Stalled Development of Immigrant Filipino Youths: Migration, Suspended Ambitions and the ESL Classroom

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Stalled Development of Immigrant Filipino Youths: Migration, Suspended Ambitions and the ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have revealed a disconnect between first-generation Filipino parents’ educational achievements in the Philippines and their children’s lower levels of educational attainment after migrating to Canada. This paper explores the educational experiences and issues of children of first-generation Filipino immigrants in Canada. Paying close attention to how newly arrived Filipino-Canadian youths describe their experiences of migration from the Philippines and their integration into Canadian schools. This working paper attempts to help make sense of the less-than-expected educational achievements and outcomes of these youths.

There are three facets of research that we report on here. First, we extend and update the documentation of Filipino immigrant youths’ educational outcomes to solidify and more closely specify the claim that this is a phenomenon that demands scholarly and policy attention. Second, we report on a survey done with 45 Filipino post-secondary students in Vancouver who, like Victor, have experienced educational success; we do this to better understand the factors that lead to this positive outcome. Third, in the bulk of the paper we introduce research with 46 Filipino youths in two Vancouver public high schools to expand our understanding of the processes that lead to the observed patterns of poor educational outcomes, and to render more complex the questions that one might ask about educational success and failure.
INTRODUCTION

“You just have to be confident,” Victor explains when recalling his first days of arriving in Canada. In the latter half of the 1990’s, when he was a young boy, Victor’s mother left the Philippines to work in Canada as a live-in domestic for a Canadian family. In compliance with the rules of Canada’s Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP), she migrated on her own, leaving Victor, his father, and his sister in the Philippines. In 2003, when Victor was 14 years old, his mother successfully sponsored them to join her in a city four hours away from Vancouver. Now in his early 20s, studying to complete a Bachelor’s of Science degree in pharmacy at a post-secondary institution in British Columbia, he shared his thoughts with us about what helped him through high school and observed: “I’m living the Canadian dream”.

Indeed, Victor is in many ways living a Canadian dream, one that lends itself well to a recognized immigrant narrative of finding upward mobility and a “better life” in Canada. Yet, at the same time Victor confounds another emerging narrative. This narrative frames Filipino youths in Canada as an anomaly to an expected trajectory of upward social mobility among children of immigrants. Analyzing the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey, Abada et al. (2009) document the poor educational achievements of Filipino youths relative to almost all other immigrant youths in Canada. When comparing fathers’ and children’s university attainment, Abada et al. found that Filipino youths – along with Black immigrant youths – are less likely to achieve a university degree than their fathers, unlike most groups in which children attain a higher level of education than their first generation immigrant parents.

This pattern of stalled mobility among Filipino and Black youths is significant in two respects. First, parental academic achievement is typically used
to predict the educational outcomes of immigrant children. Children of immigrants are expected to meet and exceed their parents’ educational attainment: highly educated parents are likely to yield highly educated children. In the case of families classified as ‘Black’, children are repeating their father’s low levels of university education. But for Filipino families the situation is quite different. Filipino immigrant parents tend to be highly educated. While Abada et al. document the fact that Filipino children do not attain the same high educational levels as their fathers, Kelly et al. (2011) demonstrate that the generalization is equally true with respect to their mothers. Women applying for permanent resident status in Canada under the LCP are highly educated: from 1993-2009 over 80 percent of LCP applicants arrived in Canada with some education beyond high school (this statistic includes those with trade certificates); and by 2009, 63 percent had at least an undergraduate degree and a further 33 percent had some post-secondary education. Thus, the low level of post-secondary educational achievement among their children is a surprising and disturbing outcome of immigration.

Second, immigration researchers have used the educational achievement of children of first-generation immigrants to map the integration experiences of immigrant communities. In their work in the United States, Portes et al. (2001) argue that the upward or downward social mobility of post-World War II immigrant communities has depended on the educational success of immigrant children (1.5 or 2nd generation immigrants). They take the educational attainment of children of immigrants as an important benchmark of community success or failure across generations (Abada et al. 2009; Portes et al. 2005; Espiritu 2002; Portes et al. 2001). Bluntly put, the failure of children of immigrants to attain high levels of education is taken to signal the downward social mobility and less-than-successful integration of the entire community.
To explain uneven patterns of integration, researchers have considered the contexts into which immigrants are received as factors that structure immigrants’ processes of adaptation: e.g., the legal status of immigrants, levels and types of state assistance, and forms of discrimination immigrants may experience; Portes and Zhou (1993) term this the segmented assimilation model. The model considers families’ human capital, background, and modes of incorporation to weigh the factors that influence immigrant communities’ upward or downward social mobility over generations. In the case of Filipino families in Canada, scholars have been attentive to the long-term effects of the devaluing of first-generation Filipino immigrants’ education achieved outside of Canada. For instance, Abada et al. (ibid) point to Kelly’s (2006) finding in the Toronto context that a high concentration of first-generation Filipino immigrants labour in low-paying service sector occupations such as clerical work, health care, hospitality, manufacturing, and retail despite their high levels of education. Certainly the devaluing of the foreign education and credentials of first-generation immigrants in Canada and associated downward occupational mobility upon migration are not unique to the Filipino community, and there is ample documentation of the occupational segregation of new Canadian immigrants at the lower rungs of Canada’s labour market over the last thirty years (Li 2000). This has been attributed to changes in Canada’s immigration system, labour markets, and a major shift in immigrant source countries, with a large proportion of racialised immigrants now migrating from non-traditional (i.e. non-Western European) countries. Scholars have shown how the systematic and everyday devaluing of immigrants’ prior educational achievements and credentials intersects with Canada’s racialised and gendered labour market resulting in the deskilling of immigrant labour (Creese and Wiebe 2009; Mojab 1999). But the situation within the Filipino commu-
nity is extreme. According to Kelly (2006), while 60 percent of Filipino male and 28.3 percent of female principal applicants claiming landed immigrant status held university degrees upon arrival from 1980-2001, only 30 percent of male applicants and 11.3 percent of female applicants were destined for appropriate jobs. Thus, while the parents of Filipino children are likely to be highly educated with credentials and training from the Philippines, the context into which they are received devalues these educational credentials, thereby dampening the potential transfer of educational aspirations to the generation growing up in a Canadian context.

There is another peculiarity of the Filipino migration experience that has attracted attention; this is the large proportion of the Filipino community that migrates through the temporary work program known as the LCP: by 2009, 40% of Filipinos migrating to Canada landed through the LCP (Kelly et al. 2011). Pratt et al. (2008) argue that the deskilling of Filipino women who migrate through the LCP as temporary foreign domestic workers reaches into the lives of Filipino youths who must contend with the economic insecurity associated with the forms of labour their parents perform in Canadian society. Public opinion also turns to the effects of temporary labour programs to make sense of Filipino-Canadian youths’ educational outcomes, typically focusing on the strains of family separation and reunification that attend immigration through programs like the LCP. A psychiatrist and member of the Filipino community in Toronto recently suggested to the media, for instance, that mental and emotional stresses ultimately take a toll. He noted that: “There are kaba-bayans [countrymen/women] in our midst who would rather suffer in silence. And then we just hear of stories of young people dying…” (D’Orazio 2011).

While their parents’ migration pathways, subsequent deskilling, and diminished prospects in Canada’s labour markets undoubtedly offer important
avenues for understanding Filipino-Canadian youths’ academic outcomes, much of the research reported here focuses primarily on what youths themselves have to say about their experiences. We take our lead from scholarship on youth culture that stresses the need for a youth-centered approach that attends to how children and young people negotiate changes in and over time and spaces (Jeffrey and Dyson 2005; Katz 2004; Holloway and Valentine 2003). In paying attention to the ways in which young people engage with changing economic, social, cultural, and political dynamics, they argue against the notion that children are merely adults-in-waiting (Holloway and Valentine 2003) and stress that youths are not only constituted by a range of dynamic relations, but wrestle with and constitute them as well. Their experiences and the interpretations that they place upon them, in other words, differ from those of adults, and youths’ active engagement with their circumstances must be considered. Dillabough (2003) argues that such an approach, one attentive to the agency of young people, can allow for a more wide-ranging consideration of academic outcomes, beyond a preoccupation over student success or failure. She approaches outcomes as evolving products of complex and dynamic pressures and negotiations. We argue that considering Filipino-Canadian youths’ own accounts of their educational experiences provides a valuable perspective from which the anomaly of their academic achievements can be approached, one that directs attention to policies and practices beyond parents’ labour market experiences in Canada. Following youths’ experiences makes apparent spaces or sites in which they must suspend or postpone their academic advancement, effectively disrupting a normative educational trajectory. Bringing into view this fuller range of experiences, policies, and practices may help us better understand the less-than-expected educational outcomes of children of first-generation Filipino immigrants.
There are three facets of research that we report on here. First, we extend and update the documentation of Filipino immigrant youths’ educational outcomes to solidify and more closely specify the claim that this is a phenomenon that demands scholarly and policy attention. Second, we report on a survey done with 45 Filipino post-secondary students in Vancouver who, like Victor, have experienced educational success; we do this to better understand the factors that lead to this positive outcome. Third, in the bulk of the paper we introduce research with Filipino youths in two Vancouver public high schools to expand our understanding of the processes that lead to the observed patterns of poor educational outcomes, and to render more complex the questions that one might ask about educational success and failure.

Detecting the Anomaly: Poor Educational Outcomes Among Filipino Youths

In an earlier Metropolis BC working paper, Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre (PWC) (2008) assessed the educational outcomes of Filipino youths by examining BC Ministry of Education data to follow the progress of four cohorts of students entering Vancouver area high schools from 1995 to 1999. We compared those who speak Tagalog at home with a selection of other Asian language groups, as well as those who speak English at home, and found that those who spoke Tagalog tended to have lower grade point averages than youths in other groups and a relatively high likelihood of not graduating from high school. In order to explore this striking finding more fully, we have extended the analysis by identifying and tracking ten cohorts of children who began high school (grade 8) in the Vancouver region from 1995.

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1 Children who have been separated from parents through the LCP cannot be identified in the B.C. Ministry of Education data sets. The best “proxy” that we have to identify Filipino children of the LCP is the language spoken at home. Although Tagalog is unlikely to be spoken in the homes of second-generation children, children identified as speaking Tagalog at home will include Filipino immigrants beyond those who have been separated through the LCP.
Further, we have refined the analysis by distinguishing between City of Vancouver and suburban schools.

We found once again that some groups of children who speak Tagalog at home tend to have grade point averages at the lower end of the continuum and perhaps most disturbing have a relatively low likelihood of graduating from high school (Tables 1 and 2). Less than two-thirds of boys in the City of Vancouver who speak Tagalog graduate from high school. But this trend is more evident in schools in the City of Vancouver. Tagalog speakers do not stand out for poor performance in the suburban schools. Certainly, even in the City of Vancouver, other language groups approximate the Tagalog-speaking children on specific measures. For instance, those who speak Punjabi at home have lower grade point averages. The “dropout” rates for those who speak Vietnamese at home are worse than for Tagalog speakers. But what is particularly striking is that Tagalog-speakers living in the City of Vancouver are at the low end for both of the measures.

We can only speculate about the different outcomes for Filipino youths in the city and suburbs. Two factors seem likely to be influential: First, more intensely deskilled and, therefore, economically marginalized families migrating through the LCP are likely to live in the City of Vancouver; and, second, there are high concentrations of Filipino youths in some city high schools, a factor that no doubt affects both friendship patterns and integration into educa-

2 School districts were selected because of the high numbers of Filipino families in them. These include most but not all districts in the Vancouver Lower Mainland. Included districts are: Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond, New Westminster, Burnaby, and Coquitlam. The analyses do not include records from North Vancouver and Delta.

3 It is worth bearing in mind that studies in the Philippines, while mixed, tend to show that younger children of migrant parents perform well at school, better than children of non-migrants, and they are more likely to take part in extracurricular activities. As Albert, one of the youth interviewed in the 2008 study (who did not complete high school), put it: “I was smart in the Philippines.” There is some evidence, however, that children of migrant mothers are slightly less likely to be on the honour roll as compared to children whose fathers work overseas and children of non-migrant parents (Scalabrin Migration Center, Hearts Apart).
tional programming, a matter that is discussed at some length in what follows. What these analyses make clear is that the circumstances of Tagalog-speaking youths in City of Vancouver high schools warrant close attention. This is something that we turn to after briefly considering the ‘counterfactual’ situation: the case of Filipino youths who succeed by completing high school and moving on to post-secondary education.

### Table 1. Median Grade Point Average for High School Graduates Among Students Entering Vancouver High Schools, 1995-2004, Among Selected Language Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Languages Spoken at Home</th>
<th>Tagalog GPA</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Punjabi GPA</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Vietnamese GPA</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>English GPA</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Chinese GPA</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>a) City of Vancouver</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>747</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>9,476</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>6,382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>609</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>9,780</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>6,162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>b) Vancouver Suburbs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>795</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>3,022</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>30,514</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>6,466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>829</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2,942</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>29,655</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>7,063</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Two lowest GPA scores in each row are highlighted in boldface.

- GPA averaged over the last 52 credits for foundational courses taken (4 credits usually equivalent to 1 course).
- Includes those who had graduated within 6 years of entering grade 8. The analyses 'track' all students entering grade eight from 1995 to 2004.
- Suburban school districts were selected because of relatively high numbers of Filipino families. They include: Burnaby, Coquitlam, New Westminster, Richmond, and Surrey. They do not include records from North Vancouver and Delta.
- Aboriginal English speakers removed from this category.

Source: British Columbia Ministry of Education. Statistical analysis by Edudata Canada (Maria Trache).
**Table 2. Rates of Graduation from High School among All Students Who Entered High School in Vancouver, 1995-2004 by Selected Language Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Spoken at Home</th>
<th>Tagalog</th>
<th>Punjabi</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>English&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) City</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>934</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Suburbs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>961</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>3,387</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>1,117</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3,687</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The ‘normal’ trajectory would be to complete grades 8–12 in five years. Data include those who had graduated within six years of entering grade 8 and indicate those for whom there is a recorded graduation date. It must be emphasized that there are real limits to interpretation. Those who did not graduate may have left the British Columbia school system rather than dropped out of high school. As long as students remained within BC, however, they are traced through this analysis, regardless of whether they changed schools within the province. This cohort-based analysis also only tracks the progress of students who were in the school system in grade 8. A child entering the system in grade 9 or later would not be included in this analysis. The analysis tracks cohorts that began grade 8 in September 1995 through 2004. Two lowest graduate rates in each row are highlighted in boldface.

<sup>a</sup> Aboriginal English speakers excluded

Source: British Columbia Ministry of Education. Statistical analysis by Edudata Canada (Maria Trache).
Defying the Trends: Filipino Youths in Post-secondary Educational Institutions in Vancouver

To better understand the circumstances of students who complete their high school education and pursue post-secondary education, we conducted surveys from September to December 2010 with Filipino students enrolled in colleges and universities in British Columbia. Surveys were distributed online and in person through the activities and contact list of a post-secondary Filipino students’ association at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. We then solicited further respondents from other post-secondary institutions through snowball sampling techniques. (See Appendix A for the questionnaire.) The majority of the survey respondents are undergraduate students at one of Vancouver’s major universities.

Eleven out of the 45 respondents indicated that they were born in Canada, 30 respondents were born in the Philippines, and 4 did not respond to the question of their country of birth or they specified that they were not born in Canada or the Philippines. Of the 30 students who were born in the Philippines, 9 migrated to Canada as infants or elementary-aged school children (under the age of 12); 12 migrated as high school-aged youth (between 13 to 18 years old); and 9 moved to Canada at over the age of 19 years old. The majority of respondents (20 out of 30) born in the Philippines migrated to Canada in the last 5 years. Not a single respondent indicated that either of their parents migrated to Canada through the Live-in Caregiver Program. With regards to their educational histories, of the 45 respondents, 17 graduated from high schools in the Philippines; 5 completed their high school education from private or Catholic secondary schools in the Greater Vancouver Regional District; and 14 graduated from Vancouver suburban public high schools. Notably, only one of the respondents indicated that they graduated
from a Vancouver public high school. To summarize, the data suggests that the majority of Filipino post-secondary students who completed the survey: i) recently migrated to Canada; and ii) received their high school diplomas from schools outside of the Vancouver public high school system. Underlying the significance of the Live-in Caregiver Program for the lives of children, we found no children sponsored through the LCP among the 45 Filipino youths enrolled in post-secondary institutions that completed the survey.\(^4\)

**LISTENING TO FILIPINO YOUTHS IN TWO CITY OF VANCOUVER HIGH SCHOOLS**

To better understand Filipino students’ experiences in City of Vancouver high schools, we interviewed and held focus groups with 46 Filipino-Canadian youths in two high schools with high concentrations of Filipino youths (see Appendix B for details of sample). The schools were chosen for this project because: i) both schools have a significant number of Filipino students, one with the third-largest Filipino student population in Vancouver public high schools, the other with the fifth largest;\(^5\) and ii) administrators at both schools agreed to support and assist in the process of conducting interviews and focus groups at their respective schools.

The majority of the high school students involved in the project had recently immigrated to Canada within the last eight years (38 out of the 46 participants). For most of these immigrant youths, their parents (either mother or father) had migrated to Canada before them, typically through the Live-in

\(^4\) While not one survey respondent indicated that one of their parents entered Canada through the Live-in Caregiver Program, post-secondary students whose mothers migrated to Canada under the program were later identified during the course of conducting interviews for this research. It should be noted, however, that the two post-secondary students whose mothers we later ascertained migrated to Canada under the Live-in Caregiver Program: i) did not attend public high school in Vancouver; and ii) their mothers did not work as live-in caregivers in Vancouver.

\(^5\) These statistics are according to the Vancouver School Board’s Filipino Multicultural Liaison Worker. The two high schools at which this research was conducted were targeted because their administrators have facilitated special programs for Filipino students on their campuses. The Vancouver public high school with the largest number of Filipino students did not respond to requests to conduct the project at the school.
Caregiver Program or Foreign Domestic Movement program⁶ (32 out of 46 participants). The majority of high school participants were born in the Philippines (38 out of 46 participants). The number of high school participants born in the Philippines of families that had migrated through a domestic worker temporary labour program can be attributed to the methods employed to recruit project participants. Students who self-identified as Filipinos responded to recruitment calls. One teenage girl later explained that she did not sign up to be a part of the project as she was under the impression that Tagalog speakers were the project’s intended target group. Participants for the focus groups and interviews at the high schools were enlisted through the assistance of the Vancouver School Board’s Filipino Multicultural Worker and school administrators. Focus groups and interviews were semi-structured with the intention of allowing students to discuss issues or experiences they wished to share. Questions about particular moments revolved around learning about their impending migration to Canada, their last days of school in the Philippines, and the students’ first days of school in Vancouver (see Appendix C for focus group questions). Questions about their daily lives focused on their daily routines at school, what they did, with whom, and where they spent time during lunch periods, in classes and outside of school. Each 30 to 60 minute focus group involved two to three students from roughly the same grade levels, ages, and gender. Twenty-three students participated in the project at each school. The focus groups and interviews were carried out from November 2010 to January 2011.

⁶ The Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) is a temporary foreign worker program of Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Live-in caregivers provide care for the children, elderly, or persons with disabilities of Canadian families. They are required to both live and work in private homes under a temporary work permit before they are eligible to apply for permanent resident status. The Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) preceded the LCP and was replaced by the LCP in 1992. The introduction of the FDM in 1982 saw the Philippines emerge as the predominant source country for temporary domestic workers to Canada (Macklin 1992).
a) Educational and Labour Market Aspirations

“They don’t expect too much. They said just finish high school, and then go to college, and then go to work. That’s what they said. They don’t need high grades.” Kathie is sharing what is expected of her, specifically, what her parents expect from her. While her parents do not insist that Kathie excel in school, they require that she progress through a normative educational trajectory -- finish high school, attain a post-secondary education, and enter the labour market. Kathie’s parents migrated from the Philippines to Canada in 2001, and she joined her parents in 2010 after eight years of separation. Already a high school graduate in the Philippines, Kathie was put back into high school when she migrated to Vancouver. She is now 17 years old and a Grade 12 student in a Vancouver public high school. In her focus group, Kathie explained that she wanted to pursue a degree in pharmacy, adding that an education in pharmacy would provide her and her family with some economic security in the future.

Aspirations for a post-secondary education and a future profession were common in the students’ narratives, among both first- and second-generation youths. Christopher, for example, is also a 17-year-old Grade 12 student, and he wants to become a mechanical engineer; Teresa, a Grade 8 student, wants to become a nurse; and Carl, a 15-year-old Grade 10 student, wants to be a lawyer. While their migration and parents’ stories differ: Only Carl was born and raised in Canada, whereas Kathie, Christopher, and Teresa migrated to Canada in their teenage years; they all share similar aspirations to pursue careers that require post-secondary education. So too, they are all driven to pursue such careers for their families. As Teresa puts it, “I want to give back to them [her parents]. They’ve done so much for us, they raised us well, and
they’ve always been supportive [...].” Teresa, like the other students who see their future aspirations tied to their families, demonstrates an awareness that securing an education in Canada might afford her the future opportunity to repay her parents for what she sees as the sacrifices they made to migrate to Canada, and to alleviate the present hardships they face working as a hotel cleaner and a factory worker.

The students often spoke of the need to work hard and to struggle through challenges in order to realize their aspirations. Arsenio and Junior, two Grade 11 students who migrated to Canada within the last three years, talk of how individual industriousness in the classroom can pave the way for future economic security:

Junior: If you work, if you work hard at what you need to do, no matter what others are doing, you’ll learn what you need to here [school] so you could use it out there. And if you want to ask others, well, you could do that too. For me, I want to learn.

Arsenio: You need a diploma to get a good job, it’s like that. So you can make a better life for yourself.

It should not be entirely surprising that children of first-generation Filipino immigrants feel responsibility for their families’ future well-being and security given the ways in which many Filipinos migrate to Canada, often through the LCP. Women who sponsor their families through migration as domestic workers often speak of their suffering and sacrifice (Pratt, 2012; Tadiar, 2009) and their children absorb and reproduce this discourse. Brought to Canada by their mothers, many of the students with whom we spoke expressed a desire to repay their parents by pursuing higher education. As Laya, a Grade 12 student puts it: “They just want us to graduate. Then, all the hardship that my mom went through, all her sacrifices, we could give back to her.
That’s their only wish that we graduate.” We also found strong statements about individual responsibility for future economic possibilities among second-generation youth. Ken, a Grade 10 second-generation student, speaks of the same sort of pressure of individual responsibility: “Respect and ownership. To take charge, respect differences of others and like if you have ownership and responsibility […], so you should take responsibility of what you could do when you’re older […].”

Such sincere ambitions and calls for industriousness, paired with their parents’ high levels of educational attainment, suggest a high probability of academic success; as indicated above, statistical analyses do not bear this out. We turn to what Filipino immigrant youths have to say about their migration and high school experiences to better understand the seeming slippage between aspirations and outcomes, with particular focus on recently arrived youths. Youths’ experiences are interwoven with the experiences of their families, particularly their mothers who migrated as domestic workers and who labour in low-income precarious occupations; there is no neat separation between children and families. We nonetheless focus here on the youths’ narratives. In turning to their accounts of their personal stories of migration and school, certain sites appear in which their educational aspirations and achievements are suspended or delayed. In particular, we consider two interrelated spaces. First, we attend to the ways Filipino immigrant youths negotiate transnational spaces and the extent to which the peculiarities of the LCP suspend youths between Canada and the Philippines for considerable periods of time, in ways that adversely affect their educations. Second, we consider a space that has been less explored for Filipino youths: this is a space within the school, namely English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms and programs as sites within which particular experiences and performances
of Filipino students take shape. From these vantage points, one can see how youths negotiate various sites of deferral that affect their academic choices and trajectories.

b) Suspended between the Philippines and Canada and Diminished Aspirations

Laya’s case is illustrative of the ways in which a temporary migration program such as the LCP plays on children’s educational trajectories. Laya was born in the Philippines and she migrated to Canada in 2009 with her older sister and younger brother. When she arrived in Vancouver, she rejoined her mother who migrated in 2005 to work as a live-in caregiver. Laya’s mother’s move to Canada was not the first time she worked abroad. She first worked overseas when Laya was one year old, leaving Laya and her siblings under the care of their aunt and grandmother in the Philippines. Laya was 18 years old when she came to Vancouver. At the time of the interview, Laya was 19 years old and in Grade 12 attending high school in one of Vancouver’s Eastside schools, one with the third-largest Filipino student population in the City of Vancouver. She describes her life in the Philippines:

May: What is it like growing up in the Philippines?

Laya: Happy...I don’t know because...whenever my mom returns home, I’m more close to my aunt and also my grandmother because I grew up with them and ya.

May: How did they raise you?

Laya: It’s like they replaced our parents, they took responsibility of us every morning, breakfast, and then what we needed, like clothes.[....]

May: What did your aunt and grandmother think about you going abroad?
Laya: They were sad about it. They miss us, because you know, my aunt has no family, we are only her family, so when we left, they were so sad, it’s only the two of them, my aunt and grandmother at the house, they got so used to having us with them.

Laya was 15 years old, already in her third year of high school in the Philippines, when she learned that her mother was in the process of applying to sponsor her and her siblings to join her in Vancouver. Laya shares how she managed the idea of her looming migration:

May: What grade were you in when you left [the Philippines]?  
Laya: I was in my third year at college.  

May: What was that time like for you, between the time that you found out you were leaving and the time that you actually left?  
Laya: [...] It took a while because I did first year college, before first year college, we did a medical exam and then we expected in 6 months our visa would arrive, but it didn’t arrive. At that time [...] because there are 2 semesters in one year, and then I only did one in college [...] my mom stopped me because we expected that we would leave [the Philippines], then it [the visa] didn’t arrive [...]. I was going into second year college, but we were taken out. So I was so bored at home, not doing anything. I took only something like a trade, 3 months only, and then I took culinary arts. That’s it only. At least I graduated.

May: What did it feel like when you had to stop college then?  
Laya: I was super sad, I wanted to continue because for me, it may take a long time and then my brain will be dull, you will forget what you learned before, like it leaves your thoughts, it’s not fresh in the brain.

May: Did you try to stay sharp?  

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7 Teenagers in the Philippines typically graduate at the age of 16, after completing four years of high school. In Vancouver, students typically graduate at the age of 18, after completing five years of high school. Laya was 16 years old when she graduated from high school in the Philippines and entered post-secondary education. Post-secondary education in the Philippines varies in length, depending on the students’ chosen program, but is on average four years.
Laya: I can’t say, because I didn’t know what to do. Just waiting.

May: What were you waiting for?

Laya: Visa.

In Laya’s retelling of her life in the Philippines, growing up with her grandmother and aunt and preparing to migrate to Canada, her story draws attention to certain absences and moments of suspension in her life. When asked to describe growing up in the Philippines, she speaks of growing up with her grandmother and aunt in the absence of her mother. When asked about learning of her impending migration to Canada, she speaks of a moment of postponement, a time when she was taken out of school and asked to suspend her education to wait for her visa to travel. Other students shared similar accounts of delay and postponing their education as they waited to migrate (see also Pratt in collaboration with the PWC, 2008), a peculiarity of the fact that so many Filipino families migrate through the LCP. Filipino women’s main available route to Canada, the LCP, requires the women to leave their families in the Philippines to fulfill the mandatory live-in requirements of the program for at least 24 months. But, as Pratt et al. (2008) demonstrate, family separation typically lasts a median of 8 years. 8 Bea, now a Grade 12 student in Vancouver who migrated to Canada the previous year, explains what she saw as the futility of pursuing her education as she waited in the Philippines: “I was supposed to be in college, but then I didn’t continue with it because I knew we were going to migrate here so what’s the point of me

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8 There are various reasons for such a lengthy reunification time. For example, even before their children’s migration to Canada, the women must pay (and save) $150 Canadian per child under 22 years of age to apply for their child’s permanent resident visa (CIC 2011). The reality that the youth wait in the Philippines for their visas to be reunited with their mothers in Canada points to tactics within the LCP that call for more than one form of delay. Not only is family reunification delayed, but the youths’ educational advancement is delayed in the Philippines for pragmatic reasons, such as the need for their mothers to collect the money for application fees which might otherwise be used for their children’s college tuition fees.
Christopher, now a Grade 12 student in Vancouver, wanted to enroll in a course at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) while he waited for the documents that his mother, who had migrated to Canada years previously under the LCP, had processed to have him and his father and siblings sponsored to Canada:

In the Philippines, I was thinking [...] even before I graduated [from high school], yes, it was before my graduation, I told my dad that I [wanted] to take an entrance exam for a course at [...] PUP. And then my dad agreed, because he said that when our visa [to Canada] arrived, it would still probably take us a year, so he allowed me to take the exam. The worst thing happened the next day, boom! [My visa arrived]. I told myself fine, I don’t want to take this course anyway, but then like, it was mechanical engineering that I was hoping to take in the Philippines.

When Laya’s, Bea’s, and Christopher’s schooling in college was suspended to accommodate preparations for their pending move to Canada, their words suggest an aspiration to progress, to continue their schooling. In Christopher’s words: “the worst thing happened” when his Canadian visa arrived to disrupt his post-secondary education. Their testimonials also indicate that their educational outcomes in Canada are intimately tied to their parents’ migration route to Canada as migrant workers, and the policies and practices involved in the management of migrant labour both in the Philippines and Canada.9 Listen to youths speaking about entering high school after arriving in Vancouver:

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9 As Rodriguez (2010) points out, the Philippine state invests significant resources to create and manage one of the world’s largest pools of migrant labour. In the neoliberal global economy characterized by post-Fordist regimes of production, the Philippines has emerged as one of the world’s premier labour-sending countries (Rodriguez 2002; Parreñas 2005; Tadiar 2009). After the United States gave up direct colonial control of the Philippines in 1945, the country entered a period of economic development driven by export for the global economy, banking on returns that would build the industrial capacity of the country. Successive Philippine presidents in this post-colonial period have fashioned different national export-oriented industrialization development programs, from Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970’s to Benigno Aquino in this most recent decade (Hutchison 2006). This liberalized economy allowed the Philippines to promote its comparative advantage in the international division of labour, offering low wages to foreign investors and countries interested in outsourcing its production for cheaper wages (King 2008). Rodriguez (2010) puts forward that various apparatus of the state in cooperation with private interests work to ensure a steady supply of pliable and disciplined migrant labour (mainly female) to richer industrialized countries.
Hari (Grade 11): At first, when we went to the VSB [Vancouver School Board] to test, I wasn’t ready, because I just got here. We were here for like 3 days and I tested right away. I didn’t know that you can re-write the test, and on the day [of the exam] we got lost on our way to the VSB, so we were late. So, I messed it up [...] I could have done better if I’d been much more prepared.

[...]

Laya: Two weeks after we arrived, we went to the VSB, then they assessed us, they said that I’m Grade 12 here still. I was 18.

May: How did you find that [the assessment process]?

Laya: I really had a hard time with Math because I can’t remember those [...], of course because, I took Math back in first-year college, one semester, it was more like business math, mainly financing. And then the exam had many triangles, [things I learned] in high school and it was a long time ago, it’s so hard to refresh, and then, I don’t know, my aunt here said to prepare for the exam but I didn’t know what to prepare for the exam, what I should study. That’s why I was surprised when I saw the Math test, I really had a hard time.

In Hari and Laya’s recollection of their introduction to school in Vancouver, the space that was previously stretched when their education was suspended in the Philippines abruptly snapped back upon their initiation into the Vancouver school system. For Laya, after over a year of waiting to migrate to Canada, she returned to school without preparation. Mirroring her mother’s experience, she describes herself as deskilled when she is tested to determine her placement in a Vancouver school.

Filipino-Canadian students’ education does not resume where it left off at the moment of suspension in the Philippines. Out of the 46 high school students who participated in this study, the majority (31 out of 46) entered Canada in their high school years, and 16 of these 31 students entered a
Vancouver high school as Grade 10 students or above. The latter group of 16 students had an especially difficult time because typically they had already graduated from high school in the Philippines, only to return to high school with their migration to Vancouver. Junior, who had just graduated from high school in the Philippines before migrating to Canada, was designated as a Grade 10 student when he migrated to Vancouver two years previous to the interview. He wishes he had graduated from college in the Philippines before moving to Canada to avoid this experience:

Yah, I became a student again, actually a high school student again [...]. It’s like when you come here, whatever you accomplished in the Philippines, you have to double your work here [...]. You have to show that you’re not weak, because students here will see you as weak. I thought that when I came here, whatever grade you finished in the Philippines, that’s what you would start here. But it isn’t like that actually. It’s sad. But you have to accept it.

Chelsea and Alexandra spoke more directly about the possible future implications of the discontinuity in their own and their family’s education:

May: You were in college in the Philippines, and you started Grade 11 here. How was that for you?

Alexandra: I was 16. I was really annoyed, but I guess it’s alright.

Chelsea: My sister is even worse. She was in 3rd year college of nursing and she has to go through the first year again nursing, and now she’s still on the waitlist [...] So what she did was apply for a private school and finished her [education] as a pharmacy tech. She’s waiting. She has to go through the first year again.

Alexandra: It’s annoying. Because you have to go back and repeat high school. [But] it’s ok, because at least high school is fun.

For some youth, the challenge of returning to high school is less bearable:
Julian: I think some people, they already finished high school in the Philippines. They don’t want to go back to high school anymore, like they already know what they’re teaching in high school. So like my friend said, “I don’t want to do this again.”

Instead of a seamless resumption, the students must negotiate with further deferrals as they contend with people and policies in their new schools.

In 2006, among Filipino youth aged 19 to 22 who migrated from the Philippines to Vancouver between the ages of 12 and 16 (Grades 7 to 11), analysis of census data indicate that 14 percent of males and 8 percent of females had not graduated from high school. For young males especially, this compares poorly to Filipino youths who migrated to Vancouver at a younger age (between 0 to 11 years old): of these, 9 percent of males and 5 percent of females had no high school certificate. Of 19-22 year old Canadian-born Filipino youths, 8 percent of males and 6 percent of females had not graduated from high school. What we might take from these numbers is that recently migrated youth who enter Canada in their high school years do not have the same access to higher levels of education as those born in Canada or immigrating at a younger age. What the narratives of the students tell us is that problems of accessibility are both subtle and complex, stretching across transnational spaces, involving a long drawn-out process of discouragement, and operating through migration and educational policies and practices of assessment that make it difficult for these students to follow mainstream paths towards high school graduation.

c) The ESL Experience: Assessing and Proving English Competency

For me, ya, it’s [English as a Second Language class] ok, it helps me refresh what I learned in the Philippines, but then like, it’s like, how should I say this? You get annoyed sometimes. Because you’re repeating what you al-
ready know. And like, no matter how many times you’ve done it, you have to do it again, so sometimes you get lazy too. To tell you the truth, sometimes you just get too lazy to go to class. - Christopher, Grade 12

According to Gunderson (2007), 40 per cent of British Columbian English as a Second Language (ESL) high school students drop out before they graduate.¹⁰ He made this assessment by tracing outcomes for 25,000 immigrant students entering English-only Vancouver public secondary schools through the Oakridge Reception and Orientation Center¹¹, a reception point for immigrant families and children where their literacy and grade level are assessed, and from random follow-up interviews with incoming students assessed to be in need of English language support. Attempting to uncover the lived experiences of ESL secondary students, Gunderson draws attention to the poor academic performances of ESL immigrant high school students in Canada.

Among the 46 Filipino high school students who participated in our interviews and focus groups, 29 were assigned to ESL programs at their respective Vancouver schools (see Appendix A). Such a large number of students from the Philippines involved in ESL programs should not be entirely surprising, as the Philippines is now Canada’s number one source of immigrants (Friesen 2011). A large percentage of youths migrate to Canada in their teen years due to the prevalence of the LCP as a migration path for Filipino families. The implications of this, however, deserve to be more fully explored.

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¹⁰ According to Gunderson (2007), Watt and Roessingh (2001) claim that drop out rates among immigrant students in Canada are as high as 73 percent. Gunderson’s (ibid) own study found the rate to be around 60 percent, while a follow-up study by Pirbhai-Illich (2005) concluded the drop-out rate of immigrant students to be 40 percent, a number Gunderson accepts as appropriate.

¹¹ The Oakridge Reception and Orientation Center, established in 1989, is now known as the District Reception and Placement Center (DRPC). More information on the DRPC can be found at: http://www.vsb.bc.ca/programs/supporting-esl-students.
Producing “Other Students”: Designating English as Second Language learners

Students’ experiences as second language learners reveal a number of contradictions at work. On the one hand, students that participated in our study described the ESL classroom as a meeting place: “It’s fun. You’re with your friends,” explained Donald, a Grade 9 student who migrated to Canada a year before our study. Junior elaborated on the dynamics of ESL as a place of encounter:

If you’re taking a subject or course with others, they get to be your buddies, it starts with someone coming up to you and asking you your name, asking how you are doing, when you arrived here. […] Like at lunch time, like, we just ask each other “How do you do this subject?” or “How do you do this homework?” We help each other.

Newly arrived Filipino students tended to see the ESL classroom as a place that offered them the opportunity to meet new friends and create support networks. The majority of newly arrived students said that over 90 percent of their friends (one student even saying 99.9 percent of her friends) are of Philippine ancestry and that they had met in ESL. Sharing similar classes and experiences, friendships created in ESL classes often form the students’ primary support network as they seek help, not from their parents or teachers, but from their peers. These youths sought assistance from each other with school assignments in the school’s hallways and the cafeteria, and further developed their relationships outside of school when socializing after school and on weekends. Ben, now a college student, speaks of the camaraderie he built with fellow Filipino students as a means of dealing with the discrimination he experienced as a newly arrived Filipino ESL student:
I came in there, and I was like “I’m going to fuck up anybody who is gonna make fun of my accent or whatever.” That was my mindset, and that’s what I did. I mean Grade 8, everyone’s got their own crew. [...] You know, you’re Pinoy, you speak with an accent, they don’t want to be that part, they don’t want anything to do with that. You know what I mean?

Alysaybar (2002) describes a similar culture of camaraderie among groups of Filipino-American youth he characterizes as “youth gangs” or barkadas (loosely translated from Tagalog to mean a group of friends) in Los Angeles. He argues that the notion of “gangs” in Filipino culture is not necessarily associated with deviance, but rather, is seen as a socially acceptable form of social networking and support among Filipinos. According to Alysaybar, the post-1965 rise of all-Filipino youth gangs or barkadas was rooted in Filipino-American youths’ attempts to protect themselves, with schools playing an important role in consolidating groupings of Filipino youth and creating an ethnic consciousness. Ben, in explaining his need to have a “crew” brings attention to the importance of a culture of solidarity among his peers.

While students like Ben, Donald, and Junior share bonds as ESL students, Marvin, a Grade 9 student, expressed an opposing tendency: “Sometimes it’s hard to communicate with others, because we’re used to speaking with each other in Tagalog. But there is a good side and a bad side to this, like for me it’s in adjusting.” Recognizing a tension within the ESL experience, Marvin brings into focus a dilemma many Filipino ESL students contend with: ESL as both support and trap. The youths spoke of the influence of peers in this dualistic manner. One youth described how he gained the confidence and savvy to skip classes as he built his social network among his peers. Another Filipino student explained: “If you want to get out of ESL, don’t listen to your friends”. At the centre of these two tendencies, one that frames the ESL experience

12 Slang word for Filipino
as an opportunity to build a sense of community, against one that renders it restrictive, is a shared aspiration to progress beyond ESL into what the students call “regular” coursework. In this regard, the dilemma brings into view an aspiration to escape ESL and join students who follow a mainstream track towards high school completion. While Gunderson’s concerns over classroom efficiency are useful in pointing to troubles in the ability of school boards to adapt to changing demographics, the students’ experiences from within these concentrations of second language learners urges us to think not only of the numbers, but of the social relations within ESL spaces and their effects.

According to the British Columbia Ministry of Education provincial ESL policy, incoming students whose primary language or home languages are not English are identified as “English language learners” through an initial assessment (BC Ministry of Education 2009). For youths entering the Vancouver school system from the Philippines, their initial assessment is conducted at the District Resource and Placement Centre (DRPC). Testing for English competency can also be carried out by individual schools when deemed necessary - at any time throughout a student’s schooling.\textsuperscript{13} Gunderson (2007) details how the DRPC tests English competency. First, the prospective student is interviewed by a staff person. At the interview, the student is asked to perform various tasks such as reciting the English alphabet or describing details about his/her life and daily routines. Second, a mandatory math skills test is administered and, based on the DRPC’s assessment of the oral interview, the student will undertake a reading assessment deemed appropriate to his or her English competency level. With the information collected from this process, students are assigned to schools and information about the level of English support judged necessary for the student is passed to their respective schools.

\textsuperscript{13} This is according to the Vancouver School Board’s Filipino Settlement Worker.
From this point on, individual schools take on the responsibility of supporting and assessing the student’s English language skills until the student can enter regular, non-ESL, full-time course work.

How best to assess a student’s English competency is an ongoing debate in second language pedagogy (see Gunderson 2006; Cummins 2000). In its “ESL: Guide for Classroom Teachers”, the BC Ministry of Education straddles this debate in a double movement. First, the guidebook acknowledges the difficulty of assessing a student’s “real, developing language proficiency” (1999:24), granting room for ongoing assessment sensitive to multiple ways of acquiring and demonstrating language aptitude. Second, the guidebook asserts that the “best evidence” of proficiency lies in classroom performance, buttressed by short in-class tests and homework assignments (ibid). For Johnson (2006), such assessment techniques, like standardized testing, follow a logic locked in the normative teaching pedagogy and practices in which educators are schooled.

While the act of designation secures students as second language learners and brings the youth into being as ESL students, there is an ambiguity at the heart of their designation. Students who participated in focus groups and interviews described being assigned to various levels of their school’s ESL program. These levels ranged from beginner (level 1), intermediate (levels 2-3), and to a final stage of ESL support before the students enter full regular course work, usually referred to as transitional, or levels 4 or 5 ESL. Consider how the students speak of the meaning and implications of their designation:

Teresa: Before, before I was taking all regular courses. Then, they what do you call it? They tested us on vocabulary and other things. I didn’t know those things. So, they sent me to ESL 2. After a week or two, they sent me to ESL 3. [...]
Hari: I started in 2. When I came here, there’s no […] ESL 4 yet, I started in ESL 2 and after a week, they put me into ESL 3 and I thought I was going to be in regular last year because there is no ESL 4, but then they put me in transitional, so I was put in there. […]

Karl: I’m supposed to be in 3, but there’s no space in 3. Because, at the VSB, there’s a chart, an assessment chart, they circled 3 and there’s also a line to 2, so it could be either 2 or 3. […]

Jess: I’m still in ESL 3. But, I expected to be in transitional or regular by now, but maybe I won’t have a chance. In my first grade, I was in ESL 2, then the following year, Grade 9, I was in ESL 2 and then I switched to ESL 3, then, the following year, this year, in Grade 10, they said I needed more time in ESL, so that’s why they said I’m in ESL 3 for now.

The students’ dizzying accounts of their ESL designations bring into view a number of ambiguities. They are marked as individuals in need of support to achieve a level of English competency. Yet they express uncertainties about their status moving through the ESL program and expectations about the future. It is useful to consider their thoughts on their ambivalent position as ESL students; we argue that the ESL label brings particular kinds of students into being with the act of classifying their English ability.

Students hesitate over the levels they have been assigned as English language learners. While each school is mandated to implement its own ESL program, ESL provincial policy on protocols for student assessment is somewhat arbitrary. The policy is that students whose English “differ(s) significantly from the English used in the broader Canadian society” should be considered in need of added English language support (BC Ministry of Education 2009). What this might mean in relation to the Philippines is an open question, given a long history of English instruction in Philippine schools, an artifact and instrument of the United States’ colonial project at the turn and through the 20th
century (Constantino 1982). English was used as the primary language of school instruction until 1974, when the Philippines adopted a bilingual, English and Tagalog, strategy for nation-building purposes (Smolicz and Nical 1997). This was also the time that Philippine President Marcos instituted the country’s Labor Export Policy. The program was designed to support the labour migration of overseas Filipino contract workers with obvious implications for governmental decisions to retain the use of English in schools. Since 1974, both languages have been used in school instruction, English being used primarily to teach Math and Sciences (ibid). Philippines census data reveals the effects of this educational policy: from the 1980s up to 77 percent of the Philippine population has claimed capacity in both English and Tagalog. English competency continues to be wrapped up with the Philippines’ role as a major exporter of international labour (Rodriguez, 2010), and facility in English acts as a lucrative bonus creating access to overseas labour markets. Indeed, English is an essential requirement of women who migrate to Canada through the LCP (the program requires competency in either English or French).

There is room to confuse English competency and accented English. Creese (2010) understands contemporary discrimination against those whose English is branded as foreign and unfamiliar in Canada to be a product of colonialism. In her examination of how African immigrant women’s English competency is brought into question on the basis of their accents, she bears in mind the ways in which British and Canadian brands of colonialism historically deployed the English language to effectively ‘other’ and, in some cases, eradicate the languages of the colonized. As part of this legacy, Creese argues that English spoken with an accent that bears the mark of a colonized history is sometimes deemed unacceptable and discriminated against in Canadian institutions (i.e. the labour market and schools) to the point that the English literacy of new ra-
cialised immigrants in Canada may be questioned or even erased. It is arguable that it is on these grounds that the English literacy of Filipino students acquired during their schooling in the Philippines is doubted and measured as insufficient. Take for example the following discussion between these Grade 11 and 12 students in which doubt lingers over their English competency:

Chelsea: [...] and sometimes I think they also underestimate their abilities in English. I see them, they could speak English, I read their stuff.

May: Isn’t instruction in the Philippines in English?

Amanda: It’s English, there is a Pilipino subject.

Chelsea: They teach everything in English except for Filipino.

May: Why do you think that happens?

Amanda: Grammar or vocabulary, I guess.

Considering immigrant Filipino youths’ previous experiences with English-language instruction in the Philippines, it is not surprising that the students refer to repetition in their ESL classes, or as Christopher puts it, “repeating what you already know.” The following discussion between two Grade 11 ESL students underscores the relevance of Christopher’s sentiments of repetition and apathy:

Arsenio: I know some guys who dropped out of school. [...] They said they were just lazy. I asked them why they dropped out; I asked them why they didn’t want to study. They just said they were lazy.

Junior: Maybe they just wanted to work. [...] But also, when I ask some guys why they left school, they just told me that they were bored with the courses they were made to take.

Kathie, a Grade 12 student, shares a similar attitude to both ESL and returning to high school upon her migration to Canada:
I was really sad about that, because I was expecting to be in college now, and it’s getting pretty boring here in high school. No offense.

The students’ descriptions of repetition, boredom, and dropping out highlight a discrepancy between the levels of English support they are assigned and the knowledge or language skills they believe they already possess. While the ESL label secures the students’ place in Vancouver schools, at the same time it produces them as the “other”: students not ready for regular course work based on technical and pragmatic measurements of their English competency. The ambiguity and uncertainties expressed by the students about the English support levels to which they have been assigned, as well as their uncertainty about why they must repeat what they already know, mark a disjuncture between their assignment to ESL levels and their own assessment of their language proficiency and needs.

Performing English Competency

“[…] what we were studying was so easy, super basic English. Inside I felt I could handle this. I don’t know why it’s so hard to get away from ESL.”

- Laya, Grade 12

The ambiguity that comes with an ESL designation folds into the actual spaces of ESL, most particularly the classroom where the students’ language competency is under persistent evaluation. The classroom is a regulated space where the idea of being “hard working” becomes a familiar refrain in their vague accounts of how the bureaucracy that structures their second language acquisition experience works. Consider for example students’ responses when asked about how their progress in ESL is assessed:

Noah: I don’t know.

Hari: Like, if you’re really working hard here, like they can really see it […]
May: Did you ask if you could move to English 4?

Laya: No, not directly, I never told them directly that [ESL] was too easy. You have to show them [...]

While their statements impart a certainty that they must prove themselves, they are less certain of what their performances should entail:

Teresa: I didn’t know, like, I didn’t know what to do back then. But, before, I didn’t tell the counselor, I didn’t say anything until they tested me in vocab, then my teacher knew that I needed to go to ESL, so, they sent me there. About a day ago, our counselor told me that I can [move to level 3], because my teacher told her that I’m hardworking, that I’m always active, like that. [....]

Junior: [...] Once you’re in transitional, the teacher again will make sure you deserve to be there, and if you deserve to go to regular, then if you are, they will tell the counselor that you deserve to be in regular.

The students repeatedly return to an impetus to prove themselves proficient in English without a clear conception of what is expected or required to perform. Their impulse to prove themselves deserving of promotion to regular coursework through individual industriousness points to an urge to perform in ways that cannot be easily calculated or measured by one’s inventory of vocabulary or grammar. As Jess shares in his explanation of why he believes he has not been transferred to more advanced levels of ESL, there is an element of showing that the students can do more than understand the ESL material at hand:

Because, you see, I don’t know the school very well yet. And, I’m actually having a hard time in ESL, because you see, I get it, I get the material, but, I just don’t know how.
Instead of a concern that their performances exhibit their English competency per se, the students speak of displaying their abilities to be non-‘others’, or more specifically, to be regular students. Asked, for example, how they think they might progress to the subsequent ESL levels and eventually be judged competent enough for regular coursework, students spoke of performing subjectivities not associated – in their view -- with being Filipino ESL students:

Marvin: Like when our English teacher asks us a question, sometimes I won’t answer right away. Like, when they ask a question, I’m embarrassed to put up my hand. It’s like the Filipino way really, to be really shy.

 ...

Donald: You have to show that you stand out in your classes.

May: Have any of your friends gone to regular already?

Donald and Rico: No.

....

May: Do you know why you were put into ESL 1?

Amanda: Because I’m not used to English. [...] I’m shy, so shy.

...

May: Did you tell anyone that [ESL] was too easy for you?

Noah: No, because I don’t want them to think that I’m like...what do you call that? Arrogant. Like a show-off or something.

Instead of a clear notion of what is expected to prove their English competency, their responses impart a vague awareness of how their proficiency is regulated and assessed, in part in relation to cultural ‘traits’ such as shyness.
Performing for Miss Smith

According to the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2009) ESL policy, regulating and assessing students’ English proficiency falls under the mandate of individual schools and the schools’ respective teaching and support staff. The school bureaucracy is held responsible for the annual accounting of a student’s proficiency. The policy manual suggests that this accounting be based on, but not limited to, periodic samplings of students’ unedited works and assignments alongside appraisals of regular classroom activity that is “designed to give the student opportunities to demonstrate his or her understanding of subject-specific content” (ibid:11). While the policy is clear in the assignment of responsibility for assessing students’ language proficiency, the students are less clear about the mechanics of assessment. In this ambiguity, the students’ performances of hard work unfold for a particular audience, namely, their respective head ESL teachers. As Amanda, a Grade 12 student explains:

“[…] It depends if they see you working hard, they will promote you…Ms. Smith specifically”.

Julian (Grade 12) and Jess (Grade 10) speak more generally about who they show their diligence to, but both see Ms. Smith14 as their initial audience:

Jess: It’s the Head of [ESL].

Julian: They look for if you’re improving your English.

Jess: And they have a meeting, they decide if you’re ESL 2 or 3.

Julian: Yeah, teachers from all ESL teachers meet in one place and they decide if you’re good enough to move on.

There is an acute awareness among the students that their English competency is being repeatedly regulated and appraised as they vie for promotion

14 "Ms. Smith" is a pseudonym.
through ESL levels. When asked how they manage their progression or descent through the various levels, students tended to reply in similar ways to Dante’s response: “It’s Miss Smith, the head of the ESL department”.

The ways in which the students pin their performances to Ms. Smith as the perceived arbiter of power brings into view other particular tensions that emerge from assessing language competency. Kuus (2011), although primarily concerned with geopolitics, brings into focus the creative capacity of bureaucratic and material practices to produce political space. For Kuus, geopolitics is constantly operationalized through bureaucratic processes socially embedded in particular places. She argues that bureaucracies, as technologies of expertise, work to codify and manage social reality. In this process, bureaucrats gradually bring to life policy through their everyday and mundane practices that render objects of interest into being for regulation and management. Kuus’ argument that bureaucrats play a key role in the production of political space points to a productive tension in the students’ performances for Ms. Smith. While ESL bureaucracy brings the students into being as second language learners, the students’ engagement with Ms. Smith, as their arbiter, in part constitutes their experience as ESL students as well as the technologies of ESL management. This self-reinforcing relationship, between the students and their arbiter, falls into a seemingly neutral student-teacher dyad, wherein the teacher transfers literacy skills to the students, who then re-perform these skills in hopes that they prove their competency to move beyond ESL into regular coursework. This co-constitution is particularly apparent in the students who continue to participate in ESL programs but who defer attaining a high school diploma to adult school:
[...] I found out there’s no credits, right? Yeah. But I think she [Miss Smith] knows that I can take the next level, because I’m doing pretty good in tests and stuff [...] It was the assignment and attendance. (Noah, Grade 12)

Noah chose not to complete assignments and attend classes regularly, explaining that he has grown bored of the material he deems is too easy for him, is weary of the discipline of class, and resigned to the fact that he was not receiving academic credits for his ESL course work. However, he imparts a belief that he meets the liberal expectations of his arbiter. Here, he elaborates on his ambivalence:

[...] My grade was like 53, I was like oh, never mind. I’m not doing homework [...] I handed in my homework, right, and she [Ms. Smith] told me it’s not here, so she wants me to do it again. That’s why I got mad. I did that for like 2 nights and slept late [to do the assignment]. Then she lost it, and she wants me to do it again. I got mad. After that, I stopped doing homework.

For Noah, Ms. Smith embodies the provincial ESL policy against which he displays his competency through assigned tests, while at the same time rebelling against it through a conscious decision to not attend classes or complete assignments. Willis’ (1977) ethnography of working class youth in Britain can offer insight here. Willis considered the ways in which a particular group of youth’s rebellious acts against figures of school authority stem from a counterculture from within which the youth regulate and organize themselves. The group’s opposition to school authority, Willis argued is: “principally manifested in the struggle...to defeat [the institution’s] main perceived purpose: to make you ‘work’” (ibid: 26). For Willis, the youths’ displays of rebellion work to shore them up as future factory workers, since dynamics at school strengthen their particular class identity as manual labourers. Not unlike Willis’ working class youth, Noah’s conscious ambivalence towards Ms. Smith and ESL argu-
ably works in part to form his constitution as a Filipino student in ESL. Such acts of ambivalence and resistance to Ms. Smith were more common among the high school boys who participated in this study compared to the girls. Edwin, an ESL-designated student in Grade 10, explained his weariness of Ms. Smith in these terms: “I feel like, well, I feel like she doesn’t see us as students, she treats us like we’re employees”.

While it is useful to appreciate Ms. Smith as the embodiment of ESL management for the students, Kuus (2011) argues it is also worthwhile to recognize the place-specific context of bureaucratic practices and the ambivalence of students’ rebellions against ESL. In this regard, it should be acknowledged that ESL programs in Vancouver schools are currently under threat of funding cuts. In April 2010, in anticipation of an $18 million budget shortfall, the Vancouver School District announced pending cuts to teachers, facilities, and ESL programs (Kelly 2010). While cuts to ESL programs have not yet been outlined, as of May 2011 187 teachers in Vancouver were laid off (Crawford 2011). The students keenly sense the reality of budget constraints. As Hari, a Grade 11 student who is hoping to complete the ESL program within the academic year sharply notes:

In Vancouver, there is a lack of funds. So, we [...] don’t have that much money unlike before, so we don’t have enough teachers, for example. Basically, we have less teachers that we can ask help from. I just want the government to make things better, not just for this school, but for everybody, for all immigrants. We’re short of funds, so basically what they do is cancel everything.

It is in this context of fiscal reforms that the bureaucracy of ESL management in relation to the students’ performances of English competency unfolds.
Falling Short of Graduating

For some students, the ESL experience defeats academic promise. Chelsea (Grade 12) explains:

I think it’s not fair, because most of them [ESL students] get high marks in other subjects, but since there are only 7 courses that are credited for the principal’s list or honour roll, they can’t [be on the list]. Because they only have 6 [courses], ESL is not credited. So they can’t be on the principal’s list. Even though they get super high marks. And sometimes I think they also underestimate their abilities in English. I see them, they could speak English, I read their stuff.

As well as affecting achievements, the reproduction of an ESL label carries with it uncertainties that affect these students’ academic trajectories:

May: Do you think you’ll be on time for graduation?

Jess: [...] I thought when I got here, my credits would start, but it’s like... You see, on the last day of school last year, I talked to an ESL teacher [to see] if I could move to transitional, but he [sic] said you can’t because, because she said...she thinks I need to improve in English. I’m trying to improve. I have good marks, like in ESL I have good marks, but I think it’s not the right time to move, maybe next year...

Jess is in Grade 10. He migrated to Vancouver from the Philippines in 2008 where he finished Grade 6. He was 12 years old when he migrated to Vancouver at the end of the school year. The first September after his arrival, he entered Grade 8. Since being assessed by the school board as a student in need of additional English support, he remains in ESL. The required ESL courses will not count towards the 80 credits he needs to graduate from high school before he turns 19 years old.15 Junior, a Grade 11 student who also

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15 If a student in a Vancouver public high school does not meet requirements to graduate before he or she turns 19 years old, the student has the option of completing a high school diploma at one the school district’s Adult Education Centres, which provides students various options to complete their diploma. See http://www.vsb.bc.ca/adult-education-centres for more details.
finds himself in the same predicament of insufficient credits, also will not graduate in his Grade 12 year. He explains:

Even if I get into regular [classes] next year, I’m still short [of credits], so I’ll go to Adult school, because that’s what they do here for those of us that are short of credits.

Because ESL classes are not counted for credit, students like Jess and Junior will run out of time to become regular high school students before turning 19 years old. Christopher, now in Grade 12, was designated as an ESL student when he enrolled in a Vancouver public high school a month into the beginning of the 2009 school year. When we interviewed Christopher, he spoke openly about the fact that he will not be graduating in his Grade 12 year, saying: “I’ll just go to adult school. At least there won’t be any stress.” Christopher’s thoughts on his experience as an ESL student are punctuated by expressions of resignation when he speaks of the anticipation of adult school. Knitted into his resignation are hints of agency, for instance, in how he is planning ahead despite his deferred high school graduation. Prepared to accept that he will not graduate in what should be his final year of high school, Christopher continues to attend classes that he explained offer him the opportunity to learn new material and ideas while he waits his time out to transfer to adult school.

Much like the students interviewed, this study cannot assess why some youths migrating from the Philippines are designated as ESL students while others are not. Given that the students tended to share a migration history of being sponsored by one of their parents who worked in Canada as live-in domestic workers, all entered a Vancouver school as teenagers, held similar class positions in Canada, and ESL designations were evenly distributed among the girls and boys participating in this project (see Appendix A), a distinguishing factor may be the types of education they received in the Philippines, specifi-
cally, whether they were schooled in private or public schools. A more systematic study is necessary to better understand the reasons why some students are able to avoid ESL. What we can say is that once a student is designated as ESL it produces the student as different and stalls their progress towards high school completion, sometimes indefinitely. Given the ambiguity of what determines entry into – and perhaps even more significant, exit from – ESL designation, the effects of ESL on the stalled development of Filipino youths requires much more attention.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When asked what advice he would give to youth who are preparing to migrate to Canada from the Philippines, Rafael replied: “It’s hard at first... You have to fight, fight, and fight.” This sentiment was repeated from other high school youth, albeit in different forms. They would usually answer this question with a similar opening salvo, “mahirap sa una (it’s hard in the beginning)”.

These words of caution were typically followed up with words of advice that were meant to encourage their peers to persevere and find ways to overcome the challenges of migration and settling into a new place. The advice ranged from appeals not to be afraid to talk with teachers, to forewarnings that initial feelings of leaving loved ones and friends in the Philippines would eventually subside, to encouraging them to get involved in school activities and make new friends. One youth suggested that his peers make a list outlining what their goals and needs would be to graduate from high school. From the mundane to the more purposeful pleas to take action, their words of advice suggest that

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16 Some students who participated in the project also volunteered to offer advice to youth who are preparing to migrate to Canada in the form of a video message. To view the video project, visit: http://vimeo.com/45098442.
youth preparing to migrate to Canada should be prepared, in different ways, to struggle through change.

The youths’ narratives of their own personal migration stories to their experiences as Vancouver public high school students also offer ways of approaching their issues with an eye for changing policies and practices that influence their educational trajectories. One thing that our study makes clear is that poor educational outcomes are not a ‘Filipino’ problem. They are a problem for Filipino youths in particular circumstances: those who have experienced the stalled educational trajectories associated with temporary labour migration programs such as the LCP, and those in City of Vancouver high schools seemingly trapped in ESL classrooms. Youths’ narratives urge the need to look at a plurality of policy arenas. The multiple deferrals and delays in their educational advancement are wrapped up in more than one place and through more than one set of policies. Centering the students’ accounts of their experiences shows that the suspension, interruption and resumption of their educational trajectories over space and time directly impact their academic achievements and outcomes. The merging of foreign labour and immigration programs in the LCP not only entangles the youths’ families in the dilemma of family separation and reunification, but may also compromise the youths’ ability to follow mainstream tracks towards high school graduation and eventually progress to post-secondary education. Secondly, the youths’ narratives point to the need to move discussion from a focus that collapses academic with integration outcomes to consider how the youths negotiate multiple factors and markers of success. Consideration must be given to the role that practices like ESL designation and assessment play in supporting Filipino youths and other students at the margins of the school system. Given the specificities of the experiences of Filipino-Canadian high school students,
there is a rationale for policies and programs that take note of their specific circumstances and needs. Such an approach could pay closer attention to the assignment of academic credits that can count towards high school graduation, greater support for Filipino multicultural workers in the schools, and better support for community-based programs and/or organizations that are working to involve and support Filipino-Canadian youths. Overall, it is important to pay careful notice to the multiple ways the agency of Filipino-Canadian youths unfolds in their experiences of transnational migration and integration.

**Policy Recommendations**

Bearing in mind the need look at a plurality of policy arenas when considering the educational aspirations and outcomes of Filipino-Canadian high school students, we offer the following as policy recommendations:

**Vancouver School Board**

- Widen the support for those who address the needs of Filipino students and their families: multicultural and settlement workers in the school district. This support includes increasing the number of workers, and increased funding for counselling and support tailored to the specific circumstances of the LCP experience.

- Reassess the assignment of academic credits that count towards students’ high school education to take into account the non-credited courses students recently arriving from the Philippines are being required to take.

- Re-evaluate the assessment of students’ English competency to consider the language skills they acquired during their education in the Philippines.
• Increase funding and support for current English as a Second Language programs so that they might better serve the particular needs of specific immigrant communities.

• Support efforts that allow community groups, organizations, and non-governmental organizations and schools to work together to provide programs and services of Filipino students and their families.

Ministry of Education

• Re-evaluate the policy of assessment of students’ English competency to consider the language skills they acquired during their education in the Philippines.

• Increase funding and support for current English as a Second Language programs so that they might better serve the particular needs of specific immigrant communities.

• Support efforts that allow community groups, organizations, and non-governmental organizations and schools to work together to provide programs and services of Filipino students and their families.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada

• In an earlier working paper by Pratt and PWC (2008), it was proposed that the family separation built into the structure of the LCP be stopped. They argued that limiting the program to only single, childless women is no solution. We once more recommend that the LCP must be recognized for what it is—an immigration program—and restructured so as to allow family immigration from the start.
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Portes, Alejandro and Dag MacLeod. 1996. Educational Progress of Children of Immigrants: The roles of class, ethnicity, and school context. *Sociology of Education* Vol. 69 No. 4:255-275


APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE FOR FILIPINO POST-SECONDARY STUDENTS

SURVEY: Educational and Labour Market Outcomes for Filipino Youth in Vancouver

You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a Filipino student enrolled in post-secondary education in Vancouver, British Columbia.

We are interested in gaining your perspective on the educational aspirations and outcomes of Filipino youth and students. Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Please complete the survey only once.

1. Age: _________ 2. Gender: _________
3. Educational Institution: _________ (e.g. UBC, SFU)
4. Year: _________ 5. Major: _________
6. Please circle in which country you were born:
   Canada or Philippines
   *If born in Canada, please skip to question 13.
7. What year did you come to Canada? _________
8. How old were you when you arrived in Canada? _________
9. What type of school did you attend in the Philippines?
   Please circle: Public or Private
10. Did you migrate to Canada with your family? YES or NO
    If yes, what members of your family? _________

11. Many Filipino families migrating to Vancouver come through the Live-in Caregiver Program. Did either of your parents come through this program? YES or NO

12. What grade did you start school in Canada? _________
13. What high school did you graduate from?
   Name: _________ City: _________
14. High school Graduation Year: _________
15. What year did you start post-secondary? _________
16. Which post-secondary school did you first start in?
   (e.g. Langara, VCC, UBC)
17. What are your reasons for going to university or college?
   Please tick the boxes most appropriate to you:
   ❑ For future employment opportunities
   ❑ For a better education
   ❑ For your parents and/or family
   ❑ Other reasons, please explain: _________

18. What do you think your biggest challenge is as a Filipino student?
    _________

19. If you are currently working while you are studying, what is your current job? _________
20. How many hours do you work per week: _________
21. Are you planning to further your post-secondary education
   (e.g. law school or graduate school)? YES or NO
   If YES, what program: _________

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME & ASSISTANCE

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g pintus@phas.ubc.ca or 604-822-2979
**Appendix B: Profile of Project Participants**

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<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Immigration Path to Canada</th>
<th>Year of Parent’s Migration to Canada</th>
<th>Year of Youth’s Arrival in Canada</th>
<th>Entry Grade</th>
<th>ESL Designated</th>
<th>ESL Level</th>
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1. These are pseudonyms and not the actual names of the research participants.

2. This data indicates which Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) program the youths’ families migrated to the country under. LCP refers to the Live-in Caregiver Program, the CIC labour and immigration program that facilitates and manages the entry of temporary workers who perform live-in domestic work. In the case of the Filipino community, it is typically the women who migrate through this program. Under the LCP, workers cannot migrate with their immediate dependent family members. Instead, they can apply to sponsor their family dependents only after completing the requirements of the program and receiving permanent resident status. FDM refers to the Foreign Domestic Movement program of the 1980’s, the temporary foreign worker program antecedent of the LCP. “Independent” indicates that the youths migrated with their families and that one of their parents did not migrate to Canada under the LCP or FDM.
APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS FOR FILIPINO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Project: Educational and Labour Market Outcomes for Filipino Youth in Vancouver

FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Were you born in Canada or the Philippines?

If you were born in the Philippines, what year and how old were you when you arrived in Canada? What grade did you finish in the Philippines before coming to Canada? Was this a private or public school?

Could you describe what it was like to go to school in the Philippines and your experiences as a student there? Would you describe yourself as a good student in the Philippines? What did you enjoy in school and what didn’t you like much? What subjects or activities were you good at and what gave you trouble?

Do your parents talk about the Philippines or why they came to Canada? What do they say? When did they come to Canada? Do you know what their work and education was in the Philippines?

SCHOOL

What is a “typical” day at school like for you? What time do you get to school, what do you do first?

What courses are you taking? (if grade 10 or above) Why did you decide to take those courses?

What do you do at lunch time? Who do you hang out with? Where?
What do you guys usually talk about? What do you guys have in common?

What do you do after school? What do you do on the weekends? Who do you hang out with most outside of school?

When do you do your homework?

Who do you go to if you need help with school work or any other problems?

How are your grades? Are you happy with how you’re doing?

Do you have any idea what grades your parents or family members want you to get, or how they want you to do at school?

What do you like about high school?

Are most of your friends Filipino? Why or why not? Are you friends with Canadian-born/Philippine-born Filipinos? Why or why not?

What don’t you like about high school? How do you deal with the {pressure, homework, etc.}?

**INTEGRATION QUESTIONS**

What do you think of or how do you see Canadian-born/Philippine-born (newly arrived) youth? Are they the same or different from you?

What do you think a Canadian is? What is a Canadian like? Do you see yourself as Canadian?

Do you think Canadians see or treat you differently? At school? Outside of school? {Stereotypes}

Have you seen any trouble or problems between Filipino kids and other kids in your school? How do you think your school handles these problems?

Do you work now? Where do you work? What do you do with your earnings?
What do your parents think about you working while in school OR about you not working right now?

What are your plans after graduating from high school? What are you doing to prepare for these plans? Why are you interested in {profession/work/school}?