

# 100

YEARS

Teachers College Press

Teachers College, Columbia University

## BOOK THEMES

### THEMES FROM *UNEQUAL FORTUNES: SNAPSHOTS FROM THE SOUTH BRONX*

*Print and broadcast media might consider talking to Arthur Levine, Laura Scheiber, and the Latino young people they chronicle about the following:*

**The Death of the American Dream.** Working-class families four decades ago had access to resources: people like teachers and professionals who lived in the neighborhood and served as models and aids in promoting educational mobility, jobs that paid enough to support a family, and effective social institutions—schools, police, courts, and healthcare—that enabled children and families to pursue the American Dream. Despite the religious and ethnic differences among the people living on Creston Avenue 40 years ago, there was one fundamental commonality—a belief in the power of education to make that dream possible for the next generation. But today, any child who moves up and out must create the road for her- or himself, much as the first pioneers did going west. Middle-class flight and fair housing laws have resulted in the loss of economic diversity in the neighborhood. Jobs paying adequate salaries to individuals without a high school diploma have largely disappeared. Social institutions no longer serve neighborhood residents—the educational, criminal justice and health care systems are failing them. Most of the children are consigned to remain in poverty, with inadequate educations, dead-end jobs, and violence.

**Hardworking, Not Hard to Educate.** The Latino young people featured in the book come from families where hard work and education are valued. For example, Leo's mother, a college-educated woman separated from her husband, could not find work as a teacher in the Dominican Republic and came to New York wanting to see her kids graduate from an American school so they could have a promising future. But being a single mom and the primary breadwinner of the family, Miriam did not have time to provide constant oversight for her children. The trip to the factory where she worked was two hours each way. She arrived home at 4 a.m. each day. She tried to set rules and curfews but was often not home to enforce them. Always one to pursue opportunities for self-improvement, she took advantage of free English classes at a local community center. Between work and school, she was sleeping four hours a night and exhaustion forced her to drop the English classes. Other parents—like Carlos' dad Ismael, who also worked six days a week in a New Jersey factory, or Juan Carlos' parents, who had worked multiple jobs and required their son to chip in—also provided examples of the power of ambition, imagination, hard work, and an individual's capacity to create a better life. Perhaps buoyed by this drive to succeed, and gaining access to the right resources, some of the young people made it to college.

**A Broken Legal System.** The book shows how a broken legal system punishes young people who, by virtue of their circumstances, sometimes find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Their brushes with the law almost always have disastrous consequences. When Leo's brother Lisandro goes looking for a job, for example, he meets with an old friend who says he knows someone who can help. But that friend is caught making a drug deal after Lisandro leaves. Lisandro is charged by police as an accomplice, and must plead guilty to a lesser charge or risk being convicted by an all-white jury and being sent to jail for a long time.

**Appalling Schools.** The reality of school for Leo was worse than suffering hurt feelings when other children taunted him because he spoke no English. Leo changed schools almost on a yearly basis. At first, the changes were for safety reasons. School corridors, an extension of the streets, were ruled in different quadrants by rival gangs. Eventually, Leo grew bored and became more interested in meeting with his girlfriend and attending parties where he would drink and have sex with other girls. At Leo's second junior high school he had a teacher who told him he was stupid, and another one

called him “a little shit” and challenged him to a fight. Leo was supposed to go to a high school preparation program since he never graduated from eighth grade. But he slipped through the cracks and was registered at the 4,600-student Kennedy High School. The classrooms were disorderly, his teachers on average were less competent than suburban teachers in terms of credentials, teachers had low expectations for the students, the school was so overbooked that it had to begin serving lunch at 9:21 am to accommodate all of the students, and Leo did not feel safe walking in the school hallways. By the third week into his first term of high school, Leo had never attended a full day, and he soon stopped going to school altogether.

**Toxic Comfort.** Rejecting the guidance of responsible adults and lacking examples of family stability, the young people portrayed in *Unequal Fortunes* often relied for comfort on equally wounded peers. Ana and Leo latched on to each other because they came from similar surroundings. Their rocky relationship was driven by the notion that they were the only support each other had and that they couldn’t survive without each other. But the relationship was toxic comfort and encouraged destructive behavior. When Leo gave up on Job Corps, he encouraged Ana to quit too. He constantly fed her promises they both knew he could never keep, yet their dependency on each other for emotional fulfillment made them yearn for the support they could never provide each other.

**Juggling Multiple Worlds with Conflicting Values.** Latino youth like Leo often find themselves moving back and forth between two cultures with different views of success. Leo found himself constantly torn between a desire to fit in with his South Bronx peers and to achieve his mother’s aspirations for a college education and prosperity. His friends who did make it to college, through special programs, found themselves living in two worlds—one mostly white and privileged, one familiar with people like them—and soon felt they fit into neither.

**Unobvious Mentors.** The mentors of the streets were drug dealers and gang leaders. By age 13, most of Juan Carlos’ and Leo’s friends had already joined gangs that required obedience to rigid rules and charismatic leaders. They lived in a culture where violence was glorified and proving one’s toughness was the fastest way of earning respect. Juan Carlos was saved from the street life by a stream of mentors, particularly a female karate instructor who introduced him to self-discipline, distracted him from his friends in the Bronx, and who gave him an incentive to meet his own expectations for success, both in school and in the *dojo*. Once he moved on to college, Juan Carlos took on the additional responsibility of mentoring his friend Carlos, who had never considered college and was barely prepared for it.

**A Higher Bar for Mobility.** The threshold for achieving success changed dramatically over the 40 years since Arthur left Creston Avenue. The nation has shifted from an industrial to an information economy. Not only has this meant the loss of industrial jobs requiring a high school diploma or less, but the fastest-growing jobs, outside the low-wage service industry, paying salaries sufficient to support a family, require more education and the highest levels of skills and knowledge in history. Mobility and education are inextricably intertwined, and mobility requires more education than ever before. On top of this, in the current economy with the loss and relocation of jobs, even with education, mobility is severely curtailed, making it far more difficult for the poor to escape poverty.

**An Isolated Neighborhood.** The old neighborhood is isolated from the American middle class—linguistically, racially, economically, and educationally. Its residents do not speak the language of the middle class, nor does the middle class speak their language. Spanish is now the language of the “old neighborhood,” and Leo’s mom’s experience shows just how difficult that makes finding a non-minimum wage job, even with a postsecondary degree. People in the neighborhood are not the same race as the middle class, and in the United States, where racial discrimination, segregation, and fear of

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people of color remain realities, this separates Creston Avenue and its children from the majority population. Poverty dictates the lives of many families living on Creston Avenue, including where they lived, the schools they could attend, the food they ate, the legal services they had access to, and the health care they received. They do not have middle-class jobs or the prospect of getting them, and their educations disqualify them from entering the middle class.

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