

Spring 2015

# E' Palante Que Vamo!: Transnational Education in the United States and in the Dominican Republic

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## Recommended Citation

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*E' Palante Que Vamo!:*  
Transnational Education  
in the United States and in the Dominican  
Republic

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Educational Studies  
December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Abstract:

This research project is designed to tell the stories and experiences of Dominican immigrant students living in New York City. For decades, immigration and educational policies in both the Dominican Republic and the United States have been widely discussed and criticized by scholars and members of this compelling community. Over the span of five decades, members of this community have engaged in a massive migration from the Dominican Republic into the United States. The study sheds light on the phenomenon of transnationalism on the lives of Dominican immigrant students, and the way that it shapes their educational experiences in schools across New York City. Through their reflections, I provide evidence that the idea of the *American dream* is virtually non-existent for members of this community. Additionally, Dominican immigrants all show a deep desire to return “home,” despite the educational and personal opportunities offered in the United States.

## Introduction

With the ever-growing population of Dominican immigrants and Dominican-American children living in New York City, it is important to understand the interactions these individuals have with their environment and most importantly in the schools they enroll in. Washington Heights, West Harlem, and many of the Bronx neighborhoods lining the East Harlem River contain some of the greatest concentrations of Dominican immigrants and Dominican-Americans in the entire city. This migration, spanning over four decades has resulted in these very distinct traditional Dominican neighborhoods. Washington Heights has been identified as a “transnational” community for several years, as many of its residents are bound to traditions that they bring back from “home.” Due to globalization and this seemingly unbreakable connection, immigrant families have been able to maintain these traditions and pass them down from generation to generation.

One of the driving forces behind this project is the idea that every Dominican child, whether they are first-generation Dominicans or not, be heard when it comes to their educational wants and needs across the country. For years, the story of this distinct group has not been told in detail, and research is somewhat fragmented and fails to piece together a very important puzzle. Important factors of migration include the perception parents of these children have about education and how moving overseas can positively affect their future. Dominican parents sometimes migrate with their children, and often they send their children to live with relatives in hopes of educating them, the one common goal being a University degree. Unfortunately, these dreams are not always as black and white as they seem. Parents and their children face issues, which may

negatively affect their education. Through my study, I attempt to dispel any myths about this group of migrants, share their successes, and their struggles and also make recommendations about how to approach providing the proper resources for students and parents alike.

My working thesis argues that although educational opportunities provided in the New York City Public schools are far better than the ones provided in the Dominican Republic. Parents and their children often long to go back to the Dominican Republic because living and adapting to the American culture is not what they expected. Immigrant families offered critiques of their home system; they also offered critiques of the system they encountered here, in the United States. Overall – there was an overwhelming response to the idea of “going back *home*.”

## Literature Review

Existing literature written on the topic of transnational education and the experiences of this immigrant population can be classified into two fundamental themes: (1) Transnationalism in New York City and *La Republica Dominicana*, (2) Respect of Culture, Identity and Language.

### *Transnationalism*

Over the last five decades, the topics of migration and immigration have remained one of the most debated issues in the United States and nations around the world. Transnationalism, a relatively newer subject matter has also made its way into the rather controversial conversation when debating the two topics. The International Organization for Migration recognizes transnationalism as the process in where “people establish and

maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders” (IOM 2008 World Migration: 500). These set of connections, which break cultural and geographic boundaries, unlike immigration, focus on the relationships *transnationals* or *transmigrants* have with two distinct places: where these groups are from, and where these groups *come* from. Traditionally, migrants leave their homes, settling in new their new homes. *Transmigrants*, on the other hand, don’t engage in this type of behavior; instead they are known to create communities, which essentially mirror the ones in their homeland. Transnationalism honors culture and tradition. Nina Schiller articulates this idea in her essay, *Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration*, in this essay she explains,

The word migrant evokes images of a permanent rupture, of the uprooted, and the abandonment of old patterns and the painful learning of a new language and culture. Now, a new kind of migrating and population is emerging, composed of those whose networks, activities, and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies. (2006:1)

In short, transnationalism brings together the better qualities of two distinct worlds: opportunities granted through migrants’ new found home, and the history and culture brought from their ‘original’ homes. Schiller states, “[transnationals or transmigrants] are immigrants who live their lives across national borders, participating in the daily life and political processes of two or more nation-states” (2006: 26). Transmigrants, in this case, migrants entering the United States from the Dominican Republic, participate in what seem to be “cultural exchanges.” In this cultural exchange, transmigrants engage in back-and-forth movement between their respective cities in the United States and overseas while simultaneously building networks of community in the United States.

These interactions between large groups of migrants in the Dominican Republic

and the United States generally result in what seem to be the development of communities that are densely populated by migrants from the Dominican Republic. *Washington Heights and Fordham* in New York City, *Lawrence* in Boston, *Bergen and Lodi* in Bergen, NJ, and *Providence* in Rhode Island are examples of these communities. This phenomenon ultimately results in the feeling of “social rejection” by members of both the Dominican community back at home, and in the United States as well (Candelario, 2007). In *Black Behind the Ears*, Ginetta Candelario explains that any type of transnational movement between two countries ultimately forces Dominican immigrants to establish these communities as a way to feel “at home” (2007: 27). Following a narrative outlined by sociologist Luiz Guarnizo, Candelario reinforces the idea that structural and social rejection by both U.S. and Dominican Society forces migrants in New York City (specifically) to form a distinctive bi-national social world that accommodates both but does not assimilate either. As a result of feeling displaced, Dominican families flee to the United States and form small neighborhoods in hopes that they find a new life and a new home.

For Dominican Transmigrants, transitions into the United States are usually calculated decisions, rooted in years worth of advice accumulated by relatives, friends, and colleagues. Migrants from the Dominican Republic leave the island in hopes that they’d find a more financially stable life for themselves and their family members. These groups of individuals pick up their belongings and essentially *go*, in order to obtain the highly desired “American dream.” Dominican migrants are usually under the assumptions that they *must* move to the United States, where there are more opportunities for work and education, and an overall better quality of life.

Once arrived in the United States, immigrants usually face a bittersweet reality. Susan Dicker explores this idea in her essay titled *Dominican Americans in Washington Heights, New York: Language and Culture in a Transnational Community*. In this essay, Dicker uses Jorge Duany's study about Dominican Migration to Puerto as a case study to build on her research on the identity and transmigration. According to Dicker, Duany's study displayed an overwhelming response and articulation on the idea of the *aqui* ("here") and *alla* ("there") (2006: 714). She describes the here, (as in the United States) a place, where it is easy to make and save money, help their families be financially stable and healthy, and *alla*- the "there," as a place where Transmigrants belong and are essentially happy (Dicker, 2006: 714; Duany, 1994:39). The *aqui* as described by both Dicker and Duany is not considered a real home, due to a trumped realization of how unglamorous lives for Transmigrants are. Historically, hopes and dreams of young men and women alike are trumped when they realized that they were condemned to lives of all work and very little play as Transmigrants in the United States. As I found through my research, this realization results in members of this immigrant group being extremely loyal and prideful of their culture and their language, which to them is one that is very rich and deeply rooted in history.

### *Culture, Identity and Language*

The use of native language and an overall appreciation of the Dominican culture are known, and almost expected characteristics of a typical Dominican Transmigrant. Dominican parents who travel with their children or send their children to the United States place a strong emphasis on learning and "figuring out" American culture. They also place pressure on Dominican youth to remain well connected to their culture and

language. As Dicker describes, the identities of transnational children are [indefinitely] linked to language because their lives require them to have a command of two languages. The lives of the Dominican youth raised in these types of transnational environments are therefore deeply intertwined in two distinct cultures and furthermore, languages: the one they learn in school, and the one they should already know, back at home (similarly like the *aqui* vs. *alla* concept previously described).

In her study of Dominican immigrants in New York City, Tracy Rodriguez explores the lives of three young women and their younger siblings, all transnational migrants, and their experiences as members of this community in New York City public schools. Rodriguez's findings were similar to those of Dickers, further proving that students of Dominican heritage struggle in classrooms because they feel that their culture (language) is undermined and undervalued. Furthermore, her study participants expressed a high level of dissatisfaction with the system and resources provided for Bilingual students. (Rodriguez, 2009: 26).

Children caught in the middle of two cultures are often looked at members of society who "are currently seeking to orchestrate meaningful lives under conditions in which their life-worlds are neither 'here' nor 'there', but at one *both* 'here' and 'there.'" (Smith, 1994: 17). These children, although very different in characteristics from their Transmigrant parent(s), also seem to hold their culture and language in deep esteem despite the challenges they might face in the classroom on a daily basis. There are times where Dominican Transmigrant students find themselves debating their allegiance to their home country (Pita and Utakis, 2002: 320), but most of the time (95%) are proud to consider themselves members of the Dominican community.



According to Benjamin Bailey, members of this community are bilingual students and furthermore, “Dominican-Americans [that] use both English and Spanish resources creatively, selectively invoking Dominican and American interpretive frameworks and highlighting particular facets of their multi-faceted identities” (Bailey, 2000: 561). With language learning, comes the ability for Dominican youth to forge relationships and figure out their position in the American culture. This phenomenon may not happen often though, due to inequities in the classroom, which interrupt and almost hinder these types of relationships from happening organically. Xae Reyes explains, “Schooling of Migrant students in the United States has assigned a superior status to the host culture, language and behaviors. This stance almost inevitably implies that other cultures are inferior, other languages undesirable, and other behaviors inappropriate” (2000: 46). The transnational Dominican students that participated in this study expressed having faced a similar struggle as they tried to assimilate into American classrooms.

Looking at the lives of Transmigrants becomes necessary, as transnationalism between *La Republica Dominicana* and cities across the United States becomes a normative occurrence. This ongoing movement of bodies between these two nations has forged relationships between cities that had not existed in the past. In the past, migrants moving from country to country have settled in new places, in hopes that they would adapt to the new environments. Dominican Transmigrants typically do not embrace this type of behavior. They instead, do the opposite and bring to their respective communities, elements of their culture back at “home.” This moving back and forth between countries ultimately results in the construction of multiple identities that fit in distinctive settings.

For Dominican youth, this means having to assimilate to environments almost on a daily basis to survive “American culture.” The following interviews examine these realities faced by young adults that are products of transnationalism and transnational education.

## Transnational Education

Transnational education, by definition, is considered a coordinated system of education across two countries. For this country, this term is virtually non-existent in theory, and in practice. Therefore, by definition, *transnational education* does not exist in that nation. In the Dominican Republic, such systems are scarce or unaffordable to Transmigrant students who flee the country with their families in hopes to achieve socio-economic stability. Instead, in this context, transnational education is perceived and received by many Dominican families, as a coordinated system of transnational strategies, adopted by families traveling overseas in hopes of giving their children a better future. By engaging in this type of activity, families are accessing educational opportunities in more than one country.

While there is no clear outline of what exactly this “strategy” encompasses, it *can* be recognized as a large network and understanding that families are making the decision to avail themselves to the opportunity to access education in more than one country for the betterment of their children’s lives. Migrating families share positive experiences, along with advice, which is all handed down for generations from Dominican migrant to their sisters, brothers, cousins, and uncles. When traveling, these families approach enrolling their children in a very rigid and strategic matter. Garcia & Kerivan-Marks explain that migrants (regardless of race) enter the United States, in hope to forge educational opportunities for their children. The scholars use Dominican parents as an

example, as such, a majority of Dominican parents express high educational and occupations aspirations for their children. Ninety-eight percent of Dominican parents reported that they wanted their children to complete a college education (2001: 120). Usually, parents migrate with their children in hopes that they can be active caregivers in their lives, as their children attend school and receive, *la mejor educación* (“the best education”).

As further proved through my interviews, parents use their resources (other humans) when figuring out how to navigate the educational system, in this case: New York City public schools. Parents interviews articulated having to ask relatives, friends and neighbors for advice regarding public schools, all whilst having to figure out (many times with the help of these same individuals) how to navigate the overcrowded streets of New York City to reach these schools. Many times, these same individuals are not well versed on how to navigate this system on due to the lack of a legitimate system in the Dominican Republic.

## Methods

For my research, I used a qualitative approach when gathering primary information. I conducted a total of twelve in-depth one-on-one interviews with eight women, and four men. Out of these twelve participants, four of the women were parents of the remaining four men and women. The young women and men interviewed are between the ages of 18 and 23. I selected participants who have migrated from the Dominican Republic or to the Dominican Republic in the past 15 years, and have studied in both countries to learn more about their experiences as immigrants who’ve successfully settled into the neighborhoods in New York City. I targeted this specific age group with the assumption

that the participants are young enough to recall their experiences as school-aged immigrant children, but also old enough to articulately express their opinions on those experiences.

Since there is such a large population of Dominican immigrants in Washington Heights, I wanted to make sure to locate a diverse group of young adults to ensure that any data collected was not entirely similar. When locating these individuals, I used snowball sampling to gather names of qualified individuals. I initially reached out to professionals (Former teachers/Principals/School Administrators) who have a large network of Dominican families.

Before I conducted any interviews, I obtained informed consent from every research participant. The form informed the interviewees that participation in the project was wholly voluntary. Participants received this form, along with an interview invitation form (Appendix A), which in detail, explains and outlines the purpose of the project along with appropriate contact information. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide (Appendix B), and participants were encouraged to stop and ask questions during the interview if they were unclear of what I had asked, or uncomfortable. My research study (along with any documents) was reviewed and approved by Trinity College's Institutional Review Board (IRB), to ensure that I followed all appropriate protocol.

The twelve interviews were conducted in person. Six out of the twelve interviews were conducted in Spanish, and the other six were conducted in English, to accommodate the needs of the participants whose first language is not English. The interviewees did not mind opening up their homes found across sections of Upper Harlem and Washington Heights to share their personal narratives because they understood the significance of the

project to their personal experiences. The interviews were structured following a guideline, which sectioned our conversations into four parts: Origins in the Dominican Republic, Transitioning to the United States, Reflections, and Background Questions (if the questions were not answered previously). The questions for parents varied slightly to ensure that the parent's experiences were also captured. The interviews, on average lasted 25-30 minutes, and all of the interviewees were comfortable enough to share personal details about their experiences. All interviews were recorded with the participant's permission and then transcribed. The names of the participants and schools mentioned throughout the interviews have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the participants.

### ***Participants***

Lucinda Guerrero is a 21-year-old young woman who is originally from a small rural town called Salcedo, that is located in *El Cibao*, a region whose word in Spanish literally translates into, "place where rocks abound." Lucinda migrated to the United States with her father when she was 12 years old and settled in the Washington Heights (also referred to as *The Heights*) neighborhood located in Upper Manhattan. Lucinda attended Intermediate School 123, located Washington Heights and graduated from Abreu Dominican High School, which is located in the Marble Hill neighborhood of the Bronx. Lucinda has since started working as a professional personal trainer, working with clients throughout the state of New York.

Analís Rodriguez is a 20-year-old young woman who is originally from New York. Her parents are both of Dominican decent. While she is, by technical definition, not considered an "immigrant," she has spent a lot of time traveling back and forth from

Washington Heights and the Dominican Republic. Analis spent 3 years living in the Dominican Republic (Santo Domingo) when she was 8, and migrated back to the United States with her mother Carmen Rodriguez, where she attended middle school (Tomm Hall) and high school (Natural Sciences High School). Analis since then has enrolled at City College of New York twice to attain a bachelor's degree.

Cristal Martinez is a 21-year-old young woman who is also originally from *Salcedo*. She moved to the United States when she was 12, where her mother, Paola Martinez, joined her. Cristal attended the Tomm Hall School, and Abreu Dominican High School. Since then, Cristal has continued her education in Atlanta, where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Music Production.

Marleny Sanchez (21 years old) and Sajomy Sanchez (18 years old) are siblings from Santo Domingo who migrated to the United States with their mother, Sandra Sanchez, when they were 16 and 13, respectively. They are both originally from the island's capital—Santo Domingo. Sajomy attended Betances Dominican Middle School; While Marleny completed her GED at Abreu Dominican High School. Sajomy has been working in a relative's restaurant establishment after he dropped out from George Washington High School.

Sammi Diaz (19) and Wilmer Diaz (21) are cousins who migrated together from the Dominican Republic 4 years ago with Sammi's mother, Eduvirgen Duarte. They are originally from a small rural town, named Villa Tapia, which is located roughly thirty minutes away from the island's second biggest city- Santiago. Sammi and Wilmer were both not able to complete their GEDs and have been working at their uncle's grocery store located in the Fordham section of the Bronx.

Kenny Santana is a 22-year-old young man, who migrated to the United States when he was 16. Kenny Santana, originally from Villa Mella neighborhood in Santo Domingo, was the first person in his family to move to Washington Heights, where his aunt and younger cousin Adrian joined him. Kenny attended Juan Pablo Duarte public High school, located in Washington Heights. Since graduating from Duarte, Kenny has enrolled in CCB community college located in the Bronx.

## Context

According to a 25-year report produced by Acción Empresarial por La Educación! (EDUCA) (“Business Action for Education”), a non-profit organization dedicated to researching the quality of education in the United States, there are seven problems that plague the quality of education in the Dominican Republic. The report states,

“First, education fails to capture the human talent necessary to include among its ranks the best educators and technicians from each generation. Secondly, Dominican students do not reach the expected achievement levels. Third, problems of access to early childhood and youth persist. Fourth, the proposed curriculum of secondary education in its different forms and in particular those linked to the technical level, do not generate the knowledge and skills that are demanded by the labor market. Fifth, the relevance of educational content and methodologies are not appropriate to current times. Sixth, there are problems with management efficiency in the public education center. Last but not least, these problems persist in education excessive fragmentation, both at the university level and at the general level of Dominican education” (2014: 10-14).

These seven problems altogether, hinder the advancement of Dominican youths in the classroom. In 2012, UNESCO reported that educational attainment in the United States at the primary level was almost two times the percentage than what it was in the Dominican Republic (Appendix C). According to the report, in 2008, UNESCO reported that 41.28%

of third grade students were not able to successfully complete “simple mathematics” homework, meaning students surveyed were not able to complete first-grade homework (Caraballo, Canaan, *et. Al.*, 2013: 12).

EDUCA and UNESCO both reported that retention rates in educational centers/institutions across the country were surprisingly low. Reports provided by the Ministerio de Educación (MINERD- Department of Education), 43.20% of children in the Dominican Republic, are enrolled in school, and only one out of every two of those children is reported to complete high school, therefore, roughly 20% of children successfully complete all levels of schooling in the Dominican Republic (2013: 12). Appendix D demonstrates that students from all levels (except for University graduates) struggle to maintain a score over 20 (on a 30-point scale) on national tests. During the last three years, the students taking mathematics, humanities, and natural sciences have averaged a score of 15.5 (roughly 50%) on examinations. Parents very aware of this situation have a common understanding that MINERD has been tirelessly working, to no avail, in attempts after attempts to implement a better system. Failure in the classroom usually drive these same parents to either migrate with their children, or send their children by themselves in hopes that they are taught by qualified professionals that are invested in the advancement of their children’s education.

## **Analysis and Interpretation of Data**

### *Exploring a Flawed Cultural and Educational System*

During my interviews, I initially asked the participants a series of questions that required them to recall on their experiences as students in the Dominican Republic. When asked about their earliest memory as a student in the Dominican Republic, the majority



(7/8) of the participants gave a detailed description of a small room, most times cramped, which lacked resources, and that was overcrowded with students. All of the students mentioned either attending school during the *Matutino* (morning) or *Vespertino* (afternoon) sessions of school, in which the morning sessions for many of the participants were almost always overcrowded. Their statements are backed up by statistics provided by MINERD, which display an overwhelming amount of students choosing to enroll in morning classes (177,345) versus afternoon (58,442) or complete day (6,112) (Appendix E). According to Sammi, instruction at his school,—Escuela Publica de Villa Tapia located in Villa Tapia was extremely limited.

“En vera, no me arrecuerdo de un día durante el año entero, que tenia una maestra fija. La clase mia, olvidate de eso, no podia concentrarme, por la bulla que tenian mis compañeros. Nadie queria estar ahi. Para mi, tenia el entendimiento que ir a la escuela en Villa era solamente para aprender a leer. Si no fuera por eso, mami no le importaria. Pero como a ella le importaba, imaginate. A leer me puso.”

Translates into:

“For real, I cannot remember one day during the entire year, of where I had a stable teacher. My class, forget about it. I couldn’t concentrate because of the noise my classmates had. Nobody wanted to be there. For me, I had the understanding that going to school in Villa [Tapia] meant learning how to read. If it weren’t for that, my mom wouldn’t really care. But because that’s important to her, imagine. She had me reading.”

Like Sammi, Wilmer shared a similar experience with his cousin, who explicitly recalled feeling satisfaction completing manual labor for his grandparents around their home than going to school. According to these young men, the “expectations” of men in the Dominican Republic included: “ganar dinero, traer comida a la meza, y ser serio,” (Wilmer) which translates into, “make money, bring food to the table, and be a serious man.” Sammi and Wilmer’s stories experiences were almost interchangeable. Even

though they were different in age, they were subject to a culture that idealized and glorified the workingman (common man). According to both participants, these ideals are ones that for generations have been instilled in the Cibaeño culture.

Interestingly enough, the experiences for the participants hailing from *El Cibao*, and *La Capital* were astronomically different. The four participants interviewed that lived in *El Cibao* (Lucinda, Cristal, Sammi, and Wilmer) all mentioned having regrets regarding having to attend school to some degree. Participants that lived in *La Capital* (Santo Domingo), although faced with similar problems, were eager to attend school, and only regret not having more time or the resources necessary to succeed academically. Lucinda cited her teacher's incompetency as being the root of her discontentment at her school.

“Esa maestra, no me arrecuerdo su nombre. Creo que es Profe Rosa, o algo asi. Me volvia loca. Yo ni se como yo estava en esa escuela de vera. Ella era egoista, y hasta nos dijo un dia que no le pagaban suficiente para ella estar ahi. Desde ese momento, yo pense, Que hago aqui? Ella no era inteligente, y no sabia controlar la clase, y por eso nadie le pone atencion. Un dia la clase se estaba portando tan mal, despues que ella hiso un comentario que tuvieron que llamar a la directora de la escuela. Y que paso? Dime tu a mi? [Pause] Nada.”

Translates into:

“That teacher, I'm not sure I remember her name. I think its Teacher Rosa, or something like that. She used to drive me crazy. I am not sure how she was even a teacher at my school. She was egotistical, and even told us one day that she wasn't getting paid enough for her to be there. I knew at that moment, I didn't belong. I thought to myself...What am I doing here? She wasn't intelligent, and didn't know how to control the class, and because of that no one paid her attention. One day the class was behaving so badly after she made a comment that she had to call the school's principal. Do you know what happened after that? You tell me? Nothing.”

Cristal like her *Cibaeño* counterparts also had negative experiences with some of her teachers she encountered as a grade-school student in the Dominican Republic. She

mentioned having to explain to her class several times “como aser la tarea” (how to do the homework) because her teachers were not clear or helpful. Cristel expressed that as a child, her mother, Paola had instilled the idea that education would be her “way out of Salcedo. When asked about her role in Cristel’s academic success in the Dominican Republic, Paola mentioned that she had no choice but to do the right thing.

“Educacion es lo que esa niña necesitaba para ver el mundo. Salcedo no es un lugar para criar su hijos. Todo que tengo se lo debo a ella, y Cristal lo sabe muy bien, que aqui en Salcedo no hay nada. Yo trabajaba con la vieja Esperanza. Cuidandola y ayudandola en la casa. A mi me daban 250 pesos a la semana. Eso no da para nada en la casa, con tanto hermanos que tiene Cristel. Ella paso hambre, y por eso ella se dio cuenta que tenia que estudiar. Con un diploma, ella puede trabajar como secretaria, en un banco, en la tienda, adonde sea, pero no cuidando a una vieja. Asi no.”

Translates into:

“Education is what that girl needed to see the world. Salcedo is not the place to raise your kids. Everything I have I owe to her, and Cristal knows this very well, that in Salcedo there is nothing. I worked with an old lady named Esperanza. I took care of her and helped her around the house. They gave me 250 Dominican Pesos a week to do that. That was not enough money, with all of her siblings I have to take care of. She went hungry many times, and because of this I think she knew that she had to study. With a diploma, she could work as a secretary, in a bank, in a store, wherever, anywhere that is not looking over an old lady. That is not the way to do it.”

When asked about the major difference between the schools in New York and schools in the Dominican Republic, seven out of the eight interviewees mentioned the quality of education, during her interview Analis recalled “learning how to write in Spanish and the importance of grammar.” “That was the main focus over there.” “We had French, math, science, but writing was the one subject they emphasized.” Analis, a student who’s had a background in both settings due to her migration back and forth between the two countries expressed discontent regarding the quality of her teachers and

overall education. Like, Analis, the other participants who studied in *La Capital* (Kenny, Sajomy, and Marlene) expressed an overall feeling of discontentment with the lack of resources provided to the students. Students like Kenny, who've attended public schools in the Dominican Republic historically, have been "left behind" due to lack of funding provided for educational expenditures in the nation.

### *Finding a New Home: Assimilating into American Classrooms and Culture*

All of the participants (12) struggled with their family's transition into American schooling. Three of the young adults interviewed mentioned described to America as a "culture shock" inside and outside of the classroom. These same interviewees mentioned that they had grown accustomed to the schooling methods as "enforced" in the Dominican Republic. Because of this, these students struggled becoming accustomed to the workload they faced as students in the United States. The young women and men interviewed that in one way or another, the fact that they felt as if people did not understand why they struggled in the classroom, including their parents. Two of the males interviewed mentioned strongly considering and eventually dropping out of school (high school) at the time, due to lack of support shown by the staff and faculty in New York City schools. Parents also expressed dissatisfaction with the way the transition process worked in New York City Schools.

Sandra, Sahomy and Marlene's mother recalled her experiences while looking for a good school to enroll her children in:

"Yo tuve que visitar por lo menos cuatro escuelas con Sajomy y Marleny antes que me ayudara alguien sin prisa. Yo hasta le dije a mi sobrina que nos acompañaran porque la primara escuela que visite no tenia ayuda que hablaran

español. Una morena hasta me grito una vez, “MAMI NO ESPAÑOL, INGLES POR FAVOR”. No entiendo como la mayoría de la escuelas en este vecindario son niños y niñas de raza hispana, y nadie en la escuela hablan Eespañol.”

During the first week in the United States, Sandra found herself being aided by her 12-year-old niece in New York City public schools. She recalled having to visit four different schools before finding one where she found another Latino/a faculty and administrators. She states, that she “does not understand how the majority of the children in the neighborhood spoke Spanish, yet could not find herself with a person who spoke Spanish to her when she needed the help.

The four parents articulated that in their opinion, the major problem in today’s schools are rooted in the fact that there is no reflection of the diverse incoming population of immigrant students in the schools’ faculty, staff, or curriculum as well. Interestingly enough, I found that while research suggests that there is a significant relationship between implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in academic success, participants were placed into regular English classrooms, and six out of the eight participants were required to take exams at the end of the year with the rest of their classmates.

### *Gender Expectations*

Through my initial analysis of my interview transcriptions, I also found that male students were exposed to the same conditions of schooling in the Dominican Republic, but that they were also exposed to a rougher learning environment when enrolled in New York City Public schools. Sammi migrated from the Dominican Republic when he was 15. Sammi was suspended on three different occasions and almost expelled once due to

“distracting behavior.” When asked about his experiences transitioning into Washington Heights he said:

“Yo estaba feliz de saber que yo llegue en un lugar que era diferente al mio, pero extrañe mi barrio. Yo odiaba a los tigueros en SCHOOL X, me hodian la vida porque no sabia como comunicarme con ellos. Mis profesores pensaban que yo no quería estudiar, y mis padres trabajaban todo el tiempo, así que durante ese tiempo, nada me importaba”

***Translates into:***

“I was happy knowing that I was in a new place that was different from my own, but I missed my barrio [neighborhood]. I hated the kids in SCHOOL X, they bullied me because my Spanish wasn’t good, my teachers thought I didn’t want to be there, and my parents worked all the time, so at that time, I didn’t care about anything.”

Perhaps my most intriguing findings thus far have been that traditional Dominican values were challenged. The young men interviewed were surprised that they were asked “to participate, pay attention, and ask for help when necessary (Kenny). Kenny and Wilmer expressed feeling uncomfortable having male teachers. According to EDUCA, female educators far outnumber their male counterparts. Male students are used to either complying with or disrespecting female teachers, therefore being taught by a male teacher was seen as a challenge. Sammi briefly mentioned the anger he felt when he was reprimanded by his teacher, Mr. Rivers because of his behavior: “A mi nungun palomo me iba a decirme como comportarme.” This translates into: “No chump was going to tell me how to behave myself.”

In summary, the information that I have been able to obtain from my interviews thus far point towards the fact that schools are simply not prepared to provide adequate resources for Dominican immigrant students. Teachers are not properly trained to understand different cultures, and, therefore cannot commit 100% to their jobs as trusted

educators in the classroom. The Dominican educational system lacks resources and adequate programming that would benefit the general student body, and this ultimately poses a problem for students who migrate to the United States and are expected to perform at a level they aren't prepared for.

Due to the quality of education in the Dominican Republic, immigrant students have a harder time assimilating to New York City classrooms where everything is heavily structured. Compared to the resources and benefits the students interviewed were receiving in the Dominican Republic, they were not accustomed to the individualized method of learning, nor were they accustomed to extended school days, nor the system of accountability that schools have set in place. These were all ingredients, which ultimately hindered and pushed some of the interviewees away from the U.S.'s educational system.

## Recommendation

Some things to consider when looking at special populations like this one may include figuring out ways to properly implement effective programs that help bridge cultural (and language in this case) gaps between migrant members and existing groups. There are a number of programs that are set in place to help families' transition into this society, but from the interviews conducted, I could tell that these families were probably not offered these opportunities. It may also be worth looking into ways teachers and parents can interact *outside* of traditional events such as parent-teacher conferences. Sometimes, parents work over long hours, which prevent their participation in events like those. Paola mentioned wanting to interact with her daughter's teacher, but never being able to due to the language barrier and time constraints. Interestingly enough, all eight interviewed young men and women expressed feeling ostracized by their teachers, faculty

and staff, and also their classmates who were surprisingly first generation Dominican-American. Students like Analis and Cristel recalled being bullied by Dominican classmates, called names such as “hick” and “pobre naca,” two slang words for *peasant* and *poor country-girl* in the Dominican Republic. These interactions are just as important as any interactions Dominican migrant youth have with any other group.

## Conclusion

Throughout this study, I was able to connect with individuals and their families to learn, in detail, about their histories as transnational citizens, and experiences as students in two very distinct countries. Throughout the study, there were times where the responses confirmed my theories and assumptions formulated on personal experiences. There were also moments throughout my interviews where some of the responses shocked me. Overall, I was very surprised at the fact that as a stranger, these 12 unique individuals let me into their homes and their lives, sharing very explicit details about their perceptions about transnational education between the United States and the Dominican Republic.

For decades, Dominicans transmigrants have traveled overseas and back in search of the perfect educational opportunities for their children. All of the participants explained their reasoning behind moving to the United States was rooted in the fact that their parents thought it would be a better place to live in, and in many aspects for them, this statement was true. Surprisingly, the experiences some of the participants faced negatively impacted their transitions into the United States schooling system. The “*aqui*” was indeed not as glamorous as projected on the screen and by their relatives. In fact, when arrived in the U.S., these participants and also hundreds of thousands of Dominican migrants were faced with lives of labor and hardship, ultimately resulting in an overall



arching theme in the study: the longing to go back *home* to the Dominican Republic, despite the educational “opportunities” offered here. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of existing programs that are set in place for migrant families of the Dominican population and every other migrant population. It would also be worth to research the interactions between First-generation Dominican-Americans and this group, to explore the extent of which these two groups either hinder or encourage academic success.

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## Appendixes

*A. Interview Invitation*September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Dear,

I invite you to participate in an oral interview regarding your experiences or your child's experiences as a student in both the Dominican Republic and the United States.

In an effort to make a connection and observation, I am interviewing immigrant families that have traveled to the United States in search of a better life in Academia and in the working world as well. Your invaluable input will serve as a basis to those who are interested in observing trends about the educational system here and in the Dominican Republic. If you agree to be interviewed, we will voice record and type a transcript of your interview and give you an MP3 copy to share with your friends and family. Also, you will retain the right to copyright the interview. Along with your permission, we will be able to share a copy of these materials on our website.

We are currently scheduling interviews during the months of October and November. If you wish to participate, please contact Ambar Paulino (a Trinity Student of Dominican descent) to set up a time that is convenient for you.

Sincerely,

Ambar Paulino  
Trinity College Box 700243  
Hartford, CT 06106  
Mobile: 347-925-3974  
E-mail: [Ambar.paulino@trincoll.edu](mailto:Ambar.paulino@trincoll.edu)

Professor Rachel Leventhal-Weiner  
Trinity College  
Hartford, CT

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## B. Interview Guide

Interview guide by Ambar Paulino (9/14/14)

### REVIEW AND SIGN CONSENT FORM

#### **ORIGINS IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

What is your earliest memory about being a student in the Dominican Republic?

While in the Dominican Republic did you attend a Private/Parochial institution or a Public School?

a. Which one?

b. Describe the academic environment of the school, if possible?

Can you Describe some of the academic curriculum consisted of while you were in school in the Dominican Republic?

Were you required to take certain courses (language, sciences, religion) while attending school in the Dominican Republic?

a. Can you describe what some of the academic requirements of those courses were?

What is the major difference between attending school (Any grade level) in the Dominican Republic and the United States based on your experiences?

Are there any particular practices/traditions you recall your school did while you were enrolled?

#### **TRANSITIONING TO THE UNITED STATES**

At what age did you emigrate from the Dominican Republic to the United States?

Were you placed into an ESL class or an English-speaking classroom?

Do you recall having to take certain tests to be placed into a certain grade level?

What was the hardest part about transitioning from the Dominican Republic to the United States in school?

Can you describe the types of support schools provided to you and your family while transitioning? (I.e. counselor, English language classes, etc.)

#### **REFLECTIONS**

Looking back, what do you think was the hardest part about being a student who emigrated from the Dominican Republic?

Do you wish there were more support provided by the school in the United States? If so, then what?

What did you miss the most about being a student in the Dominican Republic?

How have educational opportunities changed in the United States and Dominican Republic since you've moved?

#### **BACKGROUND QUESTIONS (if not answered above)**

How long did you live in the Dominican Republic prior to moving to the United States?

Where in the Dominican Republic did you live in? (El Cibao, Santo Domingo, etc.)

What schools did you and/or your children attend in the Dominican Republic/United States?

C. Educational Attainment: At least completed primary

| Dataset:<br>Education    |                   |  |      |          |      |
|--------------------------|-------------------|--|------|----------|------|
|                          | Indicator<br>Time | Educational attainment: at least completed primary (ISCED 1 or |      |          |      |
| Country                  |                   | 2010   | 2011 | 2012     | 2013 |
| Dominican Republic       |                   | ..   | ..   | 64.59923 | ..   |
| United States of America |                   | ..   | ..   | 98.79048 | ..   |

data extracted on 12 Dec 2014 00:13 UTC (GMT) from UIS/ISU

D. Average National Exam Scores (Scale 0-30) Sectioned by Grade level & Subject (2010-2013)

**Cuadro 31**  
REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA: Calificación promedio (escala 0-30) en pruebas nacionales por año según nivel o modalidad. Primera convocatoria. 2010-2013

| Nivel o Modalidad          | Año   |       |       |       |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                            | 2010  | 2011  | 2012  | 2013  |
| <b>Básico</b>              |       |       |       |       |
| Español                    | 17.18 | 16.92 | 17.57 | 18.21 |
| Matemática                 | 14.57 | 15.10 | 14.73 | 15.19 |
| Sociales                   | 16.74 | 15.96 | 15.42 | 15.75 |
| Naturales                  | 15.15 | 15.53 | 15.22 | 15.42 |
| <b>Media general</b>       |       |       |       |       |
| Español                    | 17.77 | 17.90 | 18.21 | 18.39 |
| Matemática                 | 15.99 | 16.01 | 16.48 | 16.29 |
| Sociales                   | 18.43 | 18.21 | 17.62 | 17.94 |
| Naturales                  | 16.21 | 16.97 | 16.33 | 16.42 |
| <b>Adultos</b>             |       |       |       |       |
| Español                    | 15.58 | 16.92 | 16.59 | 17.16 |
| Matemática                 | 14.64 | 15.40 | 15.32 | 14.79 |
| Sociales                   | 17.22 | 17.73 | 16.51 | 16.58 |
| Naturales                  | 15.25 | 17.33 | 15.11 | 16.17 |
| <b>Técnico profesional</b> |       |       |       |       |
| Español                    | 19.78 | 19.85 | 19.98 | 21.07 |
| Matemática                 | 16.46 | 17.05 | 17.58 | 17.55 |
| Sociales                   | 19.97 | 19.05 | 18.60 | 19.38 |
| Naturales                  | 16.84 | 17.47 | 16.96 | 17.18 |

Fuente: Departamento de Estadística, Ministerio de Educación de la República Dominicana (MINERD).

Oficina Nacional de Estadística

*E. Number of Students Enrolled by Session (Morning, Afternoon, Whole)-  
Elementary School*

**Nivel Inicial**

| TANDA / GRADO     | SEXO           |                | TOTAL          |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                   | Masculino      | Femenino       |                |
| <b>TOTAL</b>      | <b>123,627</b> | <b>118,272</b> | <b>241,899</b> |
| <b>MATUTINA</b>   | <b>90,551</b>  | <b>86,794</b>  | <b>177,345</b> |
| Maternal          | 17,137         | 17,787         | 34,924         |
| Kínder            | 25,625         | 24,332         | 49,957         |
| Preprimaria       | 47,789         | 44,675         | 92,464         |
| <b>VESPERTINA</b> | <b>29,985</b>  | <b>28,457</b>  | <b>58,442</b>  |
| Maternal          | 1,970          | 2,021          | 3,991          |
| Kínder            | 3,707          | 3,655          | 7,362          |
| Preprimaria       | 24,308         | 22,781         | 47,089         |
| <b>COMPLETA</b>   | <b>3,091</b>   | <b>3,021</b>   | <b>6,112</b>   |
| Maternal          | 676            | 693            | 1,369          |
| Kínder            | 1,195          | 1,192          | 2,387          |
| Preprimaria       | 1,220          | 1,136          | 2,356          |