting in and completing the program. Currently, the average program retention rate, nationally, is over 75%. However, this level of success does not come cheap; the cost per student in the Achieve Now program is approximately $20,000 versus $5,000, on average, for other programs serving similar populations.

The impressive success of this program with disconnected youth and with organizations’ participating in the program has created new challenges for the leaders and Staff of Year Up programs. Funders want to see the program serve greater numbers of disconnected young adults in more major cities, but they also want to do this in a more cost effective way. Given the cost of the program, funders are pushing the organization to serve more students for fewer dollars. Given the human development goals of the organization, these demands are creating a double bind for the program and its mission. For example, Achieve Now is being pressured into identifying disconnected young adults who are less needy based on the “readiness inventory,” which would, in theory, decrease the need for costly social services. However, given the larger structural challenges in under-resourced
communities such as over policing, where young adults are vulnerable to “stop and frisk” and arrests from petty infractions, even students who were admitted “criminal record free” may easily become the young adult Achieve Now is attempting to avoid at some point during the program. Nevertheless, these new directions are asking Achieve Now directors to select the least needy applicants in order to cut costs and reduce social services. This retreat from supporting the human development needs of the young people in the program may well diminish the powerful impact Achieve Now’s approach is having on both young adults and on their communities.

Despite the proven effectiveness of the social service interventions in expanding students freedoms to achieve, senior leaders in the organization who make strategic decisions about program direction are increasingly concerned about students being admitted to the program with “high risk” indicators.” The rationale for this decision is that companies (internship and employer partners) want to hire students with “less background” (e.g. poor credit history, housing instability, criminal record, etc.) and such histories make these students less desireable to corporations. This new direction has put overt pressure on admissions teams and student support service personnel to find students who self-report as having fewer barriers to persisting and completing the program. Clearly, this new direction is also an effort to diminish the program’s investment in human development, moving away from serving young adults who are in most need of support programs like Achieve Now.

Sen (1992) asserts that those living in poverty are vulnerable, every day, to dangers and other constraints to human freedom. Although Sen does not address the racial dimensions of poverty in great depth in his work, he does note that the mortality rate of American black males vs. males in Kerala India, for instance, is significantly higher for black males, which could be attributed to structural inequalities based on race. Structural inequalities such as overpolicing of black communities, exposure to police violence and higher incarceration and mortality rates for this population are being captured through the current Black Lives Matter youth movement. Hence, the vulnerability of being constantly surveilled or harassed by police in low-income communities of color physically and emotionally impacts
young people growing up in these environments and exposes them to harsh and injust treatment in ways their white peers are not. So even when young adults attempt to do “all the right things” to avoid interactions with the police, the saturation of police presence in their communities increases the probability that an interaction will occur. The most recent example of this problem arose when a police officer in Texas pulled a young black woman over for failing to signal a lane change when moving over to allow the officer to pass her. This incident soon escalated into a physical conflict and resulted in Bland's incarceration and questionable death, which is still under investigation. There are many more disturbing examples of unjust police action in black communities in the United States. Therefore, when funders and policy makers in programs like Achieve Now do not understand the realities of what is going on in predominantly Black and Latino communities, they risk closing doors to opportunity for young people who are most deserving of their support.

Achieve Now has set a 5 year strategic plan to scale and replicate its programs around the country, tripling the number of students it currently serves. Foundations, corporate partners and board members of Achieve Now are putting pressure on this program to have a greater impact on more young adults. This pressure for scaling success is not unique to the United States. Over the last decade, transnational philanthropic organizations such as Ford, Rockefeller and Open Society Institute (founded by billionaire George Soros) are requiring human service organizations to scale services to achieve greater impact and outcomes in a host of areas, from micro-financing to starting schools. The U.S. government, through its “Pay for Performance” federal grant program requires organizations to demonstrate how their efforts to outcomes can be scaled and replicated.

Achieve Now receives over 60% of its revenue from corporate partnerships and the other 40% in a mix of private and government grants. In this competitive funding environment, the program must raise funds to scale programming as well as look for efficiencies to reduce per participant costs. Achieve Now’s per participant cost is high when compared to other programs serving similar populations. Their funders view the cost as too high for the small number of students being served.
One area Achieve Now is targeting for possible cost-savings is costly student support services, despite the fact that these services have had a significant and important impact on reducing barriers to achievement and expanding freedoms to achieve for program participants. Although there is some data that sheds light on the impact of these support services, there has never been an in-depth or large scale study of how caring for these young adults beyond the classroom correlates with positive program outcomes, contributing to students’ abilities to persist in the program and, ultimately, obtain secure employment.

Senior leaders, looking for efficiencies, recognize that student services are important but they want to cut costs and cut staff. They have considered eliminating costly social services altogether by partnering with outside agencies, or “outsourcing,” referral screenings and other social support services. They have requested a cost-benefit analysis to capture and monetize the impact of human time with students and of the resources garnered through strategic partnerships. Yet, this approach is not proposed not as a way to bolster, but to streamline services. Thus, a tautology of sorts is evident in this desire to reduce student services: if the organization admits students with less risk, then fewer services may be needed. Yet, scaling to serve more of the disconnected population of young adults will most certainly, by simple math, pull in more students who are “chronically disconnected,” and who have “background” challenges that their student support services were designed to address. Concerns regarding cost and efficiency persistently drive programmatic decisions for vulnerable students. Decisions to pull back on social services will inevitably shape students’ experiences in the program and could potentially impact not only their persistence in the program, but also what they are able to be and become.

Sen and Nussbaum argue that investments in wealthy children tend to supersede what can be captured in income metrics alone. A parents educational level, family and community resources and access to health care are “compounded costs” that benefit young people in ways that economists have just begun to capture. In contrast, for young adults already growing up with limited or without adequate resources in their families and communities, the reduction of essential services
through programs like Achieve Now, can have dire impact on their achievement and more broadly, on the opportunities they have to pursue lives they want to live. Unlike young people living in poor communities, youths from higher income families do not generally have to navigate unaffordable and unacceptable housing options, cope with limited access to health services, or struggle to avoid negative encounters or faulty accusations at the hands of overzealous police in their communities. Achieve Now is attempting to address the many issues that make life intolerable and unjust for the students they serve, and that costs money. This recent move toward cutting costs and pursuing greater efficiency is potentially moving this very good program away from the essential services that have allowed students to persist and complete the program in the first place—a hallmark of their success as an organization.

In the next section, we turn to our second case study, the Internationals Network for Public Schools, and examine this organization’s unique efforts to increase equity and opportunity for immigrant youth.

Creating a Space where Immigrant Youth Belong: A Case Study of the Internationals Network for Public Schools

Immigrant youth face distinct challenges as newcomers to the United States and as students in U.S. public schools. School districts are responding in different ways to the complex sociopolitical climate to which an increasing number of older immigrant students are arriving amidst a context of increased accountability and high stakes reform. These young people face the daunting task of learning a new language, learning academic courses in a foreign language, learning the culture of a new country, and all under difficult circumstances. The Internationals Network for Public Schools (INPS) serves immigrant students have been in the United States for less than four years. 91% of these students on average are from low wealth families. 70% of their students have been separated from one or both parents during their family’s immigration to the United States. Up to 30% of INPS students, depending on school location, have had their formal education interrupted by war, political turmoil, and/or lack of access to free education in their former countries—and a few of these students achieved grade level and linguistic
competencies in their native countries. (http://internationalsnps.org/wp-content/uploads/INPS_PressKit%202013.pdf)

U.S. schools are struggling to design programs for growing numbers of teenagers, like these, who “come of age” before arriving in this country. Efforts to support students who are of high school age but who bring disparate levels of education and English speaking abilities has proven particularly challenging for U.S. schools. Policy makers and educators in traditional states where immigrants have historically clustered and in emerging gateway communities where immigrants are arriving in greater numbers need innovative ways to help immigrant students achieve academically, while they also establish a sense of identity in a new place and learn a new language— a feat far more difficult in adolescence than in early childhood (Erikson, 1968; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; Hopkins, Lowenhaupt, and Sweet, 2015). To compound the difficulty of being in a new country and in a new school, recent immigrants are also subjected to American “racial labeling and categorization” that often results in being “othered” and pushed to the marginalized edges of schools and classrooms that are ill-prepared to address the distinct needs of these newcomers (Perkins, 2000, p. 68, Zimmerman, 2002).

Despite these many challenges, or because of them, INPS, an educational nonprofit, is working to improve the academic outcomes of immigrant youth in New York City, San Francisco, and Washington D.C. These schools are attempting to shelter new immigrant teenagers from harmful educational experiences by physically removing them from traditional public schools and creating small schools that are specifically designed to more broadly prepare immigrant youth for learning and life in the U.S. The International’s Network is committed to a human and humanizing approach to educating their students are addressing the educational learning needs of newly arrived immigrants as well as the many embodied social, emotional, and material needs of these young people.

INPS oversees the longest running and most comprehensively studied separate-sited newcomer high schools in the country and it is the only such network of its kind. In the early 1980s, Janet Lieberman, Cecilia Cunningham, and Eric Nadelstern led a joint venture between the New York City Board of Education (now the Department of Education, DOE) and the City University of New York (CUNY) to open a high school on
the campus of LaGuardia Community College in 1985 for 60 recently arrived immigrant students (Fine, Stoudt, and Futch, 2005). Two more schools were opened in the 1990s. Since 2000, the organization has opened approximately one school per year (two schools were opened in 2004, 2007, and 2012) (Internations Network for Public Schools, 2014). In 2007, the organization opened their first school outside of New York City. Currently, INPS oversees nineteen small, innovative high schools for students who have lived in the United States for fewer than four years and who score in the bottom quartile on English language assessments at the time they are admitted to high school. The organization intends to provide an alternative to traditional English Language Learner (ELL) programs by valuing the students’ home language(s), home-country knowledge, and migration experiences as much as they value English language acquisition.

**Methods**

INPS’s longevity and unique partnership with New York City’s Department of Education, the United State’s largest school district and the City University of New York, (CUNY), a liberal, public university, makes it an interesting case for examining how institutions negotiate policy mandates in ways that can either enhance or impede educational opportunities, or “real” freedoms, for immigrant adolescents. Because the network has been long affiliated with CUNY, the schools within INPS have been extensively studied and written about for the past 30 years. This case study examines the pedagogical practices used in the schools overseen by the Internations Network as they have been documented in existing research. Literature examined for the purposes of this study includes: research articles, editorials, and news articles written by educators who founded or were employed by the Internations Network between 1983 and 2015. It also includes evidence of the practices used in the schools as documented by independent researchers whose studies of the schools were either published as case studies in peer review journals or reported by independently funded think-tanks. Finally, the INPS website was used as a source to assess how the program describes its own mission, beliefs and practices. In reviewing this literature, two major themes arose: First, educators in the Internations Network implement practices that fuel both content and language acquisition, simultaneously, to enhance academic achievement. In these high
schools, all teachers are language teachers and all content knowledge is taught within a context of language development. Second, these schools are intentional about creating a human and humanizing approach to education, thereby, creating a strong sense of comfort, connection and belonging for young people and their families who often feel adrift in a new country. These powerful commitments underpin the success of these schools in educating immigrant youth.

In the next section, we introduce the Internationals Network Schools, contextualize this case in the current sociopolitical context of education and discuss how this current context is impacting opportunity for immigrant youths. Next, we examine the primary practices that the Internationals Network schools use to support academic achievement and bodily and emotional integrity. Finally, we discuss how these practices are impacting educational opportunity and increasing the life chances of immigrant youth in the United States.

**Immigrant Students in the Current Sociopolitical Context**

Large populations of immigrant students are no longer confined to the six U.S. states (Arizona, California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois) that have been traditional receiving states for immigrants. Emerging gateway communities, like Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee, have experienced up to three hundred percent increase in the number of ELL and immigrant students enrolled in their public schools since 2001 (National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition, NCELA, 2015).

Although there is little national disaggregated data on the schooling practices and educational outcomes of immigrant youth in the U.S, data on *English as a New Language* (ENL)\(^1\) students provides some context for the experiences of immigrant youth and children of immigrants at the national and state level. ENL students comprise the fastest growing, most diverse, and most at risk category of students in the United States (Hersi & Watkinson, 2012; NCES, 2012, Suarez-Orozco, Gaytan, Bang, Pakes, O’Connor, & Rhodes, 2010).

These students make up 14.2 percent of all public school enrollments (NCES, 2012). Nationally, only 57 percent of ENL students graduate from high school compared

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\(^1\) New language, part 154 DOE
with 79 percent of their English-speaking peers. On average they graduate two percentage points lower than students with learning disabilities (NCES, 2012). Increasingly difficult high-stakes English tests are making it even more difficult for immigrant youth to graduate from high school in four years, or before aging out of the system when they turn 21 (Hopkins, Martinez-Wenzl, Aldana, & Gándara, 2013; Suárez-Orozco & Qin 2006). To learn the level of English required on high school exit exams, immigrant students need five to ten years of instruction in optimal conditions (Cummins, 1984, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Swain, 1984). Therefore, rigid and educationally unsound high-stakes testing policies are creating serious obstacles to educational opportunity for many immigrant adolescents.

Newcomer programs, like those overseen by the Internationals Network, are opening in school districts in emerging gateway communities in an effort to meet both the needs of recently arrived immigrant youth and the demands of high-stakes testing policies. A national survey of newcomer programs (specialized academic environments that serve newly arrived, immigrant ENL students) found that in the 1980s, only three newcomer programs existed nationwide (CAS, 2012). By 2000, however, 115 programs in 29 states were operating at 196 different sites (CAS, 2012, p. 4). By 2008, almost half of these programs were no longer in operation. By 2012, the number of newcomer programs increased again. However, 60 percent of newcomer programs currently operating in U.S. public schools opened after 2000. These statistics raise questions about the design and sustainability of these programs, their effectiveness, and their intended outcomes.

INPS offers consulting services and professional development to school districts that are considering adopting the “Internationals Approach” in their newcomer programs. INPS also attempts to influence educational policy as it relates to immigrant students and English language instruction. Therefore, their schools provide important insight into the strategies being used to negotiate, enact, and resist policies that could negatively impact the academic outcomes and life chances of their students.

An examination of the Internationals Network schools can help us understand the patterns that contribute to either the continuation or disruption of inequality for
immigrant students in the U.S. and provide interesting sites for studying how macro-level political and economic structures play out in local contexts. It is in the “daily workings of a school” that “the renegotiation of power, race, culture, and language relations unfolds” (Olsen, 1997, p. 15). A close look at the design, implementation, and expected outcomes of newcomer programs in a high-stakes testing environment also provides important insight into the politics of language operating in this country. The expectation that all immigrants should speak English underpins the implementation of several questionable education policies impacting immigrant youth. For example, ENL students are held to much higher language achievement standards to be deemed “language proficient” than are native-born students in the United States who are learning “foreign-languages.” The New York City Regents Examination in Spanish taken by high school students to demonstrate language proficiency requires little more than a sixth grade reading and writing level for a native Spanish speaker. However, graduation diplomas of fully credited ELL seniors in New York are withheld if they cannot pass the much more difficult Regents English Exam, regardless of how long they have been in the U.S. Many students pass all of their other Regents exams for graduation, but the Regents English exam is a hurdle that many ENL students cannot clear. This situation in NYC is troubling given that immigrant students can function and communicate perfectly well in the classroom and on other achievement tests, which raises the question: Why is this test written as such a difficult level of complexity? Olsen (1997) contends that, “schools are contested territory in a struggle with whether they will serve a democratizing purpose of including…or simply reproduce current class, racial, and language relations” (p. 17).

INPS is working in a politically volatile arena, and they are seeking greater equity and opportunity for immigrant children and their families. Because education policy in the United States is historically problematic and often ill suited for English language learners, INPS focuses on promoting education reform and supporting quality education for English language learners and immigrants through policy and advocacy. They have worked with immigrant organizations and organizations focusing on improving education for ELLs. As a result, they are influencing needed change in education policy.

Similar to Achieve Now, the Internationals Network also relies upon a broader network of support services and organizations to meet the needs of their immigrant
students. INPS brings a wide-ranging network of organizations and individuals including community based organizations, organizations of professional educators, immigrant and ethnic advocacy organizations, and individual researchers, school faculty, staff and community members who are committed to immigrant children and their families. One former Principal said: “

What I appreciate about Internationals is the holistic approach to the student. We don’t place instruction in one box and a student’s personal issues in another box. We take care of students as one whole person. Similarly, at Internationals, there is no division of responsibility of teaching a student English and teaching him or her subject content. We use the whole language approach and everyone is responsible for teaching language as well as content.”

—Lee Pan, Former Principal, The International High School at LaGuardia Community College

**Translanguaging and Plurilingualism: Practices That Support Academic Achievement**

The pedagogy embraced by INPS for educating newcomers includes core principles based on collaboration, community (in and out of school), autonomy and responsibility, and language-rich content integration. In a report on three schools in the network, Fine et al. (2005) found that the international schools have “extraordinarily high graduation rates” and “extraordinarily low drop-out rates” compared to New York City students in traditional public schools. For example, after four years of high school, 63.4 percent of students in the INPS graduate, compared with 51.9 percent of New York City students who were never ENLs (Fine et al., 2005, p. 1). After five and seven years of high school, INPS’s graduation rates rise to 81 and 88.7 percent, respectively, compared to 69.2 percent citywide. This rise in graduation rate also reveals the value of a longer educational trajectory for ENL students. INPS offers students up to seven years to complete high school, whereas most schools across the country require students to graduate within four years.

These three network schools are achieving extraordinarily high graduation rates with students who come from 119 countries and speak over 90 languages (Internationals Network for Public Schools, 2014). Approximately 28% of the students served are Asian, 11% are Black, 53% are Hispanic, and 8% are White, Arabic, or other (Internationals Network for Public Schools, 2014). Each network school functions
autonomously but relies on the support and collaboration of the larger network. Schools in the network serve between 83 and 420 students with diverse linguistic, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and each with their own migration history. Many students have experienced severe interruptions in their formal education and are not at grade level in either their course content or in their home language(s) while other students have had strong educational backgrounds and perform at grade level in their home language(s).

Several studies have praised the pedagogical methods used across INPS, including valuing inclusivity and preventing isolation of students with limited English or academic ability. In a typical INPS classroom, students with different content and language abilities gather around hexagonal tables and work together on assignments (Garcia & Sylvan, 2011; Hauser, 2011). Students are encouraged to use tools like dictionaries or applications on their smart phones to understand assignments, learn new content, and produce a final written or oral presentation in English. Students are also encouraged to use language skills that they find, personally, valuable for learning English, including, for example, tacking between their own language and English. While in the past this practice has been negatively criticized as encouraging students who speak “Spanglish” (and other negative descriptors), INPS refers to this practice as encouraging translanguaging and plurilingualism.

Creating Connections and Addressing Issues of Emotional and Bodily Integrity

The International’s high schools are places where students feel “a closeness and sense of belonging.” The emphasis on developing a sense of community and the importance that community plays in the pedagogical practices of the school is clearly depicted on the INPS website (http://internationalsnps.org/). Grinberg and Grinberg’s (1989) seminal research on the psychological impacts of migration and exile emphasize that a sense of belonging is “requisite for becoming integrated into a new country” (p. 23). The literature suggests that schools that are able to help the majority of their language minority students feel like they belong are better able to create greater equity and opportunity for those students (Bang, 2011; Hacohen, 2012; Heineke, Coleman, Ferrell, & Kersemeir, 2012). Hacohen (2012) explains that when children move out of their country, under a wide range of circumstances, they must contend with general
uncertainty and often a loss of identity. Bang (2011) argues that the use of home culture and language at school enables students to develop confidence as they build on prior knowledge, collaborate with their peers, and feel newly empowered. “Such interactions support learning, school-based relationships, and students’ sense of belonging, all of which can further promote engagement” (p. 416). Hopkins, Martinez-Wenzl, Aldana, and Gándara (2013) report that newcomers who feel that they belong at their schools have higher self-efficacy and lower rates of depression.

These schools are typically smaller than other public high schools in large cities. This smaller school size allows each school to establish small, family-like environments where students express feeling physically safe and more comfortable in classrooms where all students share the goal of learning English. In Fine’s study, one student explained the strong sense of community students experience at INPS, saying:

I think the teachers were very supportive. Because there were so many Kids that didn’t speak English when they come here for the first year. And When they come here most of them are depressed and sad. And when they come Here they see all these other kids who have the same situations as them. And they feel more relaxed and think, ok, I can deal with it. Petra, Romania, Manhattan International School

**Creating a Context for Success**

Newcomer students must learn English as quickly as possible to achieve in U.S schools. Learning a new language is never easy, but it is twice as difficult when students enter high school and are immediately hit with pressures for learning English to pass standardized achievement tests that will determine their educational and occupational futures. INPS recognizes the importance of immersing the young people in their schools in dynamic learning environments over several years. They also recognize that language develops through meaningful interaction with others, therefore, these classrooms are highly interactive, engaging students and teachers in collaborative and meaningful learning activities, where students acquire multiple strategies for communicating with and learning from others who do not necessarily speak their language. Garcia (2011) argues that successful programs must take a plurilingual approach to language instruction
where “languages are not seen as autonomous systems” but rather “build on the complex and multiple linguistic interactions of students in multilingual classrooms in order to develop new and different language practices” (p. 143). Garcia (2011) writes:

The boundaries between bilingual education and ESL need to be brought down, and more hybrid programs must be developed in order to respond to the dynamic bilingualism of the twenty-first century. (p. 146)

INPS recognizes that students need access to safe, engaging, and relevant schools (see Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). They also recognize the importance of adopting realistic language and graduation policies for high school students who bring vast differences in the language, learning and life needs to the school doors. Some of these students received a very good education in their former country and must simply learn English, whereas others have had very little opportunity for formal education and do not speak English. Researchers know that when students have had a strong educational background in their own language, it takes approximately 3-4 years to learn and function effectively in a new language. For students who have not had a strong educational background in their own language, learning English and succeeding in school will take considerably longer. However, the No Child Left Behind education legislation in the United States mandated testing all immigrant children in English just one year after entering U.S. schools. INPS recognized that this achievement policy seriously undermined educational opportunity for many students learning English as a new language (ENL). Given the wide disparities in students’ language and educational backgrounds, forcing all newly arrived immigrant students to take high-stakes achievement tests in high school before they have a strong command of the English language is, clearly, educationally unsound and academically unsupportable. This mandate forces many students to fail, leaving them feeling as if they do not belong here and are not welcome in U.S schools and society.

In order to create spaces where immigrant youth can thrive academically, INPS immerses their students in a learning community where they immediately experience feelings of connection, care and belonging. They value using students’ life experiences to promote learning and encourage them to use their own knowledge for the purpose of learning new skills and competencies. They also value creating genuine partnerships with
immigrant families (Nur and Nur-Awaleh, 2013; Suro, Suarez-Orozco & Canizales, 2015). Research has found that when schools provide meaningful, nurturing relationships and stimulating classes, students are consistently more motivated than students in weaker schools where students “drift intellectually and lack supportive relationships with teachers and peers” (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2008).

Garcia and Sylvan (2011), attribute the high graduation rates and low dropout rates at the Internationals Network of Public Schools to the core principals reflected in the program design. They warn, however, “that in the hands of ignorant or misguided educators, dynamic plurilingual programs could have disastrous results” (p. 398).

Lamenting the inappropriate and poor quality policies and programs being used in most schools serving immigrant youth, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) write: Only 24 percent of immigrant youth thrive in our schools while over half see their grades decline the longer they are in the country. Many of the schools that are potential gateways to incorporation for immigrant children and youth are nothing but toxic sinkholes. A disconcerting proportion of newly arrived immigrant youngsters, despite their initial high hopes, are disengaging, giving up, and failing.

Amidst this dismal landscape of education for today’s growing population of immigrant youth in the United States, the Internationals Network for Public Schools provides a safe harbor for many immigrant youth and a solid blueprint for creating better schools for immigrant youth. Based on student and school benchmark data – graduation rates, course pass, attendance and drop out rates, standardized tests and college acceptance rates, the INPS Internationals Approach to learning coupled with the Network’s emphasis on providing valuable student support services has enabled INPS to consistently outperform the broader English language learner population in other high schools and in other districts where INPS schools are located. Kirp (May, 2015) points out that in a recent report, “The White House Task Force on New Americans and the United States Department of Education promised to ‘highlight effective, evidence-based interventions’ for English learners. The Internationals Network’s schools belong at the top of this list.”
Discussion

Achieve Now and the Internationals Network for Public Schools recognize that focusing on academic achievement alone will not create greater freedom or real opportunity for the youths and young adults they serve. Many education policies and normative practices in the United States at the federal, state and local level were not designed with the best interests of the young people these programs serve in mind. These organizations serve young people who are not middle class, white, and/or do not speak English. Both of these organizations emanated from a recognized need to better serve young people whose unique needs and talents were not being recognized or addressed and who were at risk of being pushed to the marginalized edges of their communities. These programs recognize that impoverished and immigrant young people need support if they are to succeed in school and have real opportunities to pursue lives they want to live.

Many schools and workforce development programs have tried and failed to serve disconnected young adults and immigrant youth, however, both Achieve Now and INPS are nationally recognized success stories. Both organizations have considerable evidence to support their claims that they are increasing educational opportunity and the life chances of young people through these programs. From each case study in this paper, we see that each organization puts the young people they serve at the center of the program and each takes a fully human and embodied approach to increasing academic achievement and educational opportunity. Both of these organizations clearly recognize that education alone is not sufficient for increasing the life chances of their students, but they also recognize that academic achievement is vital to their students’ future educational opportunity and to their broader life chances.

However, what distinguishes these two organizations from many other schools and nonprofit organizations serving new immigrant and disconnected young adults is their commitment to education as a process of human development. Achieve Now and INPS recognize the many obstacles that block pathways to success for poor, minority and immigrant students in the United States. Both of these programs are intentional about identifying and addressing major obstacles that unjustly prevent young people from thriving, not only in their program, but in the world. For example, the Achieve Now staff
recognized that eliminating black and Latino young men from the program due to unexamined criminal infractions on their record was unacceptable due to the frequent errors and frivolous incidents that appear in these reports. Therefore, the staff worked with legal teams to set these records straight and effectively create greater opportunity for these young men through the program and beyond. The INPS recognize that education policy in the United States is often harmful for immigrant students and fails to take their learning, language, and adjustment needs into consideration. These policies directly undermine their students opportunities to graduate from high school. Therefore, INPS works with their students and families to influence and change educational policy and directly impact their students’ opportunities and life chances. For example, the Internationals Network recognizes that ELL students need to speak English in order to learn English over many years. Therefore, their small classrooms are vibrant communities of plurilingual language learning. Further, ELL students need a longer learning trajectory than their English speaking peers to graduate from high school, particularly, given wide disparities in their previous educational experiences and language abilities. Therefore, INPS adopted a seven year high school program so their students have adequate time to develop the skills and competencies they need to pass mandated tests, graduate from high school, and be admitted to college if they so choose. INPS also successfully pushed for translation services for parents in NYC and won--and now they are now proposing new regulations to govern how English language learners are taught.

Through these case studies we see that neither organization is satisfied with focusing on academic skills only. Both organizations recognize the need to tackle the broader social, emotional, and material needs of their students and both organizations identify and address issues of education malpractice and/or social injustice that undermine real opportunities to achieve.

However, the costs of providing social workers who support the social, emotional, and physical development needs of students as well as links to social support service organizations can make a program like Achieve Now appear to be unacceptably more expensive to funders, than programs that focus on academic achievement only, as we see in this case study. If organizations do not use metrics that adequately capture how a
human development approach to education is contributing to the success of young people in schools and in non profit organizations, they can expect that policy makers and funders will challenge them to demonstrate the return on investment for these expenditures.

Programs that take a human development approach to education, like Achieve Now and INPS have a lot to teach other organizations about how to improve educational outcomes and increase the life chances of young people like their graduates. However, we do not have the data we need to show why a human development approach to education in schools and non profit organizations is worth the cost.

We need better quantitative and qualitative data to provide compelling evidence that these dollars are being well spent, as well as to discern which investments were vital to enhancing the lives and opportunities of these young people. People who support a human development approach to education need to be in the business of educating funders and program partners about a human development approach to education and be capable of explaining why investing in impoverished and immigrant youth in a fully human way is vital to enabling them to thrive in school and in life. The young people that Achieve Now and INPS serve have not been beneficiaries of the kind of multiple investments that middle and upper class parents, typically, make in their children over the course of a lifetime. A parent’s income level directly impacts the investment they can make in their children. Income, as well as the lack of a secure income, impacts the schools children attend, the family and community resources available to them, and their access to healthy neighborhoods and health care. These investments in children accrue and compound over time.

Wealthy families have considerable resources and they are investing more and more dollars in finding new opportunities for their children so they can succeed in school and in life. Parents of insufficient financial means and with limited educational success have neither the funds nor the social and professional connections that wealthy families have to increase opportunity for their children. Public schools and non profit organizations like Achieve Now and INPS serve children who have not had adequate investments made in their growth, their development, their education, or in their future. These organizations are taking the lead in organizing funders and program partners who can invest in the possible future of these young people. These programs are making
significant progress toward achieving these aims, but their proven efforts must be replicated without abandoning their vitally important human development approach to education. If funders and policymakers are to see wisdom in paying more money to support fewer students, solid organizations like Achieve Now and INPS must produce the metrics that make this choice rational and compelling.

References


Internationals Network for Public Schools website, http://internationalsnps.org/


