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Irma Castillo
South Texas ISD Science Academy

Velma D. Menchaca
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Veronica Lopez-Estrada
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

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Research Article

Latina Female Superintendents Securing Positions in Small Rural School Districts

Irma Castillo, EdD
High School Principal
South Texas ISD Science Academy
Mercedes, TX

Velma D. Menchaca, PhD
Professor
Department of Organization & School Leadership
University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Edinburg, TX

Veronica Lopez-Estrada, PhD
Professor
Department of Teaching and Learning
University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley
Edinburg, TX

Abstract

Underrepresentation of women in the position of school superintendent has been identified as an equity issue in the field of education. National demographics show that approximately 73% of school superintendents are male as compared to only 27% female. Of these female superintendents, Latina and nonwhite female superintendents make up a small percentage of this group (Kominiak, 2016) and scarce in the literature. This research study revealed that Latina superintendents were attracted to small rural districts with a familial environment with high levels of parental and community involvement. They shared the perspective that small rural communities seemed to be more receptive to having a Latina superintendent than larger, more urban school districts. Gender discrimination occurred in some, but not all participant cases.

Key Words

superintendents, rural districts, Latinas, leadership, rural school settings, securing positions, hiring Latina superintendents

Women in the United States have struggled with gender inequality throughout the history of the United States. This is evident in the number of women who hold leadership positions, such as school superintendents (Robinson, Shakeshaft, Grogan & Newcomb, 2017; Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018). Published studies clearly indicate that women superintendents of schools are in the minority (Glass, 2000; Kominiak, 2016; Superville, 2017). Although there has been some progress in representation of women superintendents in recent years, they still make up only 27% of school superintendents (Kominiak, 2016) overall, and their tenure is 1.2 years shorter than most superintendents who are male (Bryant, 2018).

Aside from a few studies documenting the numbers and administrative positions attained by Latinas, limited research is available concerning other aspects of this specific group's experiences in educational administration (Brunner, 1999). Research on Latina superintendents remains scarce in the literature (Mendez-Morse, 2000). Mendez-Morse (2000) explains the lack of Latina superintendents does not mean they do not exist. Rather, "it indicates exclusion and negates the contributions of Latina leaders" (p. 584).

In 2008, women earned more degrees than males within each racial/ethnic group; however, women are not equally represented in the male-dominated roles of school administration (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010, p. vi; Bryant, 2018). Women are enrolled in educational leadership courses and superintendent certification programs, yet they are not equally represented in public school leadership. This could also be attributed to a form of bias as men move from a principal to the superintendent more often than women (Garn & Brown, 2008; Kominiak, 2016; Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018). This trend calls for the need to question why women do not hold more school superintendent positions than men (Brunner, 2000; Tallerico, 2000).

There is a shortage of research in the area of Latina school leaders, and an almost nonexistent body of research on Latina rural school district superintendents. In fact, as far back as 1991, only one case study about Latina superintendents had been published (Brunner, 2000). Since then, there has been very little change in the body of research about this topic (Manuel & Slate, 2003; Mendez-Morse, 2000; Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004; Franco, Ott, & Robles, 2011) with the exception of very few dissertation studies (Nieves, 2012; Sanchez-Portillo, 2012; Holguin, 2017).

This gap in the literature warrants a need for more research about the experiences of Latina superintendents and their tendency to choose to lead rural school districts. The more we know about the experiences of Latinas in leadership positions in education, the better. The cost of not knowing about these experiences is that we will never learn about the road they have taken—the smoother less easily traveled areas and the bumpy, difficult, and often treacherous parts. Young Latinas who aspire to be effective and transformative educational leaders will benefit from learning from their predecessors' stories as they have taken the road less traveled, yet we do not know much about their journeys.

In the 1980s, the Latino population was 14.5 million of the total US populations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010) while in 2016, the Latino population had reached 57.5 million and were the second largest racial and ethnic group behind whites.

Moreover, Latinos of Mexican origin account for 36 million of the nation's Latinos population and have led the nation's demographic growth (Flores, 2017). Therefore, we also agree with Superville (2017) that when the majority of students that are served in a school district are Latinos, it is important that students see administrative leaders that reflect their own ethnic, racial, and/or gender group because this could inspire them to achieve high-level positions one day. We view this as an equity issue. The more exposure students of color have with successful adults who they can emulate, the more likely they will aspire to achieve academically, graduate, and then pursue higher education (Sanchez, Colon-Torres, Feuer, Roundfield, & Berardi, 2013; Figlio, 2017).

Thus, given the absence of research on Latina superintendents in rural schools, studies that describe their professional and lived experiences are extremely valuable. A study by Franco, Ott, & Robles (2011) illustrates self-reflective personal and professional leadership roots of Latina school leaders (p. 12). In their study, three Latina superintendents shared their stories about their childhoods, careers, and challenges they experienced along the way. Each participant discussed how their gender, culture, and search for quality education motivated them to succeed in their careers, stressing how their female identities were masked by their professional successes.

The superintendents in this study urged readers to follow their personal compasses and not to hesitate in demonstrating their leadership capacity (Franco et al., 2011). We believe that sharing the stories of Latina school leaders can lend confidence and provide important information for Latinas who aspire to become school superintendents. Their stories can help them to navigate the traditionally male-dominated school superintendent position.

Research Design

Purpose of the study

At the time this research took place, we noticed a trend in job procurement of Latina superintendents in our region. Most were securing positions in small rural school districts. We wanted to learn why that was the case. This question prompted us to draft a purpose for this research. The purpose of this study was to hear the stories of Latina superintendents in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in south Texas, who have secured superintendent positions in rural schools with high percentages of Latino students.

Specifically, we wanted to know why the superintendents in this study chose to apply in small, rural districts rather than larger, urban districts. The following questions guided our study:

1. Why did the Latina superintendents in this study decide to seek a superintendent position at a small, rural school district, rather than a larger district?

2. To what extent have the Latina superintendents in this study felt they have experienced discrimination?

Theoretical framework

This qualitative study drew from three theoretical orientations (Patton, 1990) including Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), *testimonios*, and constructivism. *LatCrit* is an approach to understand how Latinas have been marginalized, yet resilient, and oppressed, yet successful despite inequities they have confronted (Delgado-Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). *Testimonios* is another aspect of critical race theory and focuses on stories that are seldom expressed or captured (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado-Bernal, & Solorzano, 2001).

These stories and experiences, or *testimonios,* are the voices of the struggles, pain, sacrifices, silencing, and marginalization that Latinas have encountered (Anzaldua, 1990; Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Lopez & Davalos, 2009). Finally, a *constructivist* framework aims to discover and describe ontological and epistemological lived experiences (Creswell, 2003, 2007). Creswell (2003, 2007) posits that the constructivist philosophical assumption is closest aligned for qualitative research, which aims to construct realities based on the participants' experiences, or ontology. aims to discover and describe ontological and epistemological lived experiences.

Methodology

We employed a case study methodological approach for this study. The case study methodological approach involves the study of an issue through specific cases and emphasizes exploration and description. Case studies (Yin, 2009) arise out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. Skrla (2000) emphasizes "particularization" as opposed to generalization as an objective ideal as this type of qualitative research enables the readers to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of a case (p. 301). Given the purpose of this study and the research questions that guided us, qualitative case study methodology was optimal in bringing light to the experiences of these Latina rural school district superintendents.

Purposeful sampling was used to select three case study participants. All were Latina superintendents who were currently employed by a rural school district in the RGV. Surveys, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A), participant observations, and document analyses were used to develop a thick description of multiple cases (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Geertz, 1973).

The interviews offered opportunities for participants to tell their stories, or *testimonios.* They were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emergent codes and themes. In addition, a brief electronic survey was developed and emailed to the participants in order to collect their schools' demographic data. Participant observation data and documents provided contextual information that was used to describe the three school districts. These multiple sources of data were coded and used to craft ethnographic portraits of each participant. Triangulation by method and member checks were conducted in order to achieve trustworthiness of these data (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The following pseudonyms were used to describe school districts and participants: 1) Palm Valley School District led by Ms. Monica Sanchez, 2) South Lakes School District led by Ms. Juanita Martinez, and 3) Twin Springs Independent School District led by Ms. Sonia Tello. In this study, rural districts had an enrollment of less than 300 students.

Data Analysis

In order to capture the participants' experiences as Latina school superintendents, we coded the data sets manually and used the constant comparative method (CCM) to compare data sets (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). We compared the participants' responses to the interview questions individually and collectively. This process of review, analysis, and comparison was done systematically with interview transcripts, participant-observation notes, and document analysis data sets to capture the essence of differences and similarities among the participants. The constant comparative method complimented

data triangulation to ensure data collection, review, and coding were streamlined and systematic. Several themes emerged in these data.

An example of the data analysis process for an emergent theme titled Familial Work Environment is below (see Figure 1).

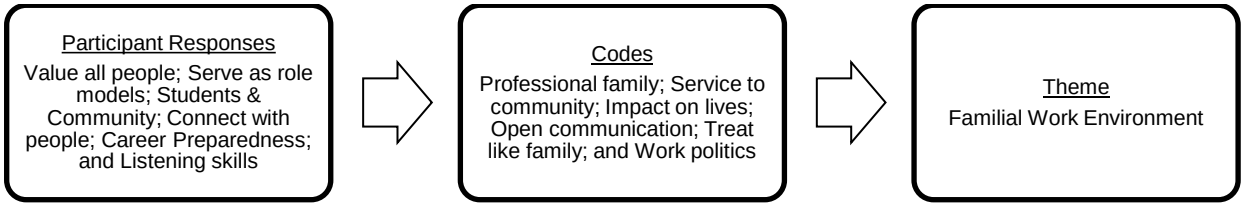

Figure 1. Example of data analysis process.

Interview questions generated considerable self-reflection among the women regarding the types of events in their life journeys that impacted them and influenced their decision to become educational leaders. Inevitably they recognized that supportive relationships with their respective family members, mentors, and community members were critical in their ascent to the superintendency. In order to organize the data in a way that was manageable and coherent, we crafted ethnographic portraits of each participant that reflected their experiences as Latina superintendents in their own words. This manner of data display allowed their *testimonios* to be heard and analyzed through a cultural lens.

Results

Four general themes emerged from the data including: extended parental support, familial work environment, networks, and versatility (see Figure 2). We will expand on each theme in what follows.

Question Stems	Family and Personal Backgrounds	Personal and Professional values and beliefs	Educational Leadership	Gender, Race & Discrimination
Participant Responses	No question about attending college; Raised in the Rio Grande Valley; Parents are college Graduates and assisted financially; Parental role models; Parents demonstrated commitment & dedication; and Community service	Value all people; Be role models; Attend student/ community events; Connect with people; Career preparedness; and Listening skills	Others helped in school and on the job; Support; Guidance; Communication with school board; Spend time at campuses; Work with community; and Rural schools are "hubs" and "hearts" of the community	Learning as a result of "wearing many hats"; Problem-solving skills; Communication with stakeholders; good-old-boys games; jeopardizing ethics; own apprehensions of professional abilities as a woman; and Always considering what is best for students
Codes	Parental foundation; Small communities; Support; Guidance High expectations; Advocacy; Dedication	Professional family; Impact on lives; Open communication; Treat like family; work politics	Support; Mentors; Visibility; Opportunities; Communication; Leadership; Contribution of knowledge; Shared power; Community priorities	Ethics; Problem-solvers; Communication; Politics; self-perception
Themes	Extended Parental Support	Familial Work Environment	Networks	Versatility

Figure 2. Summary of thematic codes and emergent themes.

Participants in this study expressed the common experience of having parental expectations for educational advancement. This was true regardless of the level of parental education. Family support was apparent as parents perpetuated the belief in the power of education. Both of Ms. Tello's parents were educators in a small rural district. Her father was a superintendent for a few years as well. She attributed her parents' support as being critical to her success. "I learned from my parents to work hard, to fight for what is right as an educator, and to be an advocate. We have to mold these kids, so our jobs are so crucial."

Ms. Sanchez added that her parents, who did not go beyond the 6th grade in Mexican schools and were migrant farm workers, motivated her to excel: "They always pushed us; we had to have a better education than they did, so we could be better off and have a good life ... They were always good role models of dedication, hard work, and commitment."

By contrast, Ms. Martinez's family was well-educated. Her paternal grandfather had a bachelor's degree; her mother had a master's degree, and her father served in the military and

later held a prominent government job. She explained that her parents expected her to excel in school. "My family was educated. The expectation was there, and it was just a matter of time before I did the same ... they nurtured me. I had the support systems, and I'm very blessed to have that."

The experience of having extended parental support among these Latina superintendents is consistent with research that shows Latino parents have a strong desire for their children to succeed. Latino parents are their children's strongest advocates (García, Scribner, & Cuellar, 2009; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009). At times, they feel limited by the support they can provide their children with homework. Parents tend to check to see that homework is complete and submitted, even though they cannot assist them. They tend to be more involved with their children's academic work at home rather than at school (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2011).

Familial Work Environment

We discovered that the women in this study chose to work in rural school communities because they had more opportunities for personal communication with parents, a stronger sense of family among the community, and opportunities to advocate for their schools and communities. Ms. Sanchez explained, " ... you don't connect as much [with families] in larger schools." This community connection, in her opinion, was "more attractive to females than males."

Numerous examples of fostering a familial working environment were observed and described. For example, Ms. Tello shared her *testimonio* about a day when a student's father came into her office when his wife was diagnosed with cancer, and he didn't know where to turn for help. She brought this to the attention of the board which resulted in the entire community pulling together to raise funds to offset the costs of medical bills for his wife's treatments and medication.

This type of familial environment where families strive to help one another during hard times is culturally consistent with Latino customs and with rural school research indicating that educators and students in rural schools tend to practice and observe values within and outside of the school environment (Cooley & Floyd, 2013).

Ms. Tello described them as "hubs" for families during good and bad times. She also offered family support in several other ways that contributed to this familial work environment such as establishing a make-shift library outside her office where students could pick up free books and a "caring closet" for gently-used coats and clothes for families in need.

Ms. Sanchez, likewise, described rural schools as being the "heart" of the community. Rural school research indicates that small rural districts foster community pride and identity, often through facilitating social activities in the rural community, such as social and cultural events, recreation, continuing education opportunities, and emergency shelters (Cooley & Floyd, 2013).

Community pride was evident in our observations at the school and in documents such as flyers, posters, and other signage at the schools. Although most of the people in the community were bilingual in these three districts, many parents spoke only Spanish, so all three Latina superintendents required all oral and written communication to parents and guardians to be delivered in English and in Spanish. We observed that Latino parents and community members had a strong presence in

school activities such as pep rallies, movie nights, Spanish-English holiday programs, and other family-oriented programs. It was evident that they were part of the school district family. Speaking in Spanish was not viewed negatively or deficiently. In fact, it was viewed as a strength and an asset.

It was also common practice for these superintendents to greet parents and community members, with whom they had established strong relationships, to be were greeted in traditional Latino ways that you would greet a family member—*con abrazo y beso* (with a hug and a kiss on the cheek).

These Latina superintendents claimed to know most of the students, and they knew who their parents were. In Ms. Martinez's district, every student, staff, and faculty member could expect a birthday card with a handwritten message from her every year. Ms. Sanchez and Ms. Tello shared that they fostered a sense of *familia* with food as well. It was customary to serve traditional desserts at morning and/or afternoon events, such as *pan dulce y café.* These practices contributed to a nurturing, safe, and culturally compatible school environment in all three districts.

Networks

Networks are critical for supporting aspiring women leaders. Mentoring of women for the superintendent position has been attributed as promoting confidence, empathy, trustworthiness, encouragement, active listening, and integrity.

These characteristics contribute to the success of women in leadership positions; consequently, many female superintendents seek support systems after securing superintendent positions (Goffney & Edmonson, 2012). The Latina superintendents in this study identified several sources of support through their professional networks which seemed to originate with professional relationships with university professors/mentors. Networks also included former principals who they had worked when they were teachers; a collaborative group of Latina leaders established by the regional service center; and other superintendents who they met through professional organizations at conferences or professional development workshops.

Ms. Tello expressed that one of her former university professors continues to mentor her regarding school finances, an area where she admitted to needing further support. Ms. Sanchez attributed her motivation and attainment of the superintendency to a mentor she has had since she was a principal. She especially appreciated that her mentor often motivated her, reminded her of her aspirations, and pushed her to advance professionally.

This finding supports the literature that contends mentors enable female superintendents to network with others in similar positions, sharing common experiences and professional capabilities, which enable them to record success within their area (Goffney & Edmonson, 2012). Quilantan and Menchaca-Ochoa (2004) found that Latina superintendents who were mentored and interacted with other professionals were successful in their career mobility. Specific professional opportunities, often afforded through mentor and network relationships, were also sources of support for participants. These networks and opportunities fostered confidence in their leadership capabilities, empowering and fueling their drive toward innovative and effective educational leadership.

Versatility

The participants of this study demonstrated versatility in their respective roles. That is, in their personal journeys to the superintendency, they often took on multiple roles "wearing many hats" as needed, given modest school budgets and a lack of personnel. In addition, they all faced challenges with community members battling female stereotypes and handling small town political issues.

Versatility was crucial to their success as educational leaders. They continued to be present and visible at campus events and accessible to students, staff members, and parents. They found it was important to listen to the needs of the community. The participants exhibited perseverance to remaining goal oriented.

The participants were versatile in both their personal and professional lives. Ms. Sanchez exhibited versatility as early as fourteen years when she would migrate to northern states with her family to seek fieldwork as migrant farmworkers. She worked hard, learned English as a second language, and succeeded academically in school, as it was expected.

Ms. Martinez stated that she had to juggle many roles. In addition to her role as a superintendent, she was working on a doctoral degree, taking care of her family, and dealing with gender bias and sexual harassment issues. Her versatility enabled her to juggle multiple roles and to be successful despite confronting numerous challenges.

Despite the challenges any superintendent confronts, these Latinas exhibited grit and were consistently goal-oriented. Latinas have learned to practice versatility and to practice authenticity by creating environments in which they embrace and use their strengths and experiences to be successful (Ruiz-Williams, 2015).

Discussion

One of our initial motivations for this research was to explore factors contributing to the low rate of Latina superintendents. To this end, Ms. Sanchez added that a large contributor to the acceptance of female superintendents is situation-oriented, "I came to a district where females held this position in the past, so it depends on the community and whether they believe a woman can also do these jobs."

She also shared that being a superintendent requires physical fitness and spiritual virtues and explained that she begins each day with prayer, asking God for guidance and strength to succeed. Ms. Sanchez also expressed that fear can discourage women from educational leadership positions and stressed that mentors are critical in "pushing" them to persevere in reaching their goals.

In order to respond to the lack of Latina superintendents, Ms. Sanchez said she makes it a personal mission to empower women to become leaders. This includes motivating women to continue their education, setting high expectations, and setting definitive goals to achieve a clear vision and purpose for attaining leadership positions. Ms. Sanchez does this in order to increase the number of female superintendents so that they can be equitable to the number of male superintendents.

Ms. Martinez, like Ms. Sanchez, motivates and follows-up with staff members to increase educational attainment. While conducting observations, one of the researchers saw Martinez in a school hallway having a conversation with one of the teachers at her district about her career goals resulting in the teacher's decision to pursue a master's degree.

The fact Martinez knew the teacher by name, interest, and goal demonstrates her intentions to empower her peers. In contrast to Ms. Sanchez, Ms. Martinez stated the chief reason women are underrepresented in the superintendent position was due to "the good old boy's network- some females learn to play the game and they will do whatever to stay there."

In order to continue advocacy for female leadership empowerment, Ms. Martinez demands young girls be educated in these opportunities. She feels the Hispanic culture favors males in terms of their options and possibilities, whereas expectations for females are limited and directed mainly by their patriarchs. Ms. Martinez is a proponent of gender equity and continues to nurture leadership in young females within her district.

Advocacy is also embodied by Ms. Tello. In fact, she was the co-founder of a regional collaborative network for female superintendents initiated two years ago. There was a need to provide female superintendents in the Rio Grande Valley with a venue to share best practices, discuss common goals, and network. She also felt sometimes women are not perceived as independent; therefore, some believe women need males to guide them in personal and professional endeavors.

In pursuance of strengthening the number of females in the school superintendency, Ms. Tello believes women must serve as role models to their peers and voice their stories in venues such as graduate classes or superintendent certification courses. She has done this herself in hopes of motivating women to take on school leadership roles.

Next, was the desire to understand the extent of why Hispanic women are more likely to secure positions in small rural school districts. Research indicates that in rural schools, the number of minority members outweigh those found in urban schools; amazingly, 45.8% of minority groups were employed by rural school districts, while only 23.7% were reported for urban district schools (Carter, Glass & Hord, 2013). Participants were attracted to rural schools in small communities because superintendents have opportunities to build strong relationships with families. Superintendents are more visible and involved, "wearing many hats" in their role and gaining much learning and knowledge about leadership.

As far as rural schools specific to South Texas, participants shared that rural schools are "warm and caring communities" and this was an important consideration for the Latina superintendents in this study. As Cooley & Floyd (2013) report, rural schools are major contributors to social activities such as recreation, cultural and civic events in the community, continuing education for continuing education, providing shelter in case of disasters or emergencies. These types of services provided by rural schools are a source of pride to community members in rural areas.

Finally, we explored discrimination issues these women may have experienced. Ms. Sanchez reported she had not felt discrimination in any fashion. She was confident it was only a matter of time before the number of female superintendents was equal to that of males. In addition, she shared, "nowadays it is not uncommon for females to be superintendents."

Ms. Sanchez felt gender discrimination was not a factor since the job responsibilities among all superintendents are the same. Ms. Tello's sentiments regarding discrimination echoed the latter. She shared, "actually my

journey was a lot quicker than males in this position. A lot of the male superintendents are older and did a lot of time before becoming superintendents. This community was just ready for a female leader."

Ms. Martinez, on the other hand, offered a different perspective. She shared experiences of gender bias due to the "good old boy networks" as well as sexual harassment by males towards her. In addition, she alluded to discrimination by sharing, rural communities still have "that male-dominated mentality." When asked about gender differences regarding leadership, she responded, "men would have compromised; they have less to lose."

Conclusion

Nationally, female administrators seem to have more success in attaining the position of superintendent in rural areas compared to those in urban schools. Statistics show 24% of superintendent positions are held by women. In 2010, 55% of those women were employed in rural areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Despite this progress, difficulties for women achieving superintendent level administrative positions remain.

A new trend has emerged in this region, where Latinas have successfully obtained superintendent positions and positively impacted small rural communities and schools. The *testimonios* that these Latina superintendents provided generated a shared experience that all preferred to lead small rural districts as they were attracted to fostering a familial atmosphere in their schools and being part of a warm and caring community. All were originally from small rural communities themselves and benefitted from having a kind of insider perspective and understanding of how small rural school districts and communities typically function.

As Latinas, they understood the importance of respecting and preserving Mexican American cultural and linguistic customs and practices in the daily lives of students at their schools. They sought support from professional networks and from their parents, even as adults. Finally, they all exhibited a willingness to work hard and weave in and out of various roles and responsibilities in their daily professional lives, "wearing many hats" as Ms. Tello expressed.

Clearly, there is a need for further research about female attainment of superintendent positions in US schools in general, and more specifically, within racial and minority groups, such as Latinas. Although this research is limited to three participants in South Texas, we learned about critical concerns they faced. As the three participants articulated, some communities were ready for a female superintendent and believed they could do an excellent job in leading the district. Yet, these Latina superintendents still struggle with some level of gender discrimination or implicit bias, as one participant experienced with "the good old boy networks."

As a society, it is essential that we embrace the capacity and potential women offer to leadership in our public schools. We leave this study with further questions for future research. Would the dispositions that these Latina superintendents display factor into their success in a larger, urban setting with similar demographics but at a larger scale? Would they be as successful there? What kinds of supports would be required?

We contend that future research on motivation, self-efficacy, and perseverance of female superintendents needs to be conducted with larger samples in rural school and urban

school settings. It is important to provide opportunities to untap the leadership potential of all credentialed candidates of school superintendents regardless of race or gender.

Author Biographies

For six years, Irma Castillo has been a high school principal at the South Texas ISD Science Academy in the South Texas Independent School District. Prior to that, she was an assistant principal for seven years at Med High School. She aspires to be a school superintendent. E-mail: irma.castillo@stisd.net

Velma Menchaca is a professor in the department of organization and school leadership at the University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley. She has been a university professor 29 years. She has published in the areas of Latina leadership, cultural relevance, and mentoring teachers and principals. E-mail: velma.menchaca@utrgv.edu

Veronica Estrada is a professor in the department of teaching and learning at the University of Texas, Rio Grande Valley. She's been a university professor 23 years and her research focuses in teacher development and preparation, recruitment and retention of teachers, language and literacy, and comparative education. E-mail: veronica.estrada@utrgv.edu

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Appendix A

Guided Interview Protocol

1. Please share your family or personal background.

2. What is the highest level of education attained by your parents?

3. In terms of your background, what values and beliefs shaped who you are today both personally and professionally?

4. When did you realize you wanted to become an educational leader?

5. What was the event or moment that triggered this decision?

6. Describe in detail how you began your journey towards the superintendency.

7. Describe how you secured your current superintendency, including any challenges.

8. What barriers, if any, have you experienced during your educational leadership journey due to our gender?

9. What barriers, if any, have you experienced during your educational leadership journey due to your race?

10. What types of discrimination, if any, have you experienced in your educational leadership journey?