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Latina School Leadership: Breaking the Mold and Rising to the Top

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Latina School Leadership:
Breaking the Mold and Rising to the Top

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Abstract

For this qualitative research study, interviews with two Latina school leaders revealed their journeys to leadership. The theoretical framework used was Latina critical race theory, feminist theory, and counter storytelling. Identified themes were strong supportive mother, fervent faith, humble beginnings, mentors, intelligent, and challenges not obstacles. These guiding themes serve as a path for Latinas who aspire to public school leadership positions.

This research focused on two Latinas who emerged from traditional cultural and familial roles and broke the mold of male school leaders (Quilantan & Menchaca, 2004). They chose to change their mothers' perceptions of a good Latina and became strong, high-energy school leaders including social media to support their professional development (DelCampo, DelCampo, & DelCampo, 2009).

Traditionally, the role for Latinas was to be the nurturer, embrace the family, and assist with the care of their elderly parents (Espinoza, 2015). Traditionally, women were protectors of the home. Latinas learn to be submissive to their parents and their spouses. Mothers equipped their daughters to take care of the family within the home (Gil & Vazquez, 2014). Their community revolved around the family, church, and the activities that happened in those environments. Latinas have a long history of valuing education; however, poverty is one of the obstacles that prevented them from following the pathway to college (Gandara & White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, 2015). The findings of this study detail the challenges that two Latina school leaders encountered in universities and the workplace and how they cracked the glass ceiling to achieve the highest school leadership positions.

Statement of Problem

The opportunities for Latinas to consider college did not emerge until the 1960s with the rise of the civil rights movement (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). At that time, the institutions of higher education began to see a presence of Latinas attending colleges and universities. The teaching profession was the most accessible entry into the work force for Latinas. Teaching became a gold mine for many, as this profession paved a path for Latinas to elevate themselves to levels beyond imagination. Many found that they were using that pathway to professional dreams (Gandara & White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, 2015). This study focused on two Latinas who worked their way through the ranks of public school leadership to leadership of school districts.

Challenges Latinas Encountered

In the 1970s, financial responsibilities seemed overwhelming indicating that a second income was necessary. Although it was not the ideal, many Latinas had to consider a job to help support their families.

Prioritization of family responsibilities above college attendance was typical (Espinoza, 2015). Most Latinas attended institutions of higher education close to home to ensure they would be available to assist with family responsibilities (Sangha, 2012). Latinas saw education as the conduit to improve their lives and the lives of their families, yet it allowed them to remain close to home and still fulfill family obligations. Often, taking evening classes was an option as it allowed them to care for their children all day and then leave them with their parents or husbands at night. Many had the support of their extended families that included childcare and transportation assistance.

The college environment presented unique challenges as Latinas navigated through a system that was foreign and complex. Many Latinas lacked the skills and knowledge to navigate through the bureaucracy for obtaining a college degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2013, p.1). A study conducted by Eva Longoria Foundation in partnership with the U.S. Department of Education (2013) examined Latina educational attainment and discovered that Latinas completing college had risen only 4% points since 1975 (Gandara, Oseguera, Huber, Locks, Ee, & Molina, 2013). Latinas are graduating both high school and college at a slightly higher rate than Latinos are but are still at a much lower rate than white women are. Latinas trailed behind women of other ethnic groups when it came to attending college (Flores, 2016). Researchers found that although Latinas complete college at almost twice the rate as their male counterparts, they trail behind all other women by significant percentages (Flores, 2016). Latinas attend universities in higher rates but still have the lowest number of college degrees (Gandara & White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, 2015).

Many Latino families encouraged their daughter to go to college, but did not understand the demands, responsibilities, and requirements that colleges placed upon their daughters, many who were first generation college goers (Jackson, 2013, Espinoza, 2015). Once Latinas were able to acclimate to the college environment, they experienced a completely new world. They realized that there were opportunities for them beyond their dreams and they began to desire the possibilities that emerged from education and privilege. Fernandez and Wong (2011) received funding from the National Bureau of Economic Research to study women and their changing landscapes. The researchers noted that the "changes in family structure, economic environment, and cultural norms between 1935 and 1955 created an increase

in education and labor force for women born in the latter year" (p. 1). Jackson (2013) found that the level of educational attainment for Latinas had risen in the past few years, yet it was still significantly lower than that of white women. College graduation rates for Latinas have increased faster than any other group of women. Latinos have increased their college going rates from 2002 (54%) to 2013 (70%) (Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015). Graduation rates have not been consistent with the attrition of Latinos and in particular Latinas. Graduation rates for Latinas were at 31.3% in 2008, still significantly lower than graduation rates for white women, at 45.8%. Latinas hold 7.4% of the degrees earned by women, though they constituted 16% of women in 2012 (Santiago, Galdeano, & Taylor, 2015).

Latinas, who pursued their desires and persevered despite the obstacles they confronted, graduated. Once they tasted the success of a bachelor's degree, they were inspired to pursue a Master's degree or a post-graduate degree.

Mentors for Latinas

Latinas encountered few role models in college and fewer Latina role models who excelled in their professions that they could emulate. Latinas also turned to their mothers for the tools to succeed. Many mothers became the mentors and role models of the women of that time, but could not model how to be successful in college, as they had not experienced college (Flores & Obasi, 2005).

Magdaleno (2006) found that mentoring for Latino school leaders was urgent and mentors who shared the same experiences and culture was significant in the mentoring process. He also found that Latinos mentored by other Latinos were more likely to thrive professionally. Quilantan and Menchaca (2004) found that Latina superintendents who received mentoring and interacted with other professionals were successful in their career mobility. Latinas pay a high price for upward mobility. Some experienced marital conflicts that often ended in divorce, a stigma considered a failure (Livingston, 2015). They experienced feelings of guilt for not being the perfect reflection of the Latina woman of the time. They were absent from their families and were not able to engage in family obligations and outings.

The Latinas in these case studies did not have strong mentors but did have strong mothers whom they respected and admired. They used the inner strength their mothers had instilled within them and moved forward. These women truly created a new picture of Latinas.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is a hybrid that borrows from critical race theory (CRT): Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), feminist critical race theory (FemCrit), and counter-storytelling. The historical processes of language, accent, immigration status, ethnicity, identity, and sexual orientation are core to Latina/o populations (Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Johnson, 1997).

LatCrit is an approach to understanding how Latinas have been marginalized, yet resilient, and oppressed, yet successful despite all of the inequities they have confronted (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). FemCrit is another approach to understanding how Chicana feminism emerged during the Chicano movement as a means to give Chicanas a voice and space (Blackwell, 2003; Cotera, 1997). Soon after, Chicanas were writing about their struggles of being excluded, marginalized, and absent from the social and political discourse of the male-dominated Chicano movement (Hurtada, 1998). Counter-storytelling focuses on stories seldom expressed or captured (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado-Bernal, & Solorzano, 2004). Through critical race methodology, the experiences of Latinas are studied in a safe space where they can voice their struggles, pain, sacrifices, silencing, and the marginalization they have encountered (Anzaldua, 1990; Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Latinas have described their experiences to shed light on their oppression and injustices through counter storytelling, *cunetos, testimonios,* tales, and family histories (Solorzano &Yosso, 2002).

Through this framework, we gathered the experiences of these two Latina school leaders to voice the struggles, pain, sacrifices, and marginalization they encountered. It inspired them to reflect on their world as they struggled to raise the bar of success for Latinas. It was inspiration to hear their *stories* as they outlined their journey to success.

Research Questions

- What support do Latinas need to assume a successful school leadership career?
- What barriers do Latinas face when establishing a successful school leadership career?
- What is the profile of highly successful Latina school leader?

Participants

The researchers identified two Latinas who lived in the Rio Grande Valley in south Texas and who were born in an era of marginalization and low expectations for Latinas. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: had to be women, Latina, and had been in a top leadership position in a school district. Both women started careers as teachers and reached the highest of leadership positions in K-12 school districts. Both were in the education profession and have since retired. The women were located in close proximity to the researchers, so the interviews were conducted in their homes to encourage them to speak openly and feel comfortable.

Methodology

Data Collection

To understand the history of Latinas' growth through the last century and the problems and barriers they faced, the researchers conducted a qualitative multiple case study by identifying two highly successful Latinas who emerged as leaders to lead K-12 districts. Pseudonyms were used for the purpose of confidentiality. The researchers collected data about each of the cases using direct observation, interviews, and examinations of their educational records. The researchers sought the stories of these highly successful Latinas who aspired to excellence.

Through counter storytelling, an understanding of the lives of the two women emerged (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado-Bernal, & Solorzano, 2004; Solorzano &Yosso, 2002). The retelling of their stories revealed the marginalization they experienced on the path to success.

The following stories are based on the participants' recollections. Because these participants were chosen based on their success and visibility in the communities they served, we believe their stories will reveal much about the challenges that Latinas encountered in their quests to be highly successful in the field of K-12 education. They painted a new mural of successful Latinas. They chose to do it all—family, education, church, and job. It was not easy nor did it proceed as they dreamed. Their paths were fraught with challenges. High motivation kept them moving forward until they reached high levels of leadership. These are their stories.

Alma

Alma, in her early 70s, was born to a Mexican American family of three children. She remembers growing up poor. As a child, she would notice what others had and what she did not have. Alma wanted more than what her parents could afford to give her. Consequently, this motivated her to achieve higher education degrees.

Both of her parents had minimal education and neither of them completed the elementary grades. She always believed that her mother had a degree and was a teacher, but in fact, this was not the case. Growing up, she remembers her mother always mentioning she taught children. Alma eventually realized her mother probably meant she taught a few children a trait of some kind. Her mother was extremely intelligent, but never completed more than the third grade. She never felt comfortable discussing the topic with her mother so she does not know the reasons for dropping out of school.

Her father was an alcoholic. She remembers turning off the lights in the evenings so people would not see her father. She was ashamed and embarrassed of her father's illness. She was raised in a town that was racially divided. Anglo families did not interact with Mexican American families. The discrimination in the community was strong and this created a trait of determination. In her seventh grade year, she was determined to be a cheerleader. She tried out and got many of her friends to vote for her. To her surprise, she was selected and this experience gave her the confidence she needed to soar. However, in her eighth grade year, her father asked her and her older sister to quit school and begin working. He told them that they had plenty of schooling and did not need to continue. She loved learning and being in school so much that she begged her father to allow her to stay in school. He eventually gave in and allowed her to stay.

Her parents had a tumultuous marriage but her mother protected her and her siblings from her alcoholic father's power. Her mother wanted to divorce her father, but her grandfather did not allow it. He told Alma's mother "in this family, there are no divorces". It was instilled in her and her sister that divorces were not a thing to do. She remembers that after her farther died, her mother spoke highly of him. Alma and her sister could not believe their mother did not remember the traumatic experiences she had while being married to him.

While in high school, Alma cleaned the tables in the cafeteria to receive free lunch. She does not ever remember being embarrassed,

because her schoolmates saw her working for her lunch. She loved working at the drug store because she would socialize with her friends and did not have to deal with her father. She was a risk taker. She was willing to engage in situations that eventually made her the strong, confident woman she became. She did not enjoy being at home, as it was a dysfunctional environment.

By the time, she was 18, she married her boyfriend and left home. This was her escape from her alcoholic father. At this time, she thought she had accomplished everything. She had completed high school and was married. What more was there to life? It was not much later that she realized she had to work. She worked as a bookkeeper, as a secretary, and then at a bank. She then applied for a secretary position at the local college and her role was to advise students about attending college. She did this for many years and felt like a hypocrite, as she herself did not have a college degree. By this time, she had school-aged children. She decided to begin college as a non-traditional student. By this time, she was in her mid-30s. Her husband discouraged her from doing so which reminded her of her own father. She promised her husband that she would go to school in the evenings and study late at night so that she would not ignore the family. After going to college in the evenings for eight years, her husband asked her to stop going. He said she was taking too much time away from her family; he told her she had changed; he said he did not like her studying so much. That brought back memories of her father asking her to quit school. She continued a few more semesters and graduated. Their marriage survived during all of those turbulent years.

She began working as teacher. After three years of teaching, she became an assistant principal. She was an assistant principal two years and then appointed principal. She completed her principal credentials and eventually worked up the ranks to become an assistant superintendent and then the superintendent.

The determination she experienced as a youngster was still evident. During her tenure as a school leader, she experienced male bias. She perceived that she had faced different degrees of male bias throughout her career. At times, she felt her father, husband, and some of the men she encountered all looked down on her. However, at the end of her career, she believed that she had accomplished much. She felt she had helped many students and colleagues. She realized her strong values had been challenged throughout her career, but she never sacrificed her values or beliefs. They carried her throughout her career.

Dora

Dora is in her late 50s and was raised in a Mexican American family of six children. She said that she lived within walking distance of her elementary school; "It was about a mile away." She lived in a rural community with deplorable living conditions. Her father was such a dictator that her parents divorced when she was six. Her mother had a fourth grade education. The children were raised in a humble environment. Her mother provided an income for the family through jobs such as housework and being a nurse's aide. However, her educational deficit kept her from doing much and "divorces were so taboo back then that she became a stay-at-home mom." She said they had to have help from the government that her mom called, "*Vamos a traer el relief*." Her dad did not support the family nor did he pay the taxes on the home they lived in while they were married. After the divorce, her mom had to pay back taxes in order to keep the home. "She was always really strong willed."

She remembered hard times with her mother trying to raise four sons and two daughters by herself. She noted, "It was hard because I believed that all of us had strong wills and were thinkers even at that young age." She stated that her mother "ruled them with an iron fist." When she was in junior high, her mother received her GED. When she was in high school, her mother enrolled in the local college and took art classes. Her role models were her mother and her four brothers.

She respected her brothers and benefitted from the way they led their lives as it forged a path for her life. They took great pride in serving in the military and were always as positive as she was. All of them attended college, so she knew; she too would attend college. Additionally, she observed her mother reading all of the time and she went to night school to get her GED. She admired her mother and was proud of her.

She graduated from high school, married at young age, and attended the local college. She wanted to be an attorney, but was discouraged by her husband from pursuing that profession. Since she had children, she decided that maybe she should try education, which would give her time to be with her children as they grew up. She began teaching and loved the job. While teaching, she came across a student who could not read and she could not give him all of the information at that grade level he needed to be able to learn to read. She was so discouraged

until she talked to an administrator who talked her into considering administration so that she could make a difference in the lives of children who the system had failed. She said, "I should have known that I would not be satisfied with the status quo and I would always be searching to find a better way."

While being married for 21 years to her husband, she knew that she was in a rut. She read *Dance of Anger* and realized that she was being held back from achieving what she was capable of doing by a poor relationship. She concluded her first husband was an obstacle because he did not want her to advance. She often thought about her own mom who did not want her daughters to be in the same situation she had been in and yet, here she was. She divorced her husband and went back to college to get a Master's degree in school administration. After teaching for several years, she got her first job as a principal of a secondary school in a large school district. Being a principal was difficult for her because her own children attended the school she was leading. One of the important beliefs she had was that "These Hispanic students are my people and had somebody given up on me, I may have been a drop out, so I have to do my best for the kids." She believes that today's parents "have become enablers with their kids" allowing them to do what they want to do rather than demanding excellence. She stated that "hard work was a value that came from her mom and honesty was just as important." She received a statewide award for her success as a school leader. She also received the HEB Excellence Award for principals from the Region she was associated with through her ISD. She believes she is a "transformational leader" and that the only role that gender bias played in her leadership is the fact that sometimes she had to think like a man to get things done.

What moved her forward and motivated her to success was the ability to see people make personal changes and become successful. She was inspired that other Mexican Americans had what it took to move forward and believed she could do it as well. She felt she was making a difference in the lives of her students by living a life of inspiration. She learned to do the right thing from her mother and learned about the importance of being honest.

In conclusion, cracking the glass ceiling was important to both women. When asked what cultural values were most important, both women talked about hard work, values, family, determination and perseverance. They did not want their children to repeat the cycles that they or their mothers had taken. They improved their lives and the

lives of their families by continuing their education and striving to achieve leadership positions. They persevered so they could be the role models to their children that their mothers were to them.

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using inductive coding techniques as described by Strauss (1987), and further explained by Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014). To uncover narratives of self-perception, we approached the data in two ways. First, we analyzed the transcripts from the participants' interviews. We reviewed each transcript by reading each piece line-by-line and adding a label or code to each area. Pattern coding was used to develop themes across the data, providing an inductive method to reduce the large amount of data and to understand the meanings the participants made of the setting under study (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). We then met as a team to compare the codes across the data sets and analyze for commonalities. If differences arose, we deliberated until we reached agreement. We established trustworthiness by code checking. The researchers agreed on the themes that emerged (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). Data were triangulated when possible for reliability. Themes emerged as the data were analyzed and supported with quotes from the interviews. Names and identifying information were changed to protect anonymity.

Discussion

The researchers analyzed the data by identifying codes of interest supported by direct quotes from each woman's interview. The codes were collapsed into themes that were shared by both Latinas. Those themes were supportive mother; humble beginnings; mentorship; high energy, intelligent women and challenges not obstacles.

Education was the key to allowing both of the Latinas to achieve successful careers in top leadership positions. It was clear that Alma and Dora both had a tremendous amount of family support in their early years in order to obtain their teaching degrees. They had strong mothers who were outstanding role models for their daughters. Their guidance, advice, and mentorship helped both achieve their educational goals (Mendez-Morse, 2004; Mendez-Morse, Murakami, Byrne-Jimenez, & Hernandez, 2015).

Both Alma and Dora had to work extra hard to receive the same rewards as their male counterparts and were often excluded from professional meetings. Dora noted that often the decisions were made in closed meetings and when she was allowed to come into the meeting, there was nothing to decide as her male counterparts had already reached the decision. She felt left out of the group and isolated from the business of the district.

It is clear that both Dora and Alma were strong-willed women. Dora actually described herself as strong willed because of the mentorship of her mother who was able to raise six children by herself. Neither woman talked about their achievements but academic records revealed they were strong academic students who received many accolades for their work!

Finally, we learned that despite the challenges and obstacles the two women confronted, they prevailed and had more power than they saw in themselves. While at times, they navigated through discrimination and feelings of isolation, they broke the glass ceiling and prevailed.

Recommendations

Leadership preparation programs should provide experiences for developing Latina's leadership skills. Prospective principals should participate in activities related to cultural diversity, research, service, professional development and experiences in diverse and bilingual/bicultural settings. It is important that programs integrate rigorous and relevant field-based experiences pertinent to high need schools districts. Course assignments should include district policies, data, and programs to give the prospective principals experiences in understanding how to make decisions based on school data.   Latina school leaders have had limited opportunities to enter school leadership positions. Districts should provide formal mentors to groom Latina school leaders for future leadership positions as principals or for central office positions. Studies have found that Latinas who were overlooked for leadership positions did not have mentors (Mendoz-Morse, 2004; Mendez-Morse, Murakami, Byrne-Jimenez, & Hernandez, 2015). Mentors should be intentionally selected and there should be a professional connection between the leader and the mentor. Mentors who are enthusiastic and passionate about their work can be positive role models for upcoming school leaders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through counter storytelling, these Latinas shed light on their experiences and their lives. They met the challenges, obstacles, marginalization, and barriers to overcome all resistance to succeed and accomplish everything they set out to do. They prevailed personally and professionally. They met and exceeded their male counterparts in many ways and acquired top-level, school leadership positions at a time when few Latinas did. They had strong work ethics and sought professional success even though they regretted the many times their work took precedence over family. Although this was in direct conflict with their cultural upbringing, which taught them to be family-focused, they managed to navigate their personal lives with integrity, raised their families successfully and found ways to validate their loved ones.

These women created the leadership mold for other Latinas to follow. They mentored and led other Latinas to aspire to excellence. They were inspirational, visionary, and creative women who broke the mold and rose to the top as school leaders while mentoring other Latinas to follow in their footsteps.

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