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## **An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Professional and the Person: A Life's Journey of a Hispanic Superintendent in South Texas**

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AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF THE PROFESSIONAL  
AND THE PERSON: A LIFE'S JOURNEY OF A HISPANIC  
SUPERINTENDENT IN SOUTH TEXAS

A Dissertation

by

GONZALO SALAZAR

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2018

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AND THE PERSON: A LIFE'S JOURNEY OF A HISPANIC  
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GONZALO SALAZAR

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May 2018



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## ABSTRACT

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Leadership effectiveness is often defined in terms of, a leader's ability to motivate followers towards a collective goal, mission or vision (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer & Hogg, 2004). However, a leaders' understanding of their own identity; how education, culture, upbringing, values and morals helped shape the *self* (Leary, & Tangney, 2002; Anzaldua, 2015; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017) and how the leader functions as a contributing member of the organization (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) is critically important.

Demographers have long held that by the year 2050, our nation will be increasingly more diverse and that there will be no racial or ethnic majority among the general population of the United States with Hispanics being one of the forces driving this demographic change (Murdock, 2004 and 2007; U.S. Census, 2010; America's Voice, 2014). Gandara and Rumberger (2009) affirm that public schools in the United States have represented "the great equalizer" or the place where assimilation into the mainstream is inculcated regardless of the culture that students bring to school. This approach, however, is devoid of the benefits of validating the cultural capital and funds of knowledge that students already possess when they enroll in the public schools. As a result, most immigrant students who enter school as English Learners (EL) have low



achievement and attainment (Gandara and Rumberger, 2009; Murdock, 2004 and 2007, America's Voice, 2014). As the demographic landscape shifts, how our nation will manage the well documented disparities in education and economic indicators afflicting minorities including Hispanics, the fastest growing demographic in the nation, will continue to be a dilemma facing national leaders tasked with adopting policy solutions (Murdock, 2004 and 2007, America's Voice, 2014).

Our ability to help all students succeed in a state that is currently educating a minority-majority necessitates educational leaders with the ability to achieve cultural synchronicity and demonstrate an awareness of the importance of reaching cultural congruence. A leader must also possess the ability to increase the social and cultural capital, and recognize the resistance that may arise from the *pedagogies of the home* (Yosso, 2005; and Bernal, 2007).

## DEDICATION

To my mother Angelica, Perez de Salazar and the Late Gonzalo Salazar Sr. who taught us to fear God and love Him above all things. To my beautiful wife Sandra America, “Amor” you are simply amazing and I love you more each day. To our children Aaron Gonzalo, Sandra America and Jessica Alexa, words cannot describe the joy you have brought our lives. You are each a blessing from God and I pray that He will forever be a lamp unto your path. To my brothers and sisters, I cherish the life we have shared and I am extremely proud of each of you.

Finally, to our late *Abuelo* Ignacio Perez Chapa, whose *enseñanzas* and memory will be with me the rest of my days.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this study would not have been possible without the help and support of the dissertation committee members. Special recognition is given to the chair of the dissertation committee, Dr. Francisco Guajardo, who encouraged me to use narrative to get to self and challenged me to rediscover the manner in which language and story can be used to improve the human condition. I owe a debt of gratitude to each of the committee members, Dr. Menchaca, Dr. Zamora, and Dr. Watt for their guidance and timely encouragement. A special thank you to Dr. Miguel de los Santos, my advisor and mentor for all of his help and guidance.

I express gratitude to the staff of the Los Fresnos CISD. Your dedication is unmatched and your commitment to the children we serve inspires me to work towards a higher level of proficiency in this challenging position in the field of education. Special recognition is expressed to the Los Fresnos CISD Board of Trustees, the *2010 Texas State Honor Board*. You have challenged and supported administration and staff, and communicated high expectations in every aspect of district operations. You embody the meaning of the word “trustee” and work collaboratively for the benefit of the children we serve. I will always be grateful for the opportunity you gave me to and the quality educational experience Los Fresnos provided our children. In closing, I extend a special thank you to the Community of Los Fresnos. You took me in as a member of the Falcon Family and taught me what is possible when everyone works with a single focus to deliver a quality educational experience for all students.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The pounding grew stronger with every passing second. My heart contracted and expanded with such force that I could feel the blood flow out of it with immense pressure. At one point, it felt as though my chest was going to burst open and my beating heart was going to drop between the attorney representing the Office of the Texas Attorney General and me. I was sitting on the witness stand prepared to answer questions regarding the impact that the inequities in the Texas school finance structure have had on the children we serve in our public schools. Judge Deitz must have heard the palpitations from his seat. He leaned over the bench in an attempt to set me at ease; “I drive through Los Fresnos about five times out of the year. I am always sure to slow down through there,” he whispered. His efforts were futile. The adrenaline emanating from my medulla attached itself to the blood that was rushing through my veins. I had chosen once again to put myself in a vulnerable position for the benefit of others; something I have been willing to do throughout my life when I valued the potential outcome.

No. I do not share this in an attempt to portray myself as the hero or the victim. I share this with you as the narrator, merely from the perspective of the *Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004).

There is something about courts and hospitals that have always made my pulse rate increase. Perhaps it is the knowledge of the potential that life-changing decisions are made at both of these places. The attorney was making opening remarks and I was not listening. It was

as though time stood still. My mind had transported me to the origin of the journey that had brought me to this juncture. Yes, I had agreed to serve as a witness for the Taxpayer and Student Fairness Coalition but what I was reflecting on went far beyond the days and months prior to that moment in time. I was instead reflecting on the entirety of the journey that began with my childhood. The pounding heart and everything that accompanied this feeling was familiar to me. The first time I had a similar rush of emotion was when I took the stage at the theatre of *El Palacio Municipal* [Theatre stage at City Hall] in the city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas. It was shortly after my fifth birthday. We were still living in Mexico and I was representing *El Jardin de Niño's Modelo* [The Garden of Model Children Preschool] at the standing-room-only event. I had been invited to recite *Los Colores de Las Razas* [The Colors of Race] at what was at that point in my life, literally, the biggest stage of my life. Now, I was 45 years old and this was not stage fright. I had agreed to participate as a witness out of a genuine desire to help shape the academic experience for the children of our communities. I was a seasoned superintendent from the Los Fresnos CISD with knowledge of what was at stake. Over the years, the Texas legislature had passed laws that standardized curriculum, teacher certifications, school start dates, length of school year, the minimum number of staff development days and a myriad of other aspects of school operations. The only thing Texas had not standardized was the manner in which schools are funded. This decision had placed children, particularly those of low socioeconomic backgrounds, at a significant disadvantage.

It is easy to believe that the mind and body come together in times like these in peculiar ways. I believe God puts us in places where He needs us and then gives us the words. My mind began to draw on archives that had been filed away but were obviously very much the fiber of my being. As I sat on the witness stand attempting to control my breathing, I attempted to draw

courage by recalling scripture, lines from movies and other readings. I did not make a conscious effort to do so, it just happened. Some of these thoughts came back to me in Spanish and others in English.

*Todo lo puedo en Cristo que me fortalece [All things are possible in Christ Jesus]. Si Dios esta conmigo, quien contra mi? [If God is with me, who can prosper against me?].*

*There is courage in the heart of every man and at some point in every man's life, this courage will be summoned.*

*The hottest corners of hell are reserved for those who could have made a difference in the lives of others but chose instead a position of neutrality.*

Representatives for the attorney general's office had not been kind to me a month earlier. They had put me through a seven hour-long deposition. They could not break my resolve a month prior to this and I was not going to back down in court. I found resolve in my upbringing and the experiences that had shaped me. On that day, on that big stage, I was able to collect myself to be a voice for those who could not speak for themselves.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Twenty-one million elementary and secondary students of immigrant families were enrolled in the nation's public schools in October of 2016, representing 26% of all students (U.S. Census, 2017, Table 1). Demographers have long held that by the year 2050, our nation will be increasingly more diverse and that there will be no racial or ethnic majority among the general population of the United States with Hispanics being one of the forces driving this demographic change (Murdock, 2004 and 2007; U.S. Census, 2010; America's Voice, 2014). Gandara and Rumberger (2009) affirm that public schools in the United States have represented "the great equalizer" or the place where assimilation into the mainstream is inculcated regardless of the culture that students bring to school. This approach, however, is devoid of the benefits of validating the cultural capital and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2009) that

students already possess when they enroll in the public schools. As a result, most immigrant students who enter school as English Learners (EL) have low achievement and attainment (Gandara and Rumberger, 2009; Murdock, 2004 and 2007, America's Voice, 2014). As the demographic landscape shifts, how our nation will manage the well documented disparities in education and economic indicators afflicting minorities including Hispanics, the fastest growing demographic in the nation, will continue to be a dilemma facing national leaders tasked with adopting policy solutions (Murdock, 2004 and 2007, America's Voice, 2014).

Our ability to help all students succeed in a state that is currently educating a minority-majority necessitates educational leaders with the ability to achieve cultural synchronicity and demonstrate an awareness of the importance of reaching cultural congruence. The positive effects of achieving cultural congruence with all stakeholders in the academic experience of children and the impact that this has on the overall performance of students in the classroom have been well documented (Flores, 2001; Tella, 2007; Lavy and Sand 2014; and Modi, 2015).

Education in a democratic society will continue to have a special place and purpose but if we are to succeed, educational leaders cannot continue to operate under deficit thinking. It is critical to the future of education in Texas, that educational leaders concern themselves with the emotional wellbeing of the students they serve. Educational leaders must possess the ability to increase the social and cultural capital and recognize the resistance that may arise from the *pedagogies of the home*. Unless the leader accepts this responsibility as a strategy for achieving a higher level of proficiency in the field of education, minority students will continue developing strategies of resistance. A superintendent's ability to do this successfully requires the individual to understand the *self* before he/she can understand those he/she intends to serve. As a leader, the superintendent must be willing to completely immerse the *self* in the culture of the

community/organization because it is at this intersect where an interesting phenomena occurs; culture begins to shape the leader/*self* and the leader/*self* begins to shape the culture (Pelias, 2003; Wall, 2006; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010).

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to conduct an examination of the self and to study the manner in which my life experiences shaped me into the leader and the person I have become. Knowing who I am enables me to lead in a manner that empowers the next generation of leaders. I took an academic approach and used self-examination as a lens through which my character and leadership style would be revealed within the context of leadership theories (Perez Huber, 2009; Gonzalez, 2001; Smith 1999; Guajardo, Guajardo Valadez & Oliver, 2012; and Wall, 2006). It was my intent to contribute to the body of knowledge of how relationships among adults result in opportunities for students to experience success and how my efforts to shape the academic experience of children in the Los Fresnos CISD resulted in me being shaped by the community in which I served.

It was my intention throughout this study to examine the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth that I acquired through *Pedagogies of the Home, La Universidad de la Vida*. These life experiences that are unique to those of us who were blessed with the opportunity to grow up in the borderlands of Texas (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2017; Anzaldua, 1987; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2009). I set out to examine my personal and professional life and to seek through the examination of personal experiences and the pedagogies of the home that shaped me. I examined my role as a change agent within the organization and the reciprocal exchanges that resulted from my relationship with the learning community for the past 13 years (Yosso, 2005; Perez Huber, 2009; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007; Guajardo,

Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). I was a work in progress that was accepted by a learning community and each time I gave of myself, this community gave me an experience that forged my character. I examined the insider-outsider condition (Brayboy and Deyhle, 2000) and the *mestiza-like* characteristics of my leadership style (Anzaldúa, 1987). This autoethnography was intended to reveal the degree to which I was able to achieve cultural synchronicity with the community in which I served. I anticipated that the study would also reveal the impact that my success or failure had on the organization's ability to create positive learning experiences for the children of a community serving predominantly Hispanic students that have been identified by state standards as coming from economically disadvantaged homes. To this end, I shared the *testimonio* of my personal and professional journey. I did so, knowing I would again find myself in a vulnerable state. Still, this method resonated with me as it aligned with my epistemological, ontological, axiological and methodological consciousness (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012).

### **Research Questions**

1. How did my life-experiences as an immigrant growing up in the borderlands of Texas prepare me to be an agent of change in the role of superintendent in the Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District; a school district serving predominantly Hispanic students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds?
2. How did relationships with members of the school learning community shape my character and how did my character shape the organization?
3. How could an autoethnographic study conducted by a Hispanic Superintendent in South Texas contribute to the larger body of knowledge pertaining to school leadership and its role in responding to the national dilemma of the impact of changing demographics and the sociological, educational and economic challenges facing our country?

## Design of the Study

This study was grounded in the sociocultural perspective of the effects of Hispanic leadership in a high performing school district in South Texas serving predominantly Hispanic students of low-socioeconomic backgrounds. I employed, autoethnography, an increasingly popular method of research that has grown exponentially in the past three decades as an alternative to a quantitative approach, in part, because the statistical power of “n” is not necessarily the marker of a “good rigorous” study (Brayboy, 2006; Muncey, 2005; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012; Holman, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016).

I chose an autoethnographic perspective as a vehicle to a substantive dive into the storying of Los Fresnos CISD as it provided an opportunity to present highly personalized accounts that drew upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purpose of extending the understanding of sociology (Sparkes, 2000, Boylom & Orbe, 2014). I was careful to ground the study on research topics in scholarly articles.

I encountered a wealth of autoethnographic studies written in English that captured accounts in the area of gender, sexuality, race, discrimination, sport, illness, death, pregnancy, family, getting a PhD and various work processes or experiences (Muncey, 2005). I found that personal situations of the marginalized have been at the center of most work (Wall, 2008; Boylom and Orbe, 2014). I found that this qualitative research method looks at one’s experience and how it connects culturally and sociologically to the world around us. I realized that an autoethnographic study that provides a sociocultural perspective might yield valuable information for improving teaching and learning. Research revealed that autoethnography is a personal narrative, critical autobiography, evocative narrative, reflexive ethnography autobiographical ethnography, personal sociology and auto-anthropology (Bochner, 2012;



Denzel and Lincoln, 2000; Wall, 2006; Perez Huber, 2009; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007; and Flores Delgado Bernal, 2012). The method permitted the researcher to utilize data sources such as photographs, video, written documents, self-observational data, official documents, interviews and although somewhat controversial memory (Wall, 2008).

I carried on a discussion of the theories that support autoethnography, the importance of story, leadership theories and used guiding questions as a road map for my research. Story was an important vehicle to this qualitative study as it captured the essence of self-perceptions and the character of the narrator because words, syntax and semantics are acquired through life experiences (Denzel and Lincoln, 2000). I employed the use of stories as a means of illustrating how my character was forged. I employed the relationship model theory to capture how my parents and grandparents equipped me with the character tools that have served as a moral compass (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2017) as well as the cultural wealth that I acquired through the reciprocal exchanges with members of the community (Yosso, 2005). I anchored aspects of the methodology on the funds of knowledge theory (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2009) and cultural and historical congruence that must exist if we were going to effectively serve in the field of education. I explored whether a dialogical relationship existed between my past (upbringing), my present (the organization/community) and the shaping of my character. I examined whether I transmitted the tools given to me through *pedagogies of the home* to forge the values or character of an organization and the reciprocal fashion in which the community and organization in which I served continued to shape me through *pedagogies of the community*.

Stories can serve as guideposts for our elders and policy-makers in our communities (Brayboy, 2006) and I examined the manner in which members of the governing board drew on values that were rooted in their own stories to guide their decisions. Researchers reveal that

stories have a place in our communities and our lives because they shape our character and remind us of our origins and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson and Millitelo, 2016; Romero, 2005; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009). I set out to capture whether I had achieved cultural synchronicity, maintained cultural integrity (without sacrificing my home culture) or assimilated to the culture of the organization at the expense of my home culture.

Pelias (2003) states that an autoethnography “let’s you use yourself to get to culture” and autoethnography places the *self* at the center of the study. Throughout the study, I placed myself at the center of research as a member of learning community and employed the paradigms and circular type of research that was associated with autoethnographic studies. I worked to triangulate the study by capturing history and the sociological perspective through the voices of members of the learning community. I encouraged them to tell their stories and include their experiences as students, parents and *abuelos* [grandparents] of students and to explain their perceptions of whether my leadership style had been accepted in our community and how it conformed to their expectations. This qualitative approach examined the perceptions of former Los Frenos superintendents, community member-superintendent relationship, superintendent-trustee relationships, administrator-superintendent relationships and the relationships with my siblings. I included information about my beliefs in an effort to avoid miscommunication and to enable the reader to see what I see (Wilson, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

Although I took an approach that Bochner and Ellis (1991) describe as a narrative of personal journey, I drew on Chang’s (2008) analytic approach to structuring the analysis of data and I connected the present to the past as I analyzed the relationships between others and myself.

Chang (2008) encourages us to contextualize the data in a broad form and to compare it to social science structures. I used the framework of leadership theories to derive information that could contribute to the body of knowledge of how communities, organizations and leaders have a reciprocal symbiotic relationship.

### **Significance of the Study**

Thomas Jefferson believed that an educated citizenry was critical to the well-being of a democracy. Horace Mann believed that teaching the principles of democratic citizenship was the primary function of education. They believed that the education of the masses would ensure the freedom of the people and would help unify citizens as they progressed toward a shared identity. In this context, conducting this study was important because education does not merely serve the public; education produces the public and helps forge the character of our society.

Demographers have long held that by the year 2050, our nation will be increasingly more diverse and that there will be no racial or ethnic majority among the general population of the United States with Hispanics being one of the forces driving this demographic change (U.S. Census, 2010; Murdock, 2004 and 2007). How our nation will manage the well documented disparities in health care, education and economic indicators afflicting Hispanics, the fastest growing demographic in the nation, is a dilemma facing national leaders tasked with adopting policy solutions (Murdock, 2004 and 2007).

The academic success of minority students is often impacted by the social, cultural and historical experiences (Murdock, 1997). For this reason, one cannot dismiss the idea that knowledge acquired in academia and the *pedagogies of the home* are disseminated through our cultural upbringing are a powerful combination. The acquisition of knowledge is something that we must pursue throughout our lives if we are to achieve the wisdom that allows us to reach our

full potential. This study was important because knowing my identity, reflecting on how I was shaped, and knowing what I stood for could help me be a better leader. I felt that reaching a better understanding of the self might result in improved interpersonal relationships with other stakeholders and that the process could help me empower the next generation of leaders. The study allowed me to explore what role, we as educators, play in shaping students; understanding that they will one day shape the local community, the state, and our nation. I speculated that if members of the organization failed to achieve cultural synchronicity through relationships, the impact on the academic experience would be negative and efforts to improve student performance might be futile. My initial research revealed that success is absent where a cultural mismatch exists between the school [staff] and the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Haberman, 1991). I approached this study with the understanding that interpersonal relationships necessitate achieving cultural synchronicity and even adopting the practices of Americo Paredes who situated himself fully inside the specific history of the community (Lipitz and Rodriguez, 2012). Exploring the relational accountability was important in this study because as students go through our school system, and experience identity crisis, they perceive the versions of reality that culture communicates (Anzaldúa, 1987). In this way, the importance of relationality, the shared aspect of ontology and epistemology in this study cannot be overstated (Wilson, 2008). Anzaldúa (1987) further postulates that lack of cultural congruence unfairly leaves students in a state of *nepantla* [Aztec for torn between two ways] or the mental state of perplexity with internal strife resulting in insecurities and indecisiveness.

This study explored my story as the Chief Executive Officer of the Los Fresnos School District and the relationships I was able to establish and maintain with community, staff, trustees and elected officials in the community. The effects that positive relationships between

stakeholders in the student academic experience and the positive impact that this has on the overall performance of students in the classroom have been well-documented (Murdock, 1997 Flores, 2001; Tella, 2007; Lavy and Sand 2014; and Modi, 2015). This research revealed that parents and residents of every community can be certain that the quality relationships in the educational process in the public schools in the community will be reflected in the operations of the school system and the pride that the staff display (Murdock, 1997 Flores, 2001; Tella, 2007; Lavy and Sand 2014; and Modi, 2015). I explored whether a positive working relationship combined with clearly communicated expectations from constituents to elected officials might result in the school district hiring a Chief Executive Officer/Superintendent who shared the same values as the community in which she/he serves. This approach has the potential to result in a harmonious atmosphere in a school district that allows the focus to remain on student performance and the improvement of the delivery of services.

This study is also important to the education world because it was situated in a school district that is located in the Region One Education Service area in the southernmost tip of Texas near the border with Mexico. As such, the school district serves one of the fastest growing demographics in the state; Hispanic (96%), English Language Learners (22%) and Economically Disadvantaged (78%) (Region One, 2017). The ability of educators to help all students succeed in a state that is currently educating a minority-majority necessitates a knowledge of the strange career of bilingual education and the historical context in which it has evolved (Ovando, 2003; and Blanton, 2007).

This research explored my personal journey as an English Language Learner, going through the public school system, the challenges of growing up economically disadvantaged, defying the odds and finishing school, becoming a teacher, an administrator and superintendent

of schools. This study is important because it explored the myriad of influences throughout my journey and the manner in which these influences shaped my character and my resolve. I approached this study convinced that a greater awareness of *self* is a prerequisite for removing obstacles for others and that staff members in highly effective schools must possess a clear understanding of the unique needs and characteristics of the children they serve. I was convinced that a community with effective schools is one in which the stakeholders have a clear understating of their own identity. In addition, I felt it was imperative that communities that desire effective schools, possess an understanding of the historical and socio-cultural issues that impact the climate, culture, of those who they serve.

This study was designed to reveal the manner in which I collaborated with staff to make curricular and professional development decisions. It has been argued that the selection of curriculum that leads to relevant learning and meaningful experiences for students within a learning community necessitates an understanding of the identity of the region in which schools are nestled (Blanton, 2007; De Leon, 1983; and Montejano, 2011). In the Rio Grande Valley, our identity originates in the annals of history and is archived in the memories of those who have come before us (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010) Interviewing the elders and former superintendents served as important research that payed ceremony to the past and revealed details of the organization that shaped me. This study examined the historical accounts that tell the important story of courageous and determined people who first came to the region seeking a life that required hard work and many sacrifices (Foscue, 1934). I worked to capture the voices of the people in the community who stood up to claim their identity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 2000; Holt. 2003; Bruner, 2004; Roth, 2006; Wall, 2008; and Anzaldua, 2015). The memories of the elders in our communities tell of people standing up for their rights in peaceful

demonstrations carried out by those who came to understand that legislation merely empowers the people to claim that which is rightfully theirs and who refused to be bound by the ideologies of oppression (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007).

This study was important because having a framework for the historical and social cultural issues can help educators and community members collaborate as they work to improve the delivery of services. The historical and contemporary perceptions of immigrants, language and schooling permit us to avoid the pitfalls of the past and provide quality bilingual programs. Through this understanding, critics of bilingual programs may be able to arrive at new sensitivity and the instructional program will be “better understood as incorporative and integrative aspects of the American ethnic order” (Onleck, 2009).

My story looked at how education in a democratic society continues to have a special place and purpose. It revealed how I, the son of Mexican immigrants, was able to rise through the challenges that make up the fiber of life and how I found my purpose in serving others while working diligently to help shape the world for the next generation. This autoethnographic study from the perspective of the superintendent was conducted in an effort to contribute to a body of knowledge that acknowledges that educators have the incredible ability to add value to the social and cultural capital that leads to post-secondary success. I approached the study with the understanding that increasing the social and cultural capital that results in the academic success of children in our schools, ultimately rests on our ability to establish and sustain interpersonal relationships. This includes recognizing the rich history of the community and instilling of cultural and helping those we serve recognize, understand and critique current social inequities; a notion that presumes that teachers themselves recognize social-inequities and their causes (Ladson-Billings 1995). My story, of childhood to adulthood was an important part of the study

because it is rich in *pedagogies of the home* (Delgado Bernal, 2001). The *pedagogies of the home* can lead to an in-depth understanding of culture and help educators establish the positive rapport required for productive teacher-student interactions to occur. This made a case for the selection of professional development activities that increase awareness of the resistances that may arise from *pedagogies of the home* and the *mestiza* consciousness.

A better understanding of the resistance that arises from the *pedagogies of the home* was important to the study as it may lead us to develop innovative curricular and pedagogical ways to include bilingualism, biculturalism and community commitment in the curriculum (Delgado Bernal, 2001). School administrators should encourage teachers to consider this in the development of curriculum as a means of accelerating student performance and the fulfillment of our mission. We can no longer ignore the importance of knowing the *self* as a member of a learning community and continue to expect students to reach high levels of understanding. We must operate as the “outsider within” to achieve the level of understanding that is required to be effective (Smith, 1999). Haberman (1991) rejects the notion of many of our nation’s schools where educators’ philosophy of education is: “We dispense knowledge. Bring your own container”. He offers a view that good teaching is a process of “drawing out” rather than “stuffing in” a theory that is supported by diverse philosophies including feminist theories of the teaching and learning process. Drawing on the rich cultural backgrounds and pedagogies of the home enables teachers to address the cognitive, linguistic and affective domains. Educational leaders who desire to help students achieve their full potential must concern themselves with the emotional well-being of students as a means to achieve this goal. Haberman states that we must work to help students make sense of the world, its relationships and their place in it (1991). Guzman (2012) argues that until there is a radical transformation of the U.S. educational system



which acknowledges the contributions of [minorities] much of the psychological well-being of [minorities] will revert to the home environment. Unless we accept this responsibility as a strategy for achieving a higher level of proficiency in the field of education, minority students will continue developing strategies of resistance.

### **Limitations of the Study**

It is important to discuss the limitations of the study. The researcher was at the center of the study and this may have led to researcher and reader bias. The narrator was in a position of authority within the organization and as such might come across as narcissistic. My truth was not necessarily the actual truth elements of others. I was the storyteller and as such, I placed myself in a position of vulnerability to the interpretations of my own experience, the manner in which my conclusions might be perceived in the community of Los Fresnos, as well as the academic community. Wilson (2008) tells us that autoethnography loses its sociological promise when it devolves into self-absorption. A conscious desire to preserve the integrity of the process may have limited the researcher's ability to go where the study was taking him. The study was confined to a single school district and did not allow for the generalization to the broader population. The findings were the insights developed from the analysis of the self, and self-perceptions provided by the researcher. The reader may perceive the outcome as slanted, misleading, or self-serving.

### **Summary**

A Hispanic superintendent of schools conducted an autoethnographic study; an emigrant himself, who grew up in the borderland of Texas and successfully served in a community serving a population of students that is composed of one of the fastest growing demographics in the

Texas. It examined the phenomena that occurred over more than a decade in the symbiotic relationship between the organization that shaped the leader as the leader worked to shape an organization.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The successful attainment of a school district's mission relies heavily on the ability of the superintendent as a leader of the organization, to establish and maintain interpersonal working relationships with members of the entire learning community. A superintendent's ability to do this successfully requires the individual to understand the *self* before the individual can understand those he/she intends to serve. One must also be willing to completely immerse the *self* in the culture of the community/organization because it is at this intersection where an interesting phenomena occurs; culture begins to shape the leader/*self* and the leader/*self* begins to shape the culture (Pelias, 2003; Wall, 2006; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; Hughes, Holman, Adams, & Ellis. 2013; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016).

Achieving the required level of cultural congruence or synchronicity may require the type of self-assessment and evaluation that can be reached through an autoethnographic approach (Wall, 2006; Bochner & Ellis, 1991 and 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2006; Ellis, 1991; and Hughes, Pennington and Makris, 2012). The use of personal narrative as employed in autoethnography may serve a vehicle through which the narrator can exercise the reflexivity necessary to understand the *self* while paying ceremony to the past, celebrating the present, and even imparting cultural healing (Wall, 2006, Wilson, 2008 and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). Through the use of personal narrative, autoethnography validates the voice and "lived experiences" of the

individual at the center of the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, Mercado-Garza, 2005, Guajardo and Guajardo, 2010). It is an important process that the reflective academic leader may find both challenging and rewarding.

Pelias (2003, p.371) warns that if we are not careful, “academics like tourists, never see the world beyond its surface level. I choose to see the world beyond the surface and to study the *self* as a means to understand culture of the community in which I serve, how it has shaped me as a person and how, as a leader, I have been able to influence the culture of an organization.

The review of literature was approached with a desire to organize a framework around which I conducted an autoethnography. The following topics were addressed throughout the review of literature: history and context of south Texas schools, the role of the leader in an organization, the leader-follower relationship, responsibilities of the superintendent as chief executive officer, and current research trends in autoethnography as a praxis for research.

### **Autoethnography as a Praxis for Research**

Although most social scientists were trained to guard against subjectivity and to separate *self* from research activities, it is an impossible task because scholarship is an extension of researcher’s lives and is inextricably connected to self-personal interest, experience and familiarity (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Autoethnography emerged as a legitimate focus of study that allows for the production of new knowledge, removed the risks inherent in the representation of others and employed a method of self-observation inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; and Ellis, 1991). In an autoethnography, a uniquely situated researcher resides within a studied set of circumstances and uses voice to ensure that the outcome is not simply a summary and interpretation of the works of others (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Ellis, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; and Hughes, Pennington and Makris, 2012). Researchers suggests

that the freedom of a uniquely situated individual to reflexively use his/her experiences as a means to look more deeply at *self-other* interactions results in the use of introspection as a data source. This coupled with accepted practices in the field of research yielded accurate results while challenging traditional research conventions that merely create the illusion that the knowledge produced is more legitimate (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Wall, 2006; Holt, 2003; Bochner & Ellis, 1991 and 2000). It is well documented that intense introspection with a sustained focus and total concentration on the question coupled with a deep exploration of the researchers unique understanding of the topic will yield new knowledge (Sparkes, 2000; Wall, 2006; Bochner & Ellis, 1991 and 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2006; Ellis, 1991; and Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

Autoethnography is a qualitative method that sets the researcher at the center of the investigation as a “subject” (the researcher that performs the investigation) and an “object” (a participant that is investigated) and gives voice to personal experience and the use of self-observation in which the data provides the researcher a window through which the external world is understood (Sparkes, 2000; Roth, 2006; Wall, 2006 and 2008 Chang, 2007; Denzin, 2006; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; and Hughes, Pennington and Makris, 2012).

Autoethnography sets out to acknowledge the inextricable relationship between the personal and the cultural and to make room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression through a systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation about *self* and social phenomena involving *self* (Pelias, 2003; Wall, 2006; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). It consists of highly personalized accounts that draw on the experiences of the author/researcher and for this reason, it was initially viewed with a high degree of criticism by the scientific community (Bochner & Ellis, 2000; Moustaka, 1990; Sparks, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994;

Bochner, 2012; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012; Holman, Adams, & Ellis. 2013; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016; Hughes & Pennington, 2017).

During the time, that autoethnography was in its infancy, traditional scientific approaches required researchers to minimize the *self*; viewing *self* as a contaminant. Researcher shows that the situatedness of the knower, the context of discovery, and the relation of the knower to the subjects of his/her inquiry were seen as demons at the door of positivist science; ways of inquiry that connect with real people, their lives, and their issues were seen as soft and fluffy and, although nice, not valuable in the scientific community (Bochner, 2001; Richardson, 1990; Wall, 2006). Critics of scientific traditions however, argued for the abandonment of rationality, objectivity, and truth to move social science beyond a focus on method, toward the power of social research to have a moral effect (Richardson, 1990; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Bochner, 2001; Holt, 2003; Bruner, 2004; Wall, 2006).

Finding value in the personalized form of research and seeing the potential for its contribution to the world of science, social scientists stood up to poststructuralists and postmodernists who had began waging an unrelenting attack on postpositivists' presumptions about authority of a humanly constructed text, and casting serious doubt on the sanctified scientific doctrine of truth through method (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Holt, 2003; Bruner, 2004; Wall, 2008; Bochner & Ellis, 2012; Bochner, 2012 and Adams & Ellis, 2016). Holt (2003) argued that ultimately, the scientific method itself turned out to be words "neither clear nor useful" and that what was needed instead was an approach to social science "that emphasizes the utility of narratives and vocabularies rather than the objectivity of laws and theories". Researchers sustained that the use of narratives that referenced self-experiences as a data source was merely a postmodern philosophy that questioned the dominance of traditional science and

that this form of research provided legitimate ways of acquiring knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 2000; Holt, 2003; Bruner, 2004; Roth, 2006; Wall, 2008). Supporters of autoethnography as a legitimate form of research defended the personal narrative as a viable option to orthodox science by documenting the functions of stories and storytelling as a platform for describing and managing identity; bringing meaning to the lived experience; sharing the knowledge gained with others; and the reflexive dimensions of the relationship between storytellers and story listeners (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 2000; Bruner, 2004; Roth, 2006; Wall, 2008; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2009; Anzaldúa, 2015; and Adams & Ellis, 2016).

“Just as it is worthwhile examining in minute detail how physics or history go about their world making, might we not be well advised to explore in equal detail what we do when we construct ourselves autobiographically? Even if the exercise should produce some obdurate dilemmas, it might nonetheless cast some light on what we might mean by such expressions as "a life"...“a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold: Freud's *psychic reality*” (Bruner, 2004 p.692 and 708).

The “narrative turn” pointed inquiry towards “acts of meaning” challenging rational and mechanistic assumptions of social science orthodoxy in favor of understanding persons as self-interpreting beings that are capable of telling about the social world and using self-analysis as a means of knowing (Bochner, 2012). Researchers have since then supported the use of personal narrative and continue to sustain that it is precisely at the crossroads of the personal and the group member experience where the real knowledge exists (Stivers, 1993; Laslett, 1999; Bochner & Ellis 2000; Wall, 2006, Wilson, 2008; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2009; Hughes,

Pennington & Makris, 2012; and Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Wall, (2008) speaking from her own experience, found autoethnography to be a rigorous challenge undertaking revealing that this form of scholarship highlights issues of representation, “objectivity,” data quality, legitimacy, and ethics and that the intimate and personal nature of autoethnography can, in fact, make it one of the most challenging qualitative approaches to attempt. Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on *auto-* (self), - *ethno* (the socio-cultural connection), and - *graphy* (the application of the research process). Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang, (2010) reveal that the focus on self does not study “self” in a vacuum since there is a multiplicity of others that exist where the “self” inhabits; therefore collecting data about “self” ultimately converges with the exploration of how the context surrounding “self” has influenced and shaped the make-up of “self” and how the “self” has responded to, or resisted forces innate to the context.

The movement toward personalized research reflects calls to place greater emphasis on the ways in which the ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched and explain that narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives (Holt, 2003; Richardson, 1990; Wall, 2006, Wilson, 2008; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2009). Hughes, Pennington and Makris (2012) postulate that autoethnography has the potential to reveal epistemological and methodological roots that both challenge and support the versatility and utility of the method thus providing a transparency that is absent in conventional methods of research. The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making of room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned (Wall, 2006, Wilson,



2008; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2009; ; Holman, Adams, & Ellis. 2013; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016).

### **History and Context of South Texas Schools**

The six flags flown over Texas throughout its rich history shaped social classes and education through decrees, mandates and legislation. A top-down approach heavy on mandates and light on resources, has been the mode of operation throughout the evolution of the Texas public school system. It is in these mandates that an explicit record of the sociological history with explicit cultural dimensions and racial situations were revealed. Historians and scholars explored the political, economic, and cultural, dimensions of race situations and captured how the successions of class societies and the uneven nature of this transformation revealed variations in race relations (De Leon, 1983; Guajardo and Guajardo, 2009; Montejano, 2011; and Orozco, 2012; Hughes & Pennington, 2017). Their sociological inextricably intertwined interpretive history of the state and the evolution of education told a story of race, labor, politics, and a cultural segregation that was mapped in a geography of race and class. Research revealed that the wounds left by an attempt in Texas to address the “Mexican Problem” summoned the courage and resolve of a resilient culture that participated in a period of “inclusion” and was striving to attain cultural healing (De Leon, 1983; Yosso, 2005; Guajardo and Guajardo, 2009; Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012). For the purpose of this autoethnography and to contribute to the body of knowledge in the process, a review of literature pertaining to the history of the advent and evolution of education in Texas with an emphasis on bilingualism and binationalism in South Texas schools was necessary.

The first notion of education in Texas was traced by historians to the seventeenth century in San Francisco de los Tejas (present day Houston County) after the arrival of Spanish

conquistadors and priests who adopted the *encomiendas* system of building schools next to missions where Jesuit and Franciscan priests worked towards controlling the Indians through their indoctrination into the Christian faith (Holleman, 1973, Blanton, 2007; Montejano, 2011; and Orozco, 2012; Hughes, Pennington & Makris, 2012 and Jones, Adams, & Eliss, 2012).

Depictions of a rudimentary structure of education in Texas involved a top-down leadership approach and a compliant following of members of the group.

*The crown decreed that all schools throughout the whole of the empire completely abolish any official role for native languages. In some places this royal decree was silently, ignored, although missions in Texas seem to have followed royal directives. The Franciscan fathers in San Antonio wrote in the 1790s to the viceroy in support of this abandonment saying that the Hispanicization of the indigenous tribes over several decades had succeeded so completely that there were hardly any non-Christianized indigenous people within a 150-mile radius of San Antonio (Blanton, 2007 p. 12).*

A top-down approach rationalized by divine intentions relegated natives to villages where they were “given” land and were to remain under the control of a “protector” who generously provided a school house in which the children could be taught reading, writing, and the Christian doctrines. (Holleman, 1973 p.4). Attempts to teach Christianity, the Spanish language and practical arts in mission schools achieved few permanent results for many reasons, including the difficulty in getting supplies, illness, and indifference or hostility of some of the Indians (Holleman, 1973; Blanton, 2007; Montejano, 2011). A non-mission school was in operation at San Fernando de Bexar (San Antonio) as early as the 1740s. It, as well as all other schools started during the period, proved transitory in which settlements and military posts with large

enough populations were called upon to provide salaries for teachers did not succeed. The military nature of the Texas colony, the frontier conditions, the sparseness of the population, the poverty of the people and the lack of funding by the central government resulted in failed attempts at a diffusion of knowledge and the Hispanicization of the natives during the Spanish period (Blanton, 2007).

After Mexico declared its independence from Spain in the early 1800s, the government introduced the Lancastrian system of education in which teachers taught as many as 150 students; still none of these schools were made available in Texas (Holleman, 1973; Blanton, 2007). The Republic of Mexico ratified the Federal Constitution of 1824, which called for the establishment of primary schools where children would be taught reading, writing, counting, the catechism of the state religion, as well as political rights and obligations followed by secondary schools where arts and sciences were taught (Holleman, 1973; Blanton, 2007; De Leon, 1983; Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012). Although the number of Anglo immigrants in Mexican ruled Texas was increasing, the Mexican government remained silent on the issue of language of instruction in schools. Title VI of the 1827 Constitution of the State of Coahuila and Texas only vaguely mandated the method of teaching be uniform throughout the state and that a general plan of public education regulated by means of statutes and laws was of the utmost importance (Holleman, 1973; Blanton, 2007; and De Leon, 1983). Under the guise of a desire for educational bilingualism that would help assimilate their children into Mexican life, Anglo Texans such as Stephen F. Austin (who was serving in the Coahuila State Legislature), proposed a school called *Institute of Modern Languages*. These plans never materialized as the responsibility for creating a system for the diffusion of knowledge was instead shifted to

*ayuntamientos* (committees) that were never provided the much needed resources (Blanton, 2007; De Leon, 1983).

The period between 1830 and 1835 was characterized as a period of civil unrest that included among a handful of concerns, the issue of funding for adequate education. Under increased pressure from the settlers of the region, the Mexican State of Coahuila-Texas passed the decree of April 1833 formulating a system for the establishment of primary schools. These primary schools were to be established in every city within six months and would be funded by an endowment created by the leasing of land. Half of the revenue of municipal funds (up to two-thousand dollars) was to be set aside for education and called for a *junta* which exercised authority compatible to the present day board of trustees to oversee the operations (Holleman, 1973; Blanton, 2007; and De Leon, 1983). Although it appeared that state government found a solution where the federal government had failed miserably, an effective system failed to materialize (Holleman, 1973 p.12). Anglos who settled in Mexican Texas resolved to act on their true intentions; none more clearly articulated than those expressed by Stephen F. Austin several times before the war for independence:

*“My object, the sole and only desire of my ambitions, since I first saw Texas, was to redeem it from the wilderness-to settle it with an intelligent, honorable and enterprising people (De Leon, 1983 p.3).*

On March 2, 1836, Texas declared its independence from the Republic of Mexico citing the neglect of public education as a chief grievance (Holleman, 1973; De Leon, 1983). Since then, the state’s history captured a succession of class societies with distinct characteristics that have been traced by social historians over four major periods. The period between 1836 and

1848 was a period of incorporation that was dominated by the *Spanish-Mexican Hacienda Society* in which the new Republic focused on domestic issues, while still, largely neglecting education (Montejano, 2011 & Blanton, 2007 ). During this period, authorities of the “new order” sought to establish a peace structure in which the accommodations that were agreed to between the leaders of the victors and the leaders of the defeated led to the pursuit of commercial goals with a focus on land markets. The social structure that was shaped by the events of the epoch consisted of Mexican elite (landowners) and an Anglo mercantile clique that held a higher place than the independent but impoverished Mexican *Rancheros* whose social position remained a step above those of the indebted working class of Mexican *Peones* (De Leon, 1983; Montejano, 2011). Several factors, including the outcome of the Mexican War, marked the end of the *Spanish-Mexican Hacienda Society* and gave way to the reconstruction of social classes in an *Anglo-Mexican Ranch Society* in which the closing of the frontier, refrigerated railcars and crop growing innovations increased land values and made farming profitable (Montejano, 2011). The ensuing decade was defined by an agricultural revolution would not be kind to the Mexican-Tejanos of the region and condemned them to the lowest levels of the revised social structure through imposed identity and land grab tactics in which second generation Anglo elites asserted themselves as members of the higher social structure and robbed many impoverished landowners of their properties; provoking a violent reaction by the Texas Mexicans that would then be suppressed by the Texas Rangers (Holleman, 1973; Blanton 2007 & Montejano, 2011).

The decades that followed were beleaguered with bitter conflicts waged on political arenas for the control of county governments by factions that were distinctly characterized by race and the interest of the groups they represented and little was being done to address the issue of education and it was not until the administration of Mariabeu Lamar, President of the

Republic of Texas that Congress established a plan for a school system ranging from primary to university level and delegated control to the counties in 1840 by also creating the Board of School Commissioners who had the authority of dividing counties into School Districts (Holleman, 1973). It was then, that Texas would make the commitment that would have a profound impact on education. The State of Texas, in the Constitution of 1845 further declared its responsibility for free public schools:

A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the rights and liberties of the people, it shall be the duty of the legislature of this State to make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of public schools.

The legislature shall, as early as practicable, establish free schools throughout the State, and shall furnish means for their support by taxation on property: and it shall be the duty of the legislature to set apart not less than one-tenth of the annual revenue of the State, derivable from taxation as a perpetual fund, which fund shall be appropriated to the support of free public schools and no law shall ever be made diverting said fund to another use... (Holleman, 1973 p.20).

The efforts of the Republic to finally provide a blueprint for education, however, did not result in the creation of many permanent public schools and it is well documented that fifteen years after being liberated from Mexican rule, only forty one Texas counties had even completed the preliminary land survey which was a prerequisite to receive public education funds thus prompting the legislature to make it mandatory in 1854 (Holleman, 1973; Blanton, 2007 p. 17-18). Ironically, education was still viewed as a home function or one of private and religious involvement – not a proper concern of state and local government (Blanton, 2007).

Over the next several years, the shape of education would be forged in the legislature and although the Texas Constitution saw several iterations, the states responsibility for funding the general diffusion of knowledge remained.

During the period of 1850 -1915, Mexican Americans remained one of the most significant non-English speaking groups in Texas who represented either a dominant majority or a significant minority in a number of counties in South Texas from the U.S.-Mexico border to San Antonio (De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001 and Montejano, 2011). The migration of farm settlers and the cultural incongruence that accompanied it, was experienced by a majority of Mexican American residents of the borderland of the Rio Grande or the *Magic Valley*; a hotbed for land developers who touted the fertility of the soil and further sealed the place of people who made up the labor force to the lower rungs of the social structure through the marketing the abundance of cheap wage labor and describing the *rancheros* of the area as a “hand to mouth type of people that were slightly better than the negro” (Blanton, 2007; De Leon, 1983; Montejano, 2011). Education for these hard working people was less of a priority and the children of farm laborers were often released early to help in the fields (Blanton 2007).

Historians assert that the impoverished public education in this sparsely populated part of the state were secondary to the well-established, high quality, bilingual and binational parochial schools (De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001; Blanton, 2007 & Holleman, 1973).

There were several parochial schools (two for boys and one for girls) of long standing success in the city of Brownsville and the surrounding countryside in Cameron County. They offered a truly bilingual/binational education and a significant portion of the student body came from Matamoros, the corresponding city across the Rio Grande

from Mexico. In Laredo, the Holding Institute, a Methodist school consistently enrolling nearly 200 students, began advertising in the 1880s its openness to different methods of teaching English to Spanish speakers (Blanton, 2007, p. 24-25).

In nearby Hidalgo County, County Judge J. M. de la Vina explained in his 1897-98 report:

*Although schools in the county had not been patronized for several years, they were experiencing a turnaround in the appeal of the public schools: “We are now gradually overcoming this prejudice by employing teachers who are thoroughly familiar with the people and I impress it upon the teachers that not only the children but the parents need to be instructed – if not in the language-in the laws of the country as far as possible and the more intelligent Mexicans are realizing the necessity of English education for the rising generation (Blanton 2007 p.27).*

The agricultural revolution eventually ushered in the *Segregated Farm Society* that took a stronghold between 1920 and 1930 (Montejano, 2011). The paternalistic master-servant relationship became irrelevant due to the bounty of seasonal labor that was mediated through formal wage contracts. Farmers and landowners experimented with labor control tactics that included the use of non-market criteria and in some cases consisted of coercion and violence. The Jim Crow policies further trapped the working class and came to define Mexicans as “inferior” people. It was during the period of 1903 and 1920 that school boards organized in the Rio Grande Valley communities as county school districts were being created by the Texas Legislature (De Leon, 1983 and San Miguel, 2001). By the 1920s ‘Americanization’, fueled by the worldly views that resulted from World War I and the Mexican Revolution, in Texas focused squarely on “The Mexican Problem” through the adoption of subtractive English Only laws



(Blanton, 2007). The fervor of the *English Only* legislation of 1923, supported by the Texas State Teacher Association, was best illustrated by the State's Superintendent of Instruction, Annie Webb Blanton's conversation with a fictional an opponent:

*“If you desire to be one with us, stay and we welcome you; but if you wish to preserve in our state, the language and the customs of another land, you have no right to do this which our state will grant you.” Then, scolding her fictional and silent adversary, that unless the adversary's children spoke only English, “you must go back to the country which you prize so highly and rear your children there” (San Miguel, 2001; and Blanton, 2007 p. 67).*

Throughout South Texas, Anglos, mostly farmers, established school systems that served as a vehicle through which the economic, political and social status quo could be perpetuated; enabling them to retain power (De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001; Montejano, 2011; and Orozco, 2012). Discriminatory practices supported by English Only laws and a desire to Americanize children of Mexican descent continued for several decades. Spanish speaking immigrants and even Texas born English speaking students with Hispanic surnames were segregated into the “Mexican Schools” that were common throughout the South Texas borderland. Blanton (2007 p.69) shares quotes that illustrate the culture of discrimination and pre-existing racial ideology towards Tejanos and Mexican immigrants in South Texas:

*“We provide schools which are separate for several reasons: difference in language, most of the Mexicans here are of the pelado type; difference of color and race; difference of locality in which one resides. We admit some Mexicans to*

*American schools in the higher grades, and some others who live near the schools and are of the better type”.*

- Prominent businessman in a small South Texas town

*“When you educate a Mexican, he is pretty close to the white man. The Mexican has not the bodily odor and is not so bad as the Negro, so people are less favorable to the education of the Mexican than the Negroes because education removes the differences...The inferiority of the Negroes is biological; that of the Mexicans not so much if any”.* - An Anglo resident

*“Certainly, Americanization and Citizenship cannot be separated- therefore it would follow that Americanization and citizenship are working towards the same end.”* -A Harlingen Principal of a Mexican School in the 1930s

This type of racial discrimination was further perpetuated by the IQ tests that were common practice in several states and used to justify racial and ethnic discriminations (De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001 and Chavez-Garcia, 2007).

Throughout the next several sessions, the legislature took measures to improve of education but did not take action to improve conditions for students who were clearly being discriminated. In 1932, during the 42<sup>nd</sup> Legislature a joint committee on Organization and Economy was appointed and Gillfenhagen and Associates, specialists in public administration and financed, were appointed to serve as technical staff (Evans, 1955). A valuable outcome of the review that was concluded in 1932 was information concerning enrollment, class size, ratio of full-time students to full-time instructors and instructional organization – many metrics that are still used to evaluate school efficiency today. The Gilmer Aiken Act of 1949, further

strengthened the state's financial support for public education by establishing a pay scale for teacher, defined special assignment positions (i.e. librarians, nurses and superintendents), charged county boards with setting up the most economical means of transportation, set the length of the school year to nine months and created the Texas Education Agency to serve in a central governance and compliance role that would result in equalization of efforts throughout the state. Still, in spite of the efforts in the legislature to equalize the quality of public education across the state, little was being done to address the racial marginalization of and the segregation of minority students; including Hispanic, African American and German American students (De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001; Evans, 1955).

Throughout the 1960s, teachers and administrators continued to punish students for speaking Spanish on the school grounds demeaning the language and its speaker and shaming students into speaking English only (San Miguel, 2001; Blanton, 2007; Montejano, 2011; and Orozco, 2012). In 1972, a group of seventh grade Mexican American assigned to relate their own grade school experiences with *English Only* expressed the following:

*“In the first through fourth grade, if the teacher caught us talking Spanish we would have to stand in the ‘black square’ for an hour [while other classmates] had to pay fines of a penny to a nickel, staying after school for detention, or getting extra homework”* (Blanton, 2007 p. 128).

The impact of World War II and the advances of the Industrial Revolution led to the emergence of urban-mercantile and consumer interests as a social political force in Texas. The once dominant class structure of growers to farm laborers gave way to an Era of Merchant to Urban Consumers. Historians and researchers postulate that the Mexican American community

had waited patiently hoping to work within the system to effect change grew bitter and a cultural and political shift began taking place in the late 1960s (Holleman, 1973; De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001; Guajardo and Guajardo 2004; Blanton, 2007; & Orozco, 2012). Tejanos were becoming more adamant about the role Spanish should play in public schools and political activists rose up with the formation and involvement of organizations such as Political Association of Spanish Speaking Organizations (PASSO), the American G. I Forum the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). Mexican American Community and the number of Mexican American children transitioning from grammar school to high school increased significantly Guajardo and Guajardo 2004). Backed by MAYO, students represented the vanguard of the Chicano movement giving as an example of the student led protests in the 1960s at several South Texas public high schools demanding the immediate institution of bilingual-bicultural education (De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001; Guajardo and Guajardo, 2007; Montejano, 2011 & Orozco, 2012). These boycotts, referred to as “blow-outs” by high school students, occurred at public schools of Edcouch Elsa in 1968, and Kingsville and Crystal City in 1969 would result in the demonstration of power by the children of a previously marginalized group against an elite structure rooted in the segregationist culture of Jim Crow. These demonstrations became a turning point in what researchers refer to as the *self-definition* of entire communities willing to take on what *Brown* attempted to accomplish legally but could not achieve politically or socially (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2005; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, and Militello, 2016; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004). These grass roots efforts continued to effect change in the political landscape. Leaders that were culturally congruent with the electorate began reaching positions of public service at every level and Mexican Americans won their own protracted struggle in a series of favorable

verdicts from Texas courts. These verdicts weakened racial separation by prohibiting school boards from designating specific buildings in a school campus for Mexican children and a Supreme Court ruling stating that Mexican Americans were a class to whom Jim Crow laws could not be applied (Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012; and Alexander & Alexander, 2012).

The Mexican-American Civil Rights activism of the 1960s and 70s accelerated the collapse of the Jim Crow laws and forged a path for the present day *Pluralistic Urban Society*, a form of integration in which Texas Mexicans have been legitimized and afforded a measure of influence.

### **The Role of the Leader in an Organization and the Leader-Follower Relationship**

Leadership effectiveness is critically contingent on, and often defined in terms of, a leader's ability to motivate followers towards a collective goal, mission or vision (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer & Hogg, 2004). A leader's understanding of their own identity; how education, culture, upbringing, values and morals helped shape the *self* (Leary, & Tangney, 2002; Anzaldua, 2015; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017) and how the leader functions as a contributing member of the organization (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) is critically important. It is equally important to comprehend the manner in which the follower's self-conceptions, their evaluation of the collective *self*, and their level of inclusiveness (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer & Hogg, 2004) interact with their perception of the leader (Romero, 2004; Drazenovich & Skovira, 2010; Hofstede, 2000) and combine to define a leader's effectiveness. Arriving at a unified theory of leadership effectiveness, necessitates an examination of the building blocks of wide-ranging leadership effectiveness theories. Several theories exist that can be employed to assess and comprehend the symbiotic relationship that exists between the perceived effectiveness of leadership and the acceptance by the member group; the degree to which that acceptance empowers

the leader and the impact of culture, biculturalism, and ethnicity on leadership development (Hofstede, 1993, 2000 & 2006; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; Drazenovich & Skovira, 2010; Romero, 2004). Hofstede (1993) proposes that managers derive their authority from the people managed: culturally, they are the followers of the people they lead, and as such, their effectiveness is to some degree dependent on the members of the organization/group.

Gerstner & Day (1994) state that subordinates' perceptions of the leader can have a substantial impact on the outcomes of the leadership process. Hofstede, (2006) postulates that understanding the cultural value dimensions is important because differences can interfere with the successful completion of projects in today's multicultural [organizations]. In order to achieve goals and avoid cultural misunderstandings, leaders should be culturally sensitive and promote creativity and motivation through flexible leadership (Hofstede, 2000). Gerstner & Day (1994) reveal that the orientation of cultural values shared by members of an organization will result in variations when defining the leadership profile. Hofstede (2000) further explains that differences between cultures can be meaningfully measured and ordered along a five dimension cultural paradigm that consists of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity and long-term versus short-term orientation.

Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, (1992) offer Relational Demography theory as a means of exploring the effect that a leader's ethnicity may have on the follower perceptions of leader behaviors. According to the research, people compare their demographic features to other people in their social groups to judge whether the group's demographic features are similar to their own (Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly, 1992). Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly (1992) explain that cultural affiliation often results in the designation of dominant-minority status across different social identities. Relational Demography Theory suggests that the individual's attachment to the organization is lower when

there is a significant difference in race between an individual and other members in a work group (Tsui, 1992). Variations in sociocultural contexts and the lived experiences of both leaders and their members may well influence the nature of the leader-member exchange (Chin, 2013). People define themselves not only in terms of idiosyncratic individualizing attributes and interpersonal relationships but also in terms of the collective attributes of the group to which they belong (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). The manner in which individuals perceive themselves, their self-concept or “identity” has a profound effect on the way individuals feel, think, behave and the goals that they set (Leary & Tangney, 2012; Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer & Hogg, 2004). Lived experiences associated with acculturation, discrimination, racism, and biculturalism may well shape the values leaders bring and the goals they pursue (Chin, 2013). Drazenovich & Skovira (2010) postulate that in social-cultural groups, members act, make decisions, and have policies and rules for acting and deciding, to avoid the undesirable and undesired results of uncertain situations. Research suggests that uncertainty avoidance in socio-cultural environments had a significant positive correlation with increased leader control, and power distance had a significant negative correlation with leader delegation, approachability, communication, and team building (Drazenovich & Skovira, 2010).

Leadership Categorization and Relational Demography Theory suggest that ethnicity has a major impact on how people work together and perceive leaders (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Lord’s Categorization theory (1982) states that behavior predictions can be made from a confined set of likely behaviors through categorization of an individual; which may often lead to stereotypical misconceptions. Romero (2004), proposed as an example that the Hispanic culture has a general predictable effect on leader behaviors such that leaders will tend to be directive and autocratic. This is important when we consider that followers compare potential leaders to their

leadership prototype when making a leadership assessment (Romero, 2005). The more attributes the leader has that are consistent with the follower's leader prototype, the higher the perception that the person is a leader (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). The higher satisfaction rates of followers who perceive their leader's behavior to be culturally congruent and aligned to their prototype of a leader is well documented (Hogg, 2001; Ayman & Cremer, 1991; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). Eagly & Chin (2010) suggest that current social and ecological contexts define ethnic roles and behaviors in ways that may constrain and bias perceptions of leadership effectiveness among and diverse leaders of color.

Romero (2005) explains that to the effect that culture has on leadership prototype, it also has an effect on leadership style development in leaders. Leadership Categorization theory and leadership prototypes (Lord, Foti, & Phillips 1982; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984) may explain the possible differences between follower perceptions of Hispanic and Euro-American leaders. Eric Romero's study (2005) on the effect of Hispanic Ethnicity on the Leadership Process revealed that Hispanic leaders were perceived as equivalent in terms of leadership to Euro-American leaders despite a significant difference in ethnic identity scores between Hispanic and Euro-American students. Romero reveals however, that the mean perceived effectiveness ratings for leaders whose leadership style matches their follower's leadership prototype were significantly higher than those in the mismatch condition (2005). Social identities generally influence our behaviors in social and interpersonal domains and are likely to influence leader identity and behaviors (Chin, 2013). Leadership practices that are acceptable in one culture may be counterproductive in another culture (Romero, 2005).

Cultural factors, such as level of economic development, influence of the military, and contact with other cultures, influence leaders in forming their leadership styles (Romero, 2004).



Cultural variation in leadership is also shown in a comprehensive series of cross-cultural studies known as the GLOBE studies (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), which examine the leadership styles and national cultures of 62 countries via a survey of 17,000 middle managers from 951 organizations in the food processing, finance, and telecommunications industries. The GLOBE studies identified nine *universal* cultural orientation value dimensions (COV) that were empirically validated. Research also refers to the GLOBE studies as a mechanism that can be used to gauge leader for distinguishing effective ineffective leaders (Lord and Maher, 1993; Hofstede, 2006). This study draws on the Implicit Leadership Theory and posits that beliefs about leadership are viewed as related to cultural values and beliefs and the cultural background or social context of the perceiver (Hofstede, 2006).

Similar building blocks can be found in the Social Identity Model of Leadership (SIMOL) as proposed by Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) which illustrates the leadership processes in the context of a shared group membership where leaders, as group members ask followers, as group members, to exert themselves on behalf of the collective. Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins (2005) refer to this model as one in which leadership is seen as a vehicle to social identity-based collective agency in which leaders and followers partners. This mutual identity-based model relationship both enables and constrains the practice of leadership and provides the basis for overcoming the traditional opposition between the leader and the led (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005: and Anzaldua, 2015). This model considers leaders and followers as interdependent; actively relying on each other to create the conditions under which mutual influence is possible (Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; and Anzaldua, 2015). In proposing this model, the researchers drew on compatible social-cognitive, motivational, social-interactive, and societal interactive theories to explicate the relationship of self-conception and group and

intergroup phenomena and kept, as a cornerstone, the assumption that group membership attributes to self-definition (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Through this model, Knippenberg & Hogg (2003) reveal that in salient groups with which group members identify, leadership effectiveness rests on the extent to which the leader is prototypical (representative of the group's identity) and engages in group-oriented behavior in an effort to find acceptance in the community. Sindic (2011) postulates that the conventional definition of citizenship seeks to achieve equal membership of a political community from which enforceable rights and obligations, benefits and resources, participatory practices and a sense of identity flow. Such definitions, then, take identity as a necessary correlate of (psychological) citizenship (Sindic, 2011). Ng, Rochelle, Shardlow & Ng, (2014) draw on the concept of *psychological citizenship* in the study of Chinese immigrants in Britain and offer a transnational bicultural model of self. The study presents "psychological citizenship" in contradistinction with the conventional forms of citizenship while still emphasizing a sense of community, belongingness and membership. This framework allows us to draw parallels in the world of leadership. It implies that leaders in a member organization, may begin as an "immigrants" with a cultural mismatch but may accumulate cultural capital in an effort to reach the desired cultural self and achieve the cultural congruence with the member group (Ng, Rochelle, Shardlow & Ng, 2014). This may be accomplished through blended biculturalism; the construction or reconstruction of self as being a blended or combined product of host and heritage cultures or through alternating biculturalism; also known as bicultural efficacy or competence which refers to immigrants' beliefs in their ability to adjust behavior in accordance with the particular cultural norms of the social context and to maintain a positive relationship with both their heritage and host cultures and to be free to move between them without feeling conflict (Ng, Rochelle, Shardlow & Ng, 2014). It is worth

noting that Laframboise, Coleman & Gerton (1993) this process of achieving psychological citizenship does not occur in a linear form in which the individual must lose the native culture and proposes instead acculturation, assimilation, alternation and fusion models. Social Identity Model of Leadership further suggests that group memberships shape attitudes, feelings, and behavior and as a result self-conception, in terms of group membership, involves a psychological “merging” of self and group until all aspects of self are governed by the *ingroup prototype* (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). These studies suggest a view of leadership as a shared process embedded in social systems and organizational cultures (Yukl, 1989; Hackman & Wageman, 2007) and the importance of social identities and lived experiences associated with variables of race, ethnicity, gender, and minority status in our conceptualizations of leadership.

The United States is experiencing a demographic shift. Although white men still predominate as leaders, the increasing representation of women and of racial and ethnic minorities is unmistakable and although [these groups] have remained underrepresented in these and other leadership roles, they occupy considerably more of these leadership roles than in any earlier historical period (Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2006; Eagly & Chin, 2010). Still, racial/ethnic minority groups in the US share a common experience of minority status in the US in the ranks of leadership where among chief executives of all U.S. organizations in the public and private sectors, 27.9% are women, 3.6% are African American 5.6%, are Asian, and 9.7% are Hispanic (Chin, 2013; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). As societies and organizations become increasingly diverse in the US and globally, it becomes important to understand how the social identities of our leaders interact to influence the exercise of leadership (Chin 2013).

## Summary

Leadership has evolved from an emphasis on task orientation, obedience to orders, and top-down management control to current trends in leadership that acknowledge the need to build a more relationship oriented workplace that empowers followers in the member group, builds capacity, and fosters teamwork. The interpersonal working relationships that the leader establishes and maintains with members of subgroups of the organization and the acceptance of the leader by the member group contributes greatly to leadership effectiveness. This is especially true in public schools that have been shaped through legislation and mandates where an explicit record of the sociological history with explicit cultural dimensions and racial situations are revealed. School leaders must work with a moral imperative to gain awareness of the revelations provided by historians and scholars of the political, economic, and cultural, dimensions of race situations, the successions of class societies, the uneven nature of this transformation and the variations in race relations that may warrant cultural healing. Furthermore, a leader's awareness of the *self* and the social-cultural dimensions that have shaped the *self* will result in a greater understanding of those they serve and increase the leader's awareness of the psychological merger that occurs as the culture shapes the leader and the leader shapes the culture.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

I dedicated the first portion of this chapter to a statement of the research questions. I chose to begin with the research questions in order to introduce the reader to the rationale and importance of this study and to set the stage for the explanation in the research design. The next several paragraphs lay out the research design and make an argument for the utility of an autoethnographic approach to the substantive dive into the storying of the Los Fresnos CISD. A statement of the purpose was included in the research design and I carefully articulated the importance of arriving at culture while grounding these statements in research and theories. I further detailed the methodology in a section dedicated to procedures for data collection and offered the reader the rationale and purpose behind each of the focus groups. I also acknowledged the possibility of the need to triangulate the data should the information gathered from the interviews necessitate a review of documents and memorabilia. As with other chapters, I included a summary for the purpose of bringing a cohesiveness to the information provided.

#### **Research Questions**

It is my intention to pursue the answer to the following research questions:

1. How did my life-experiences as an immigrant growing up in the borderlands of Texas prepare me to be an agent of change in the role of superintendent in the Los Fresnos

Consolidated Independent School District; a school district serving predominantly Hispanic students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds?

2. How have relationships with members of the school learning community shaped my character and how did my character shape the organization?
3. How can an autoethnographic study conducted by a Hispanic Superintendent in South Texas contribute to the larger body of knowledge pertaining to school leadership and its role in responding to the national dilemma of the impact of changing demographics and the sociological, educational and economic challenges facing our country?

### **Research Design**

This study was grounded in the sociocultural, autoethnographic perspective (Villalpando, 2010; Yosso, 2005; Hofstede, 2000; Bochner, 2012; Drazenovich, D.A. & Skovira, 2010; House, R.J., Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Ngunjiri, F.W., Hernandez, K.C., & Chang, 2010; and Sindic, 2011) of the effects of Hispanic leadership in the Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District (CISD), a high performing school district in the Region One Education Service Center in south Texas serving predominantly Hispanic students of low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Texas Education Agency, 2016). The researcher employed, autoethnography, as an alternative to a quantitative approach, in part, because the statistical power of “n” is not necessarily the marker of a “good rigorous” study (Brayboy, 2006; Muncey, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to conduct an examination of the self and to study the manner in which my life experiences shaped me into the leader and the person I have become. Knowing who I am enables me to lead in a manner that empowers the next generation of leaders. An academic approach to self-examination served as a lens for revealing my character and leadership style within the context of leadership theories (Perez Huber, 2009; Gonzalez, 2001;

Smith 1999; Guajardo, Guajardo Valadez & Oliver, 2012; and Wall, 2006). This study was expected to contribute to the body of knowledge of how relationships among adults resulted in opportunities for students to experience success and how my efforts to shape the academic experience of children in the Los Fresnos CISD resulted in me being shaped by the community in which I served.

It was my intention throughout this study to examine the funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth that I acquired through *Pedagogies of the Home or La Universidad de la Vida* (Bernal, 2007; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017). These life experiences that are unique to those of us who have been blessed with growing up in the borderlands of Texas (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2017; Anzaldua, 1987; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2009). I set out to examine my personal and professional life and to seek through the examination of personal experiences and the pedagogies of the home that shaped me. I examined my role as a change agent within the organization and the reciprocal exchanges that resulted from my relationship with the learning community for the past 13 years (Yosso, 2005; Perez Huber, 2009; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). I was a work in progress that was accepted by a learning community and each time I gave of myself, the community of Los Fresnos gave me an experience that forged my character. I examined the insider-outsider condition (Brayboy and Deyhle, 2000) and the *mestiza-like* characteristics of my leadership style (Anzaldua, 1987). This autoethnography will revealed my effort to achieve a cultural synchronicity with the community in which I served and the impact that my success or failure had on the organization's ability to create positive learning experiences for the children of a community serving predominantly Hispanic students of which 78% were identified by state standards as coming from economically disadvantaged homes. I shared the

*testimonio* of my personal and professional journey knowing I was placing myself in a vulnerable state and asserted that this method of research aligned with my epistemological, ontological, axiological and methodological consciousness (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012).

After serving as the district superintendent for over a decade, I made a conscious decision to use an autoethnographic perspective as a medium to a substantive dive into the storying of Los Fresnos CISD and the narration of my professional and personal lived experiences. This qualitative method sets the researcher at the center of the investigation as a “subject” (the researcher that performs the investigation) and an “object” (a participant that is investigated) (Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; and Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It was an approach that appealed to me as a researcher because it gave voice to personal experience and allowed for the use of self-observation. In addition, autoethnography represented the potential to provide a robust amount of data that provided the researcher a window through which the external world was understood (Sparkes, 2000; Roth, 2006; Wall, 2006 and 2008 Chang, 2007; Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; and Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). Autoethnography, as a research method, acknowledges the inextricable relationship between the personal and the cultural and to made room for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression through a systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation about *self* and the social phenomena involving *self* (Pelias, 2003; Wall, 2006; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). This research allowed for highly personalized accounts that drew on the experiences of the author/researcher. (Bochner & Ellis, 2000; Moustaka, 1990; Sparks, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Bochner, 2012). Autoethnography validated the voice and “lived experiences” of the individual at the center of the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, Mercado-Garza, 2005, Guajardo and Guajardo, 2010).



I reflected on the funds of knowledge and the cultural capital that I obtained through the *pedagogies of the home* and the manner in which I drew on these to make decisions along the way (Mercado-Garza, 2005; Delgado Bernal, 2010; and Anzaldua, 1987). I examined the insider-outsider condition and the *mestiza-like* characteristics of my leadership style (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; and Anzaldua, 1987). This autoethnography revealed my effort to achieve a cultural synchronicity with the community in which I served (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Haberman, 1991 and Lipitz & Rodriguez, 2012). This study examined the impact that my success or failure had on the organization's ability to create positive learning experiences for the children of our community (Anzaldua, 1987; Murdock, 1997; and Modi, 2015).

I carried on a discussion on the importance of the narrative within the context of my work. I consciously leaned on a large body of evidence that story, in all of its forms, is an important method that captures the essence of self-perceptions and the character of the narrator because words, syntax, and semantics are acquired through life experiences (Denzel and Lincoln, 2000; Sparkes, 2000; Holt, 2003; Bruner, 2004; Roth, 2006; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). I carried on a discussion of the theories that support autoethnography, the importance of story, leadership theories and used guiding questions as a road map for my research. I employed the relationship model theory to capture how my parents and grandparents equipped me with the character tools that served as a moral compass (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2017) as well as the funds of knowledge and cultural wealth that I acquired through the reciprocal exchanges with members of the community (Anzaldua, 1987; Yosso, 2005). I anchored aspects of my methodology on the funds of knowledge theory (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2009) and the cultural and historical congruence that must exist if we are to serve effectively in the field of education. I explored whether a dialogical relationship existed between

my past (upbringing), my present (the organization/community) and the shaping of the *self*. I examined whether I transmitted the tools given to me through *pedagogies of the home* to forge the values or character of an organization and the reciprocal fashion in which the *pedagogies of a community* and organization in which I served continued to shape me (Anzaldúa, 1987; Guzman-Martinez, 2012; and Delgado Bernal, 2010).

Stories of lived experiences can also serve as guideposts for our elders and policy-makers in our communities (Brayboy, 2006). Therefore, I examined the manner in which members of the governing board drew on values that are rooted in their own stories to guide their decisions. Researchers reveal that stories have a place in our communities and our lives because they shape our character, remind us of our origins and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson and Millitelo, 2016; Romero, 2005; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009). Pelias (2003) states that an autoethnography “lets you use yourself to get to culture” and autoethnography places the *self* at the center of the study. Given the role of the board and the superintendent, I worked to capture whether I have achieved cultural synchronicity, maintained cultural integrity (without sacrificing my home culture) or assimilated to the culture of the organization at the expense of my home culture (Lipitz & Rodriguez, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995, Haberman, 199; Flores, 2001; Tella, 2007). Throughout the study, I placed myself at the center of research as a member of a learning community and employed the paradigms and circular type of research that is associated with autoethnographic studies.

Researchers refer to autoethnography as a personal narrative, a critical autobiography, an evocative narrative, a reflexive ethnography, an autobiographical ethnography, a personal sociology and an auto-anthropology (Bochner, 2012; Denzel and Lincoln, 2000; Wall, 2006;

Perez Huber, 2009; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007; Flores & Delgado Bernal, 2012).

Autoethnography permitted the researcher to utilize data sources such as photographs, video, written documents, self-observational data, official documents, interviews and, although somewhat controversial, memory (Wall, 2008). I triangulated the study by capturing history and the sociological perspective through the voices of members of the community. I encouraged them to share documents and memorabilia as they participated in the focus groups and included their experiences as students, parents and *abuelos* [grandparents] of students. I asked for their perceptions of whether my leadership style was accepted in our community and how it conformed to their expectations.

Muncey (2005) asserts that there is a wealth of autoethnographic studies written in English that capture accounts in the area of gender, sexuality, race, discrimination, sport, illness, death, pregnancy, family, getting a PhD and various work processes or experiences. In other words, personal situations of the marginalized have been at the center of most work (Wall, 2008) but few, if any, had been conducted as a method of studying Hispanic leadership and its potential impact on student achievement/success. This qualitative research method looked at the researcher's lived experience and how it connected culturally and sociologically to world around him. In the context of public education, this study provided a sociocultural perspective that may yield valuable information for improving teaching and learning.

### **Site Selection**

I served in the capacity of superintendent of schools of the Los Fresnos CISD since December of 2005. Serving in this role for well over a decade afforded me the opportunity to work collaboratively with others to shape the organization. It afforded me the unique opportunity to

carry out a substantive dive into the storying of Los Fresnos from an autoethnographic perspective.

The Los Fresnos CISD is a school district that prides itself in delivering on its mission of providing a quality educational experience that results in the development of socially responsible life-long learners. Delivering on this promise for every child that enrolls in its schools is a primary goal for the school district and the academic performance of its students remains a point of pride for the community. This community pride is understandable when one considers that the school district has been able to sustain student performance levels on state assessments at levels that surpass state and regional averages for over three decades and produce post-secondary ready students as evidenced by the awarding of the Texas Education Agency's distinction designations (Texas Education Agency, 2017). This sense of achievement however, is exponential when one goes beyond the numerical data that produced by standardized tests and considers the challenges that this community has had to overcome. Historical documents and the voices of the elders document the manner in which its residents have come together to overcome challenges to form "A Proud District and United Community", a slogan prominently displayed in the heart of the school district (Keillor, 1991).

I approached this research with the firm belief that the storying of Los Fresnos CISD, through an autoethnographic perspective, was a worthy endeavor. I ensured that the research design had a clear identity, that the study layed out the Los Fresnos school ecology contextualized by demographic figures, and that it captured the hallmark moments of its culturally rich history. Capturing the essence of the spirit of the community, necessitated the storying of Los Fresnos within the context of history and the literature.

For this reason, it was important to note that during the period of 1850 -1915, Mexican Americans remained one of the most significant non-English speaking groups in Texas. This group represented either a dominant majority or a significant minority in a number of counties in South Texas from the U.S.-Mexico border to San Antonio (De Leon, 1983; San Miguel, 2001; and Montejano, 2011). It was during this period of Texas history that the township of Los Fresnos came to existence and it is evident that the history of the community and the school district were destined to be inextricably intertwined. James Keillor (1991), physician and local historian recounts in *A Brief History of Los Fresnos*:

*Los Fresnos, a small community located in Cameron County, approximately twelve miles north of Brownsville, was one of the last unsettled frontiers of the Rio Grande Valley. It was almost the last tract of land to be opened under the “land company” system. By 1915, when the first settlers came to Los Fresnos, the upper valley had been quite well cleared. The town grew rapidly from its beginning until the Great Depression and again during the decade of the 1940s, but has always maintained a small town atmosphere. It was not clear how Los Fresnos received its name as several versions may be found. According to one account, it was named after the Rancho Los Fresnos established by Mexican ranchers as early as 1771. Another account tells us the proposed town was initially named Moseville by Lon C. Hill, Sr. naming it after his son Lon C. (Mose) Hill, Jr., but the name was subsequently changed to Los Fresnos. A third account gives credit directly to Hill, Sr. for the eventual name. “As he rode through the senderos (winding lanes) viewing and planning the future development of this beautiful country, he saw many ash trees scattered in the woods and on the banks of the resacas. Because of this, he began calling the locality Los Fresnos [Spanish for Ash Trees]”*

The Los Fresnos School District would not be chartered in the State Legislature until 1925 and but the first school was erected in Los Fresnos in 1915 which coincided with the establishment of a township. Miriam Chatelle (1948) states:

*A white and green, one-room schoolhouse was erected in 1915 to care for the educating of the children living here (Los Fresnos). It is not used for a teacher age and has been altered several times during its thirty-two years. When it was built, it had an indented porch, with about four steps leading up to it, a double door opening into the one room, with cloakrooms or spaces partitioned off on either side of the door.*

*The schoolyard was enclosed with a board fence with a stile, and the top board of that fence was quite wide, affording us many hours of enjoyment walking around the schoolyard on top of it. There are two of the mesquite trees there now that were then so close to this fence that when you were walking the board walk you would have to duck low to keep from bumping your head, losing your balance and falling off the fence.*

*Beatrice Kinlock, a girl from Brownsville, was the first teacher and the enrollment was twelve, which included a few Latin-American girls. Then there were three of us who attended high school in San Benito that year. The land company furnished transportation. They hired a man with his car, on a salary and commission basis, to take passengers to town, transport the high school pupils, purchase groceries, deliver the mail, bring out ice – in fact, to purchase any article needed by the village housewives and farmers. Now, as I have said before, it was on these daily trips to town that a soldier guard accompanied us for protection (pp. 85-86).*

The migration of farm settlers and the cultural incongruence that accompanied it, was experienced by a majority of Mexican American residents of the borderland of the Rio Grande (Najera, 2015; Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012). The *Magic Valley*, a term often used to refer to

the fertility of its soil, and abundance of water from the Rio Grande was also characterized by the overabundance of cheap labor; making it a hotbed for land developers. Research reveals that it was the marketing of cheap labor that sealed the place of people who made up the labor force to the lower rungs of the social structure (Blanton, 2007; De Leon, 1983; Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012). Various accounts depict the *rancheros* of the area as a “hand to mouth type of people that were slightly better than the negro” (Blanton, 2007; De Leon, 1983; Orozco, 2012). Montejano (2011) reveals that the rapid development of the region was dependent on Mexican labor but “this type” of labor brought with it the unknown and potentially troublesome social cost that was referred to as the *Mexican Problem* (p. 179). There were differing views regarding the *Mexican Problem*, however. Some argued that the feared social cost of Mexican immigration could be regulated; others including some farmers and workers predicted the “undoing of America” (Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012; Najera, 2015). By 1915, education for these hard working Mexican immigrants was less of a priority and the children of farm laborers were often released early to help in the fields (Blanton 2007, Najera, 2015; (De Leon 1983; Blanton 2007; Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012; and Najera, 2015).

I, as the researcher, could have merely cited the demographic make-up of the district to explain why I chose to approach the storying of the district through the lens of the outsider within and the context of an analytical framework grounded in the Latino epistemological perspective. Although that argument might have been sufficient, a more compelling reason resides in the resolve and the will of a community to transform its schools from a system that almost a century ago, permitted the marginalization of some students of Mexican descent through segregation. The segregation of students to the “Mexican School” was only a small part of the rigid English Only racially motivated national movement. The mandates handed down

during the first quarter of the twentieth century from State Superintendent of Education, R. B Cousins (equivalent to today's Commissioner of Education) were intended to "Americanize" non-English speaking students with the intent of "shedding their foreign-ness" (Blanton, 2007 p.62; De Leon, 1983; Montejano, 2011). The segregation that resulted from these laws, left scars that are still palpable in the recollections of some of the elders in the community who are still working to achieve cultural healing.

Children, of Mexican descent, segregated into Mexican Schools throughout the borderland of Texas were inevitably destined to receive an education of lesser quality (Blanton, 2007; Montejano, 2011; Orozco, 2012; Najera, 2105). During the time that this study was conducted, the Los Fresnos CISD still consisted of mostly rural farmland and the student population is predominantly Hispanic. The Los Fresnos School District provided quality instructional programs designed to challenge all students and drew on their cultural capital to engage them in the learning. The study narrated the progress of a school district and the forging of its values and priorities from an autoethnographic perspective. It examined the researcher at the center of the study to find how the leader shaped the organization and how the organization has shaped the leader.

I made story making and storytelling central to this study and utilized this method as a tool to achieve a more culturally and historically congruent approach that brought the narrative to life and achieved a deep substantive dive into a narrative of the transformation of a people who rose above an imposed identity. I employed the borderlands and relationship models as appropriate in order to methodically identify and document the community cultural wealth, funds of knowledge, and cultural capital from which its people drew their strength and their resolve



(Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti 2009; Anzaldua, 1987; Guajardo & Guajardo 2012; Saldivar, 2006).

At the time that this study was conducted, the public school system in the State of Texas consisted of 1039 school districts and 185 charter schools. The Texas Education Agency (2017) assigned school districts to 20 Regional Service areas for the purpose of disseminating information and providing professional development for educators through Education Service Centers (ESCs). Region One ESC consisted of 34 school districts and the service area extended through seven counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Starr, Webb, Willacy, Zapata) from Laredo to Brownsville. The combined enrollment of these school districts was approximately 427,671 students with a demographic that consists of 97.45 percent Hispanic, 1.61 percent Anglo .36 percent African American, .43 percent Asian, .04 American Indian/Alaskan, .01 percent Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and .09 of two or more races (Region One, 2017). According to the Texas Education Agency (2017), in Region One, 36.87 percent had been identified as English Language Learners and 84.97 were classified as economically disadvantaged, 3.84 percent were migrants and 1.81 percent are recent immigrants.

Located in the heart of Cameron County, the Los Fresnos School District is part of the Region One Education Service Area near the border with Mexico. The district had one high school serving eleventh and tenth graders, one ninth grade through tenth grade campus, three middle schools, and nine elementary schools. During the 2016-2017 school year, Los Fresnos CISD had an enrollment of 10, 788 students who reside throughout the district's 451 square mile service area consisting of mostly rural farming communities. The demographic make-up of the Los Fresnos School District was 96.7 percent Hispanic, 2.6 percent Anglo, .10 percent American Indian, 0.2 percent Asian, 0.2 percent African American and .10 percent of the student

population identified ethnically with two or more ethnicities. For state funding purposes, the school district was considered a property poor school district that served a large percentage of Economically Disadvantaged (78%) students.

If you consider the sustained levels of student performance, the low turnover rate among employees, the percentage of staff members with advanced degrees, the high percentage in four and five year completion rates, and low dropout rates, you realized that something special occurred in the Los Fresnos CISD. The high levels of student performance that the Los Fresnos CISD sustained over several decades alone is nothing short of extraordinary. For over two decades, Los Fresnos CISD consistently ranked among the top performing districts in the state. It did so by helping students, regardless of their circumstances, reach levels of academic achievement that surpass state and regional averages. It sustained this performance levels during a period of intense scrutiny in an era of accountability in which the legislature insisted on utilizing standardized testing to measure teacher effectiveness and communicate to the public the quality of instruction delivered in public schools throughout the state. During the era of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the Los Fresnos CISD schools received ratings of *Recognized* and *Exemplary* from the Texas Education Agency (T.E.A.) and student performance garnered numerous *Gold Performance* acknowledgments (Texas Education Agency. 2002; Texas Education Agency. 2003).

In 2013, T.E.A. introduced a new, more rigorous assessment known as the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) for 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades and End of Course Exams (EOCs) at the high school level. Since the introduction of these more rigorous assessments, the T.E.A. used student performance on the STAAR and EOCs to rank schools and the agency ranked every campus in Los Fresnos as having Met Standard and awarded its schools

numerous Academic Distinction Designations. The *Post-secondary Readiness Distinction* was the only designation that could be attained at the district level (Texas Education Agency, 2016 & 2017). A *Post-secondary Readiness Distinction* in Texas means that a district met or surpassed state standards in the area of:

- a. Graduation rates,
- b. ACT/SAT participation and performance,
- c. Percent of High School students completing a coherent sequence of courses in Career and Technical Education,
- d. Dual Credit Course Completion, and
- e. 70% of the students must pass two or more state assessments

At the time of this study, Los Fresnos CISD was in an elite group of school districts in the state of Texas. In 2016, Los Fresnos was one out of 10 public schools districts to receive the *Post-secondary Readiness Distinction* from the Texas Education Agency. Los Fresnos CISD was one of only 5 school districts in the state to receive this distinction four consecutive years - or every year since T.E. A. implemented the current accountability system (Texas Education, Agency, 2017).

In its Board adopted goals, the Los Fresnos CISD made a commitment to go beyond state and federal passing standards to measure student performance. The District set a goal of increasing the participation and performance of students in Pre-AP and AP courses and in 2013, the College Board awarded Los Fresnos High School the *Gaston-Caperton Inspiration Award* for significantly increasing the performance and participation of minority students passing the AP exams with high marks. The College Board consistently recognized Los Fresnos High School for the manner in which it designs programs that lead to student success with the title of a

*High School that Works*. The College Board offered several awards to selected students who enroll in high school courses that offer college level rigor and have performed exceptionally well on Advanced Placement (AP) Exams. The number of students achieving AP Scholar and AP Scholar with Distinction increased each year. In 2016, Ford Next Generation Learning (NGL) recognized the manner in which Los Fresnos CISD provided value added high school diplomas with endorsements through career oriented academies. The United States Department of Education took notice of the sustained levels of performance in the Los Fresnos CISD and it granted Olmito Elementary (2015) and Rancho Verde Elementary (2017) the recognition of being named *Blue Ribbon Schools*. The National Hispanic Recognition Program recognized seven of the members of the class of 2017 as National Hispanic Merit Scholars for their performance in the top 2.5% among Hispanics taking the PSAT throughout the nation. The number of students achieving this milestone continued to increase as eleven students in the class of 2018 were recognized as National Hispanic Merit Scholars. The Los Fresnos CISD continued closing the achievement gap between students who come from economically disadvantaged homes and the “all student” population. T.E. A. took notice of the number of schools in the Los Fresnos CISD receiving the Title I High Progress and High Performing Schools recognitions and conducted a study of best practices. The study was carried out during the summer of 2017 and Texas Education Agency published the best practices in the fall of 2018.

The leadership of the Los Fresnos CISD school board was also recognized at the state level. In 1999 and again in 2010 the Texas Association of School Administrators and the Texas Association of School Boards named The Los Fresnos CISD Board of Trustees the *Outstanding School Board of Texas*. At the time of this study, Los Fresnos CISD was the only district south of Austin to receive this recognition twice. By the spring of 2018, the researcher had served in

the Los Fresnos CISD for over 12 years in the capacity of superintendent. He also served as a campus administrator for 6 years prior to being named superintendent of schools.

### **Procedures and Data Collection**

This study explored my personal journey, a Mexican National whose family emigrated Mexico to reside United States at the age of six. I employed the use of story to narrate my personal and professional journey. I detailed my struggles as an English Language Learner and student in the public school system. I captured the challenges of growing up economically disadvantaged, defying the odds and finishing high school, choosing to become an “American Citizen” and being among the privileged who participated in post-secondary education, and earned the credentials to become a teacher, administrator and superintendent of schools. I examined the influences throughout my journey and the manner in which these influences shaped my character and my resolve. This study was an important part of my professional growth because in conducting this autoethnography, I helped me arrive at a greater understanding of the *self* and a greater awareness of self is a prerequisite for removing obstacles for others.

My story looked at how education in a democratic society continued to have a special place and purpose. It revealed how the son of Mexican emigrants was able to rise through the challenges that make up the fiber of life and found his purpose by serving others in the field of education while working diligently to help shape the world for the next generation. This autoethnographic study from the perspective of the superintendent contributed to a body of knowledge that acknowledges that educators have the incredible ability to add value to the social and cultural capital that leads to post-secondary success. Increasing the social and cultural capital that results in the academic success of children in our schools ultimately rests on our

ability to establish and sustain interpersonal relationships with students. This includes recognizing the rich history of the community and instilling of cultural and helping those we serve recognize, understand and critique current social inequities; a notion that presumes that teachers themselves recognize social-inequities and their causes (Ladson-Billings 1995). The story of my childhood to adulthood was important because it is rich in pedagogies of the home. The pedagogies of the home can lead to an in-depth understanding of culture and help educators establish the positive rapport required for productive teacher-student interactions to occur. This study is expected to raise awareness of the need for the selection of professional development activities that reveal the resistance that can occur from the pedagogies of the home and the mestiza consciousness.

I conducted five focus group interviews using a standardized, open-ended interview approach. I interviewed members of my family, principals, elders in the community, three former superintendents, and the board of trustees.

### **First Focus Group**

I began the focus group interviews by making an audio recording of a standardized open-ended interview of my siblings (5 sisters and two brothers) for the purpose of capturing the lived experience, what they chose to remember and the essence of the values that were transmitted through rearing we received.

### **Second Focus Group**

As I studied my professional journey, I explored the manner in which I collaborated with staff to make curricular and professional development decisions. To this end, I interviewed principals who have served in the district for a minimum of ten years. I served alongside many

of them in the capacity of principal and they saw me make the transition to the position of superintendent in the same school district.

### **Third Focus Group**

In the Rio Grande Valley, our identity originates in the annals of history and it is further archived in the memories of those who have come before us. For this reason, I felt the need to collect data by interviewing a focus group of 6 elders who had lived in the Los Fresnos community for a minimum of 20 years, had children graduate from the school system and served on at least one advisory committee in the past.

### **Fourth Focus Group**

I interviewed a focus group of three of the former superintendents who each served in the Los Fresnos CISD for terms exceeding five years. These superintendents were familiar with my role and the work I have done. Two of them still lived in the community and the third served as my mentor.

Interviewing the elders and former superintendents served as important research that pays ceremony to the past.

### **Fifth Focus Group**

At the time of this study the Los Fresnos CISD enjoyed a significant period of relative stability in the makeup of the Board of Trustees. In 2010, the Los Fresnos CISD Board was named the State Honor Board at the TASA/TASB Convention by the Texas Association of School Administrator. The community has reelected them to their positions since. I collected

data by interviewing the Board of Trustees as a single focus group. I complied with the Open Meetings Act by conducting the interview in a duly posted meeting of the Board of Trustees.

### **Other Data**

I also reviewed documents and/or memorabilia that was shared or that surface in the course of the focus group interviews. I analyzed these in an effort to get to culture, to validate the lived experiences, and to get a gain a better understanding of that which is shared by members of the focus groups. I reviewed these documents as a source of data. I approached the study prepared to go where the data led.

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout the study, I placed myself at the center of research as a member of learning community and employed the paradigms and circular type of research that is associated with autoethnographic studies. I included information about my beliefs to avoid miscommunication and to enable the reader to see what I see (Wilson, 2008). I collected data from the focus groups by using a standardized, open-ended interview approach and captured audio and video recordings. I created a transcript of the views collected. Having transcribed the interviews, I read the transcripts and immersed myself in the data to make preliminary observations led me to identify patterns. I developed a coding system that I used to group the data and I carried out a thematic analysis of the views that I collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Bernard, & Ryan, 1998; Bernard, H. R. 2010, and Creswell, 2012). I used the coding scheme to group the data in a manner that allowed me to create a data set, explore evidence and make conclusions. I looked closely at the narrative of each of the focus groups and captured the interrelatedness of the themes.



## Summary

Our ability to help all students succeed in a state that is currently educating a minority-majority necessitates educational leaders with the ability to achieve cultural synchronicity and demonstrate an awareness of the importance of reaching cultural congruence. The positive effects of achieving cultural congruence with all stakeholders in the academic experience of children and the impact that this has on the overall performance of students in the classroom have been well documented (Flores, 2001; Tella, 2007; Lavy and Sand 2014; and Modi, 2015).

Education in a democratic society will continue to have a special place and purpose but if we are to succeed, educational leaders cannot operate under deficit thinking. It is critical to the future of education in Texas, that educational leaders concern themselves with the emotional wellbeing of the students they serve. Educational leaders must possess the ability to increase the social and cultural capital and recognize the resistance that may arise from the *pedagogies of the home*. Unless the leader accepts this responsibility as a strategy for achieving a higher level of proficiency in the field of education, minority students will continue developing strategies of resistance. A superintendent's ability to do this successfully requires the individual to understand the *self* before he/she can understand those who he/she intends to serve. As a leader, the superintendent must be willing to completely immerse the *self* in the culture of the community/organization because it is at this intersect where an interesting phenomena occurs; culture begins to shape the leader/*self* and the leader/*self* begins to shape the culture (Pelias, 2003; Wall, 2006; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010).

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS: TESTIMONIO

The *testimonio* that I present is from the perspective of the narrator for I am neither a victim nor a hero (Pérez Huber, 2009; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012 and Ellis, 2000). I employ *testimonio* as a method for the exploration of the *self* and use it as a mechanism to arrive at culture (Pérez Huber, 2009; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012; and Leary & Tangey, 2012). I provide it as a framework of the development of my character and a tool to reconcile the findings of data collected through the focus group interviews. I do so knowing that I place myself in a vulnerable state but I have chosen autoethnography because it aligns with my epistemological, ontological, axiological and methodological consciousness (Perez & Huber, 2009; and Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). An autoethnographic perspective also serves as a vehicle to a substantive dive into the storying of Los Fresnos CISD as it provides an opportunity to present highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher and extends the understanding of sociology (Sparkes, 2000).

#### **Life South of the Rio Grande**

The earliest memory that I have is living next door to my grandparents at the corner of Lauro Villar and Guatemala #24 across from *La Alberca Chavez*, the municipal pool and skating rink. It is here that I began to acquire the funds of knowledge and cultural wealth that are

transmitted through the *pedagogies of the home* and the life experiences that are unique to those of us who are fortunate enough to have grown up in the borderlands of Texas (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2017; Delgado Bernal: 2001; Anzaldúa, 1987; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll and Amanti, 2009). We lived two blocks south of the banks of the Rio Bravo [Rio Grande] and one block south of La Casa Mata, a military fort used by the Mexican Army in the Mexican-American war. My *Abuelo* Ignacio Perez Chapa, or Nachito as grandmother lovingly called him, made an addition to the home that he and *Abuela* Rosita owned. Our parents took God's charge of "be fruitful and multiply" to heart. The year was 1974, the arrival of a set of twins would mean *mamá* and *papá* were now going to be raising seven children. We were each a little over a year apart except for my brother Felipe and I who were eleven months apart. Seven mouths to feed posed an economic hardship for a family in which the only source of income was coming from my father. He was making a living driving a Coca Cola truck and his salary was not making ends meet. My *abuelos* took us in and added two rooms and a restroom to the west side of their home. The two rooms spanned the length of their home and during the planning stages of the room additions to his home, *abuelo* decided to keep the side door that previously gave him and *abuela* direct access to their driveway. Once the addition was completed, that side door opened from the Salazar living quarters directly to my *abuela's* kitchen. *Abuelo* wisely decided to keep a latch on their side of that door for traffic control. On the Salazar side, the room facing the north served as a living room, dining room and kitchen. I guess one could say it was an open concept. The other room served as sleeping quarters for the entire family. Our sisters shared a queen-sized mattress and Felipe and I were assigned to bunkbeds that had a wagon wheel design between the bedposts. An empty playpen was located strategically near *mamá's* and *papá's* bed. Mamá told us that *La sigueña* [The stork] would soon deliver two bundles of joy.

Martha was the eldest, she attended elementary school at *Josefina Menchaca*, my brother Felipe, and I attended a public pre-school named *El Jardín de Niños Modelo* that was down the street. Our *mamá* walked us to school each morning while *Abuela* Rosita supervised breakfast for our sisters. Mamá was expecting the twins and I distinctly remember how she struggled as she waddled down the sidewalk. Mamá often recollects how she burst into laughter one day when my brother and I innocently asked her if she was going to wear a belt, as we were about to leave for school. She tells us that we went on to tell her we wanted her to be thin like our teachers.

Our school day started bright and early each day. I clearly recall that the greater part of the day on Mondays was set aside for teaching citizenship and patriotism. Our school uniform consisted of khaki shorts and a button down shirt with a plaid print. On Mondays however, everyone wore white. We were required to wear white button down shirts, white pants and black dress shoes. Every Monday, teachers walked their respective classes out to the courtyard where we assembled in a battalion-like formation. Some of the older students presented the colors and we all stood at attention waiting for guidance from the staff. We were taught to salute *La Bandera Tricolor con El Aguila Real* [the tricolored flag of Mexico depicting the eagle with a serpent in its beak] by holding a military-style salute over our chest as we pledged allegiance to Mexico. After the ceremony, we returned to class. There were no air-conditioned classrooms at the time but we had windows that opened to the courtyard. We sat around tables where we collaborated on different assignments. Recess was the highlight of the day. We often gathered to play games such as *La Rueda de San Miguel* [Saint Miguel's Wheel] or *La Vibora de La Mar* [The Ocean Snake] until several of us broke off to play tag or go buy a *raspa* [snow cone] from a man that would sell snacks from across the school fence. He set up his cart on the sidewalk just

outside the playground and in exchange for two *pesos*; you could get a cool treat before returning to class.

There was a great deal of emphasis on the arts and I thoroughly enjoyed that part of our day. We were provided multiple opportunities to participate in plays and performances and I remember having a

role in many of them. I played the role of the Big Bad Wolf in *La Caperucita Roja* [Little Red Riding Hood], I played the role of a clown in a play about a toy store, and anytime a school performance required reciting a poem, I was their “go-to-guy”. It was not that I loved poetry. My *mamá* loved poetry and I loved her. If she was willing to put in the time to get me to memorize a poem and recite it with voice inflection and stage presence, I was willing to channel her passion. All that *Maestra* Raquel had to do was ask my *mamá* and no matter how busy she was, *mamá* was going to find the time to make sure I was prepared.

It seemed like *mamá* Angelica was always cooking, or cleaning. Raising seven kids required much of her. She was quite the multitasker so when there was a play or poem to rehearse, she had me follow her along as she cooked and did the housekeeping. I clearly recall standing next to a small, white stove regurgitating the verses she wanted me to memorize. I remember repeating the stanzas until I learned where to use voice inflection and where to hold out or raise my hands.

*Mamá* would occasionally make mention of something that made little sense to me and it is the manner in which she said it that made me remember it for years.

*“Recuerda que tú naciste el año de las olimpiadas en México”*

[Remember that you were born in the year that the Olympics were held in Mexico].

She made sure that all eight of her children knew their address, birthdate, and other identifying information at an early age. Still, what did the XIX Olympiad have to do with me? Why did my *mamá* choose to remind me of my birthdate in this manner and why did she choose to deliver the reminder at times when she was preparing me to recite a poem for a school program? What did that mean? Her timing seemed, even to me as a five year old, rather awkward and the more she mentioned it, the more I felt a degree of temporary pressure; temporary because as a five year old, I thought about it and moved on to all the things that kids my age preferred to do.

I had a childhood relatively rich in academic experiences for a child my age. I also have fond memories of the fun we had as we played outdoors, sometimes at the expense of my *abuela's* plants. My siblings and I were a mischievous bunch and often wreaked havoc in *Abuela Rosita's* garden. We broke her terracotta pots and did our best to paste them back together with mud. How she did not have a heart attack, I will never know. One day, we pulled one of her favorite plants right out of the ground and decided to “give her more”, by tearing it apart and sticking every branch in the mud. We genuinely thought she was going to be very pleased with us.

Papá worked for the local Coca Cola Bottling Company as a deliveryman. On some weekends, as time allowed, *papá* would pull up in the Coca-Cola truck. His delivery route allowed him to stop by the house for lunch and we loved it. We could hear the truck pull up as we were playing in the garden. The race was on to see who would be the first to jump into his arms or to sit on his feet challenging him to drag us across the house floor as he walked to the table where lunch was set. On occasion, he would walk us out to the truck, roll up one of the side doors to expose stacks of the wooden cases that held the product and allowed us to choose a bottle of soda. He worked sun-up to sun-down with an admirable work ethic and yet we were

struggling to make ends meet. Payday for our *papá* meant my brothers, my sisters and I were going to stay with our *abuelos* so that *mamá* and *papá* could go get groceries. A run to the grocery store triggered an entire ritual of preparations. *Mamá* made sure we had a meal before they left and something to snack on while they were gone. There was something peculiar about when they announced they were going to cross the Rio Grande at the international port of entry to the U.S. No one ever said, “We are going to go get groceries at the H.E.B. in Brownsville.” Instead, I recall our *mamá* saying:

*Se van a quedar con sus abuelos. Su papá y yo vamos a traer mandado al otro lado.*

[You are going to stay with your grandparents. Your father and I are going to go get groceries on the other side.]

This concept of *al otro lado/on the other side* was one of those things no one had to explain.

You just grew up understanding “al otro lado” from the context of conversations.

Geographically, the Rio Grande was an international boundary but in the daily lives of those of us who grew up in *la frontera*, it amounted to nothing more than simply part of the landscape.

We had relatives on either side of the river and our lifestyles consisted of an interdependence of the social structure on both sides of the river.

*Papá* worked for the Coca Cola Bottling Company until they announced they would close the plant in Matamoros. He obtained a work visa “*al otro lado*” and he was gone all the time. No more Coca Cola truck at lunchtime on Saturdays. Our *abuelos* filled the void left when *papá* went to go work “al otro lado”. The door that previously controlled traffic between our home and *Abuela* Rosita’s kitchen was now always unlocked. *Abuelo* was an early riser. He often peeked into our sleeping quarters to see who was awake. Pan dulce from *Panaderia El*

*Trigal* [sweet bread from *The Wheatfield Bakery*] was a staple at his home and if you made the trip with him, you had a chance to pick your favorite piece from the assortment on the shelves. I was always willing to be his wingman on a trip to the bakery. When we returned, our *abuelo* read the newspaper; sometimes, he read aloud, stopping to comment on stories of interest as *Abuela* Rosita fixed a pot of coffee and prepared breakfast.

My *papá* had gone to work in the shrimping industry. It was an industry that was booming in the 1970s and there was a shortage of labor. He told us he was a *descabesador* [header]. He went from delivery man for Coca Cola to heading shrimp on *The Scatterd Brain*, a shrimp boat that docked in the Port of Brownsville. The shrimping industry paid well and it was enough to sustain a large family. There was a trade-off though. My *papá's* hands were suddenly course and he was gone for up to thirty days at a time. He was home for three days at the most and gone again. His presence in the household was most meaningful so when he was away from home, we felt it.

### ***Así Que Se Van Pa' La United***

My *mamá* was very conservative and excellent at managing a household budget. It was during this period that things began looking up for us and one day, *mamá* and *papá* told us we would be leaving our home in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. They told us we were going to go live *al otro lado*. *Papá* had put a down payment on a wood frame home in the *Ebony Heights* subdivision. The home was within walking distance of an elementary school and that was important to our parents. *Abuelo* teased us stating, “*Así que se van para La United?*” [So you are leaving for *The United?*] It was the most he could do to keep himself from sobbing uncontrollably. He and *abuela* had warmed up to the idea, the noise, the mischief and havoc that accompanied raising the original Magnificent Seven next door to them.



As soon as it was clear that we would be moving to a new home in Brownsville, *mamá* was true to form and she began teaching us what few English words she knew – mostly nouns like “win-dow”, “ta-ble”, “mo-ther”, “fa-ther”. Suddenly, we had become imaginaries, in the borderlands of culture (Saldivar, 2006). It seems somewhat comical now but it was a crash course in the English language and it did not come close to preparing us for the culture shock that we would experience.

I recall the day our parents loaded the entire family into our station wagon and heading towards the Gateway International Bridge. We lined up oldest-to-youngest in the immigration offices at the port of entry that day. I recall how cold the whole experience was that day. I do not mean the temperature. Perhaps, it was because the staff was unfamiliar to us or because we did not know the language, but the process itself was cold and the offices were bland. My siblings and I had already received a shot. I am not certain if the inoculations were at this same office or a doctor’s office. I remember however, that it was after this visit to the immigration office that we were able to go on these trips to get groceries *al otro lado* and eventually to our new home in Brownsville. Our *mamá* now had a set of resident alien cards for each of us that she kept in a fold up wallet and only rolled them out when we crossed the international bridge.

### **Living in a State of Nepantla**

It was October of 1974 and we left our home at Lauro Villar #24 and moved in to a three-bedroom house at 1793 Stanford Avenue. It was a two bedroom, one bath wood frame structure with a garage that was converted to a third bedroom. The entire layout was different to the only home we had ever known. My favorite feature was the large picture window in the living room that let in a good amount of daylight. We had a fenced in back yard that paled in comparison to *abuela’s* garden but it did have two mature ash trees that provided a lot of shade and somewhat

compensated for the change. *Abuelo* and *papá* brought the pieces of furniture from our home in Matamoros and that familiarity made the transition a little smoother. As soon as we were settled in, *mamá* and *papá* took us to the Gulf-Mart next to the H.E.B on Boca Chica Boulevard and bought us school clothes. We would no longer wear plaid uniforms with khaki pants and we would no longer be required to wear white button down shirts and white pants on Mondays. I was looking forward to going to school but I soon realized that I had not really grasped the concept of why *mamá* wanted us to learn to speak English. I mean, she told us we would have to learn to speak English at our new school but this did not really register until we attended class on the first day.

I was entering the first grade and was assigned to Ms. Besteiro's class where we sat in rows in individual desks. All of the adults and most of the kids spoke only in English. We started the day reciting the pledge to a flag that was not familiar to me. Kids held their hand flat over their hearts and not in a military style salute. The teacher led the class from the front of the room and I could not understand what she was saying. The few kids that spoke Spanish either whispered or said nothing most of the day. I spent most of my class time looking around the room feverishly, reading body language as I tried to keep up with my classmates. Even the alphabet displayed across the top of the blackboard in the front of the classroom was different; it was missing letters. I had no idea what was happening. Recess was the highlight of the day at this school also. We had recess but no one was playing *la Rueda de San Miguel* or *La Vibora de la Mar*. I wasted no time, made my way to the swing set, and later on discovered what everyone was calling the monkey bars. No one was selling *raspas* [snow cones] at the fence and although I missed that, we had this amazing playground equipment with slides, swings and monkey bars. Several kids spoke Spanish on the playground and that made recess special also.

I did well on the playground but in the classroom, I was struggling. The teacher had put us into groups according to our reading ability. I was either a red bird or a green bird. I know with certainty that I was not a blue bird. I was reading everything phonetically but the words were not making sense.

*See Pug Run. Pug Runs Fast. Run Jane Run.*

*Ted jumps rope. See Ted jump rope. Jump Ted jump.*

I sounded out each letter the way Maestra Raquel had taught me but I could not comprehend what I was saying. From the illustrations, I knew this much; the story was related to a dog, a boy and a girl. It was frustrating.

Things were strange at home also. We had settled in and we were now living *al otro lado* in our new home. One night kids began showing up on our doorstep in costumes, they knocked on the door, held out a bag and said something my siblings and I did not comprehend; it sounded like /trik-e-trit/. We were confused by the entire experience but then *mamá* explained that there was a holiday in the United States in which children went door to door asking for candy. My brothers, sisters and I could not understand why kids wore costumes and go out asking for candy but we liked it.

*Mamá* was expecting a baby again and she still cooked and did house chores as she sang her favorite songs ranchera style. She sang aloud:

*Aquellos ojitos verdes ¿dónde se andarán paseando? Ojala que venga a verme aunque sea de vez en cuando. Hay, Hay, Hay, Hay, ¿Dónde andarán? Esos ojitos que me hicieron suspirar.*

Looking back, I think she may have been singing about my father's green eyes. We all missed him. She was practically raising us by herself. *Papá* was gone all of the time. At most, I believe, he may have stayed home about a week after Andrea, the youngest, was born and then he went back out on the shrimp boat. Shrimping provided for the family but he was never home. My *abuelos* visited often. They never arrived empty handed and usually brought with them items that were staples in our home in Matamoros. They brought pan dulce [sweet bread], corn tortillas, and even bottled water. We were now living in *La United* as my grandfather once teased, and although many things were the same, some of the very significant things in my life were different. We spoke Spanish at home but we could not do so at school; at least not around our teachers. I have come to understand it now. I was living in a state of nepantla struggling to find my cultural identity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hurtado & Gurin, 2004). My blood still boiled when I heard México's national anthem on Spanish television or Spanish radio stations but I was now pledging allegiance to a different flag. Who was I? What was happening? Our world was changing. The state of confusion grew deeper as time went on.

As I moved through the grade levels, I was beginning to pick up more English. Each school year, teachers at Ebony Heights Elementary were more adamant about not allowing us to speak Spanish. On several occasions, speaking Spanish resulted in my teacher asking me to stand put my hand out towards her. I remember how she laid a 12" wooden ruler on the back of my hand, lifted it, and swatted it down to strike me. When I was in the fourth grade, Mrs. Drumright made me hold up a dictionary in each hand and asked me raise and hold my arms up away from my body for what seemed like an eternity. Spanish was the language of poetry and the arts, it was the language of my *abuelos* and my *padres*. The entire thing was nothing more than hypocrisy. Speaking Spanish throughout the school day resulted in punishment but as the

month of February drew near, students were highly encouraged to participate in the Charro Days festivities. This celebration of culture is an annual event celebrated since 1938 in the city of Brownsville, Texas during the latter part of the month of February to commemorate the Mexican heritage and the relationship that exists between the Mexican and American sides of the Rio Grande.

When my siblings and I reached a conversational proficiency level in English, things became even more convoluted. At the Salazar household, speaking English in the presence of those who did not understand it was considered ill-mannered.

*“En esta casa van a hablar Español. ¿Que falta de respeto es ese?*

*¿Como van a estar hablando en Ingles delante de sus padres y sus abuelos?”*

*[You will speak Spanish in this house. What lack of respect is that?*

*How can you be speaking English in the presence of your parents and grandparents?]*

It was as though we were living a double life. I did not feel deeply rooted in either culture for a long time. We did not know it at the time, but the circumstances were forcing us to develop what Anzaldúa (1987) referred to as the mestiza-like consciousness. Circumstances warranted going in and out of both cultures and between languages. Everything was contingent on the situation or location. In time, I came to accept this as the new norm. It was only after I came to terms with this, that I was able to indulge in the best of both worlds. I was an academic tourist in the borderlands of culture (Saldivar 2006; and Pelias, 2003).

I was in middle school when I decided to look up the 1968 Olympics, my mother was no longer making reference to this event, but after all those years, I was still curious. I was in the library of Stell Middle school when I reached for an encyclopedia and learned that the XIX

Olympiad was important for several reasons. It was the first time that track was run on an all-weather surface instead of the traditional cinder surface. It was the first Olympiad held in a Spanish speaking country and the platform that Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two track athletes from the U.S.A., chose to protest the oppression that African Americans had endured. Standing on the platform, receiving their respective medals, they each raised a black-gloved fist; a gesture symbolizing black power. Their gesture was meant to communicate to the world the oppression that had been at the center of the civil rights movement in America. It was a moment that had a ripple effect throughout the U.S.A. and across the globe. An event that would be etched in history and in the minds of those that lived through that era. Reading through the encyclopedia, I realized that my mother was attempting to use that event to inspire me to deliver a passionate presentation of the poem “Los Colores de Las Razas” [The Color of Races]. I have to believe that she was drawing inspiration from this event and that she was attempting to transmit that to me. Reading through that encyclopedia helped me realize that others had endured much more than the state of confusion that I was experiencing and I had a better understanding of the meaning of the poem.

I am not sure what had changed. By the time I was in middle school, teachers did not seem as concerned about students speaking Spanish. Still, there was something rather ironic about the middle school experience. I had reached a level of proficiency in which I was more fluent in English, and now the school curriculum required that I take Spanish as a foreign language.

### **The Nurturing of Our Spiritual Lives**

Things were constantly in a state of flux in our lives. We were transitioning into middle school when my father suffered an accident at work. He tore the meniscus on his right knee

when he slipped on a ladder as he was making his way into the engine room of a shrimp boat. He did not have medical insurance and had to undergo surgery. Physical therapy did not help him recover as expected and we fell on hard times. Although we struggled financially, our father was home and this meant he was going to nurture our faith and our Christian values. My father came to know the Lord because of my mother and her Christian upbringing. She had grown up in the Presbyterian Church and she was steadfast in the Lord. She was well versed in the scripture but she supported and encouraged him to take the lead role in our spiritual upbringing. On a weekly basis, he led a family worship service. Our father turned off the television, rounded us up, and brought us into the living room. He opened with prayer, led us in song and delivered a message. The most beautiful version of *Cuan Grande es El* [*How Great Thow Art*] I have ever heard was in my father's fervor-filled voice. He made the family worship service interactive and he managed the short attention spans of a multi-age group of kids with a balance of firmness and finesse. He encouraged us to ask questions. At times, we stumped him and he wrote our questions down. He researched the responses and brought the answers back the following week. It was wonderful to have him home, even if it came at the expense of the things we could no longer afford.

What little savings he and my mother had did not last very long. My father had always been employed and not being able to work took an emotional toll. It was evident that he was afflicted by the circumstances. He was a man of faith and though he believed God would provide, he took pride in being the head of the household. We had to pay utility bills and make the mortgage. I could see how it weighed on him when he had to ask for help. My grandfather stepped in again and my father insisted that this money be a loan so he kept track of it in a spiral notebook. My grandfather was not expecting him to pay it back but my father was adamant. He

was a man who knew his obligations and took pride in being the provider for his family. Still, he had to set pride aside and he and my mother went to apply for government assistance. The responsibility of providing for a large family left him with few alternatives. Purchasing groceries with food stamps came with a degree of shame. It was difficult to make eye contact with people near you at the register and there was no way to explain what we were going through. I often walked from our house to the Lopez Supermarket that was located down the street to get milk, eggs, and tortillas. I was self-conscious and there were times when I had to make the trip to Lopez Supermarket several times a day to purchase a single item. I would pay with food stamps so that I could bring back the change and when we had enough change to purchase a bar of soap or a bottle of the most inexpensive shampoo, I had to walk back to the supermarket to make that purchase. We were able to purchase groceries but we could not use food stamps for toiletries, detergent and other things we previously took for granted. To make matters worse, my siblings and I were going through growth spurts. Although the younger ones took advantage of the hand-me-downs we were all growing out of our clothes. God continued to provide and he worked through the church pastor and his wife. They visited us periodically and brought groceries, monetary donations and a variety of clothing from a second hand/thrift store. We all gathered and sorted through the bag of clothes and chose the pieces that fit. Every now and then, we would come upon a trendy shirt but mostly, we were wearing vintage clothing to school. Over time, I learned to ignore the stares or the comments classmates made under their breath as I walked by. It was the eighties and I was wearing hip-huggers with bell-bottoms and shirts with collars and sleeves that would have made Elvis Presley and John Travolta jealous. Some things you could not ignore though. My biology teacher in high school was covering a lesson and he was sitting at his desk describing a fungus. The entire class burst into laughter and



other unflattering comments when he stated that the fungi was the color of the shirt that I was wearing. I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me whole. There were days when I could not take the ridicule. I skipped school and hung out with kids that were also missing out on the lessons of the day. There was no good reason for skipping school but I eventually came to terms with it, rationalizing it as a form of self-segregation or self-preservation (Villalpando, 2010). Still, I had a mother who was always praying, it was through her prayers, and guidance that I was able to get through what I believed were difficult times.

As my father's condition improved, he found employment doing boat maintenance in the docks of the Brownsville Shrimp Basin. His knee never fully recovered and he learned to live with some pain. He worked with a man by the name of Guy Pete at RCA Trawlers Inc. He painted boats in dry docks, did minor engine repairs, spliced cables and any other jobs assigned to him. The pay was only a fraction of the wages he earned when he was heading shrimp but he was gainfully employed and coming home every evening. More importantly, this job provided a renewal of his self-confidence and the hope that things were looking up.

### **Musically Inclined**

The school band program nurtured an appreciation for the arts and opened up a new world of opportunities for us. We could not afford to purchase an instrument and our band director knew it. He had each of us try out for brass and woodwind instruments that the school provided. Martha played the bassoon, Felipe played the baritone, I played the tuba, Rosie played the oboe, Claudia and Andrea played the trumpet while Ricardo and Sotera pursued different interests. It was loud around the house as we were often practicing different sheet music. I am not sure how our parents put up with it. We traveled with the band program throughout the Rio

Grande Valley for performances and competitions and even went to Six Flags one day. It is difficult to explain but this was a big deal for us because we had never been out of the Valley.

There were times when we went hungry at these events because our parents did not give us money to buy a snack; we just did not have the means. We were at Six Flags in San Antonio one day, when Mike Maza, a trumpet player in the symphonic band approached me as I watched everyone make their purchases at concessions from a distance. He asked if I was hungry and offered to buy me a meal. I have never forgotten his kind gesture and compassion. He was my classmate but that day, he was a blessing to me. I still pray for God's blessings over Mike.

Making the All-Valley band and competing in the Pig Skin Jubilee or the City of Palms Concert, site reading, ensemble or concert band competitions was a great experience for us. Each time we put on the band uniform we shed the clothing of poverty. For the brief moments that we were competing, we were equal. We were only being compared by ability and according to the skills developed through hours of practice. We brought home medals and ribbons for site reading, for placing First Chair All Valley and Division I ensemble competitions. My mother was proud and she told stories of our success to anyone who was willing to listen. She displayed the medals over the console television in our living room. Whenever anyone visited, she showed the awards, told of our achievements and she embellished. We blushed as she held up medals that were clearly labeled *All Valley Band Competition* and told our relatives that we were competing at the state level. It was her way of letting us know that she valued our achievements and her way of communicating high expectations. We had too much respect for her to correct her in the presence of our guests. Our participation in the band made the talent portion of the annual Christmas Program that *Abuela* Rosita hosted on Christmas Eve each year even better. We loaded our instruments into my father's station wagon and crossed into Matamoros to our

grandparent's home. Our grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins cheered us on as we played solos and ensembles. We created many memories. It was at these family gatherings that we forgot of all the struggles and where we appreciated being part of a large family.

### **College Readiness**

When I was in middle school, a counselor called some of my classmates and me into her office to tell us about an employment opportunity that was available to middle school students in the summer months. Cameron County had received a grant to engage teenagers from underprivileged homes through the Cameron County Summer Youth Employment Program, another blessing from God. I rode a bike from our home on Stanford, Avenue, across the crosswalk and over to Highway 48. Other teenagers who were hired through this program also descended on a warehouse from which county employees departed each morning. We split up into groups and boarded county vehicles along with the county staff to make our way to the job sites. Our schedule consisted of a two-week rotation with teams of hardworking men that were skilled in different trades and we worked on construction projects funded by the county. We ran conduit with the electricians who took time to explain electrical current and how it flowed through the lines, tempered by transformers and how we harness the power of electricity for use in our home appliances. We learned tricks of the trade from the plumbers and painters who had a wealth of experience and were knowledgeable in their trade. I spent the longest two weeks of my life with the bricklayers though. I spent those two weeks learning that mixing cement is hard work and that I was going to have to go to college. The recipe for the cement mix called for placing fifteen shovels of gravel in a wooden mixing box, add fifteen shovels of sand, and six bags of cement mix. I had to spray water into the mixing box to give it just the right texture and mix it by stroking a t-shaped set of two-by-fours. I stroked the contents back and forth to make

the concrete mix. After the mix was ready, we were to fill five-gallon buckets and carry them over to the bricklayers who were standing on scaffolds laying CMU block and calling out for more mix:

*“Mas mescla! Mas mescla! Mas mescla!”*

[More mix! More mix! More mix!]

I was physically spent every day and had no trouble falling asleep when I got home during those two unforgettable weeks. I could hear the voices of those bricklayers in my dreams. Nothing made me more college ready than the hard labor the bricklayers put us through. I distinctly remember thinking, “There is no way, I can spend my life mixing cement. I have to go to college and get a degree.” A summer job provided an opportunity to contribute to the household but it represented something more; a promise of a brighter future. We were still very needy but my mother did not allow me to hand over all that I had earned. I recall a conversation between my mother and my father. It was a philosophical conversation about whether there was a teaching moment in front of them and whether they should use this as an opportunity to teach us to contribute to the household. They arrived at the conclusion that they had not raised kids so they could put them to work and become a source of revenue. They insisted that I keep the lion’s share of what I earned that summer and I used most of that money to purchase school clothes. Still, I was the average teenager and I blew some of what I had earned on non-sense.

My high school counselor suggested that I enroll in the vocational program, as there was a slim chance that I would go to college. Her words pierced me to the core and I felt like those words were a condemnation to a life of poverty and struggles. She was so matter of fact about it. She was telling me that the possibilities for me were limited. This was not the first time that someone had talked about what the future might hold. Mrs. McGowen an elementary PE teacher

who was frustrated with our behavior once told us we “would never amount to anything” as we sat on the black top at Ebony Heights Elementary. Her words hurt also but somehow, I managed to rationalize the entire incident. I figured I was sharing that prediction with everyone that was sitting on that blacktop and concluded that somehow the dose meant for me was not that significant. My counselor’s words took me back to that day on the blacktop and my thoughts bounced between Mrs. McGowen and Mrs. Moreno. I could not let it go. I followed Mrs. Moreno’s advice and enrolled in the vocational program.

I had always been fascinated with architecture and building design and fortunately, the choice slip she handed me listed drafting as a course option. I selected the class, and dropped one of two band periods. I thoroughly enjoyed drafting and design and I knew instantly, that this was something I wanted to pursue after high school. I was beginning to look towards the future and my counselor ignited a fire in my belly. Perhaps, I had misinterpreted her words or intentions but I could not shake the way she made me feel. I carried resentment for a long time and I thought about my future a lot.

My grandfather had told me that every man is the architect of his own destiny and I was determined to begin working on mine. Somewhere along the way, I had learned of the naturalization process for becoming an American Citizen. One day, as I sat and thought about where I had been and tried to visualize what I would do in the future, I decided to pursue the naturalization process. I made a conscious decision to also take the next step in my spiritual life. We were members of the congregation at Trinity Baptist Church and I made a profession of faith and asked to be baptized. I was beginning to put, my house in order, as my grandfather had always suggested.

### ***Abuelo's Enseñanzas and the Wisdom of Solomon***

We sat on the tailgate of his yellow and white, short bed, '71 Chevy pickup listening to *Radio Gallito* [*Little Rooster Radio* – radio station handle] as the daylight faded into the evening. Abuelo pickup truck was not just this sorghum farmer's vehicle for transporting seed and diesel to *Rancho El Naranjo*, it was a full-blown classroom and stories were his method of teaching. Research reveals that stories have a place in our communities and our lives because they shape our character, remind us of our origins and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson and Millitelo, 2016; Romero, 2005; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009).

*Abuelo* Nacho had a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education but he had the wisdom of Solomon. I quickly realized that if I was willing to spend part of the evening listening to the nightly news with my grandfather, I was going to hear some interesting stories and I was going to learn something new every time. I sat on that tailgate often and tried to swing my legs to the same rhythm as his. I listened intently and worked to visualize what the DJ was narrating. Sometimes it was the local gossip column and other times it was national and international news. Whenever there was a low-interest story on the radio, my *abuelo* would reach for his four-by-six transistor radio, turn down the volume, and share stories of his life's journey. I thoroughly enjoyed learning about his childhood, about his parents and the life they lived. Other times, he focused on my world. He would begin with a series of questions intended at getting to know me and understanding the world of a child my age. With the skill of a master teacher, he began scaffolding his questions and taking the conversations from something that was of high interest to me and easing on to the lesson of the day. He did so with grace and elegance and he would keep a five-year old from losing interest and running off to play. He explained things in ways that helped me comprehend

and he wrapped them up in the same elegant way that my *abuela* wrapped gifts. He encapsulated the takeaways in a *refran* [Spanish sayings] and did so in an effort to make sure I would remember. It was during these lessons that I learned things he would later reference during my teenage years:

*“Mira Gonzalito acuérdate que el que con lobos anda a aullar se enseña.”*

[Remember young Gonzalo, he who runs with the wolves learns to howl.]

*“Mira Gonzalito nunca dejes camino por vereda.”*

[Never leave a paved road for a path.]

*“Recuerda Gonzalito que el que mucho abarca poco aprieta.”*

[He who is overstretched has a hard time reigning things in.]

He imparted wisdom throughout my life and I came to appreciate him more with the passing of time. My *Abuelo* lived to be 88 years old. He was 80 years of age when he realized he should not be driving anymore.

*“Un buen conductor sabe cuándo ya no debe manejar.”*

[A good driver acknowledges when it is no longer safe for him to be driving.]

It was then that he began to talk about selling the 97 hectares of farmland that he had personally cleared when he was recently married to *Abuela* Rosita. It was in a somber voice that he spoke about giving it up. Arthritis had taken its toll and his disfigured hands were the source of much pain. He needed help and I needed his guidance. I told him that if he did not want to sell the ranch yet, I could drive him on Saturday mornings. He liked the idea and his pickup continued to be a classroom for me.

For the next several years, we took weekly trips to Rancho El Naranjo for the purpose of delivering diesel, a salary and a bag of *pan dulce* [sweet bread] for Romualdo his trusted ranch hand. On one of those trips, *Abuelo* asked me to drive him around the perimeter of the property. Driving around the perimeter of the property was not unusual. This was part of an occasional exercise that allowed him to check if the *polocote* [a tall weed] was removed, or if the seedlings were coming up in need of iron-sulfate. His motivation was different that day. As I began down the dirt road, *Abuelo* let out an iconic sigh composed of four faint whistles; each longer than the previous one. With that sigh, I knew class was in session:

*“La vida es como esta vereda Gonzalito; angosta y no muy larga. Tu, como el conductor, decides si sigues el camino andado ó si lo abandonas para andar por las brechas. ¿Ahorita estas estudiando verdad? Te has propuesto una meta”.*

[Life is like this path young Gonzalo; narrow and not very long. You, as the conductor, decide if you follow the known path or if you will abandon it to travel down through the brush. You are currently going to school, right? You have set a goal.]

I never had to wonder when I was being schooled. He had a unique way of delivering a message with a cadence and a graceful reverence. It was a familiar tone and cadence. It was very similar to the tone he used as he facilitated the Wednesday worship service at *El Principe de Paz* Presbyterian Church where he served the congregation as an *Anciano Gobernante* [Governing Elder].

*¿Vez aquella posta blanca? Esa posta marca los límites de esta propiedad. Dale hacia esa posta y no quites tu mirada de ella.*



[Do you see that white post at the end of the road? It is the marker to the property line.  
Head towards it and do not take your eyes off of it.]

He paused as if to allow the portion of the message to percolate. The silence provided just enough time so I could begin to wonder where he was going or what I had done to elicit the message of the day. Was it something I had done? What were my parents telling him? He reached for a couple of Coca Colas that he had carefully wrapped in sheets of *El Bravo*, the daily newspaper that he read religiously.

I must pause here to explain that preparations for a trip to the ranch involved wrapping of two sodas in sheets of newspaper, placing them in his morral [a multipurpose canvas bag], and placin it under the front seat. Preparations, according to my grandfather also called for making sure you loaded a toolbox and chains for the tires, in case there was mud made the dirt road leading to his property impassable.

He asked me to stop the truck and he proceeded to remove the top of the two glass bottles. Drinking a warm Coca Cola at the ranch seemed to be one of life's little pressures for my *Abuelo* and only those of us who were blessed with the opportunity of popping a top with him during one of those excursions understands the unique feeling of sharing a moment and a warm coke with my grandfather.

That day, he pointed to the marker at the end of that path and encouraged me to stay focused on my goals. He told me that there would be many distractions along the journey. He warned that there would be invitations to go fishing, barbecues, poker games and even relationships that would cause me to lose focus. He cautioned me stating that if I took my eye off of the goal and began to set my sites on the distractions that would inevitably be present

along my journey; I was going to go off course and I would miss out on the rewards of reaching my destination.

*El hombre es el arquitecto de su propio destino Gonzalito. Dios nos da oportunidades de hacer decisiones y forjar nuestro futuro. Yo te aseguro que no van a bajar ángeles del cielo para sacarte de un pozo y ponerte en terreno más alto. Al momento que quites tu mirada de la meta te aseguro que dejaras el camino que te lleva hacia tu destino.*

[Every man is the architect of his own destiny young Gonzalo. God allows us to make our own decisions and to forge our own future. I can assure you that angels are not going to descend from heaven to take you out of the depths and to place you on high ground. The moment that you lose focus of your goals, you will inevitably abandon the path that can take you to your destiny.]

Not all lessons were motivational. It soon became clear to me that several of his *enseñanzas* [teachings] were designed to show me the error of my ways. During the time that I was doing my undergraduate work, I worked in the Food Service Warehouse in the Brownsville Independent School District. I was still single and I was budgeting every dollar. I was driving a Jeep Cherokee that I was able to finance through the Teacher's Credit Union and in no time at all I had upgraded the tires on that four wheel drive to eight and a half inch wheels and All Terrain BF Goodrich tires. I also equipped my ride with a Pioneer stereo and a speaker box that occupied the length of the storage area of my Jeep. On one of those Saturday mornings when I showed up to drive him to the ranch, my *Abuelo* asked if I would drive him to the *panaderia* (bakery). He got into the passenger's side and when I pulled out of the driveway, the oversized tires rubbed against the fender well. "What was that?" He asked pretending to be alarmed. I

explained that the sound was the new oversized tires that I had bought for my Jeep; thinking that my response would somehow impress him. The lesson began:

*“¿Y donde están las llantas y rines originales? Se te dañaron o algo?”*

[So where are the original tires and rims? Were they damaged? ]

I drove to the bakery as I explained that these tires and rims made my Jeep look nicer and that I still owned the original tires and rims which were stacked in our back yard. He began to scaffold his questions:

*“¿Y se ve mejor?”*

[And does it look better?]

*“Así que cuanto pagaste por el juego de llantas?”*

[So how much did you pay for this set of wheels?]

I told him I had paid \$225. When I clarified that I had paid \$225 for each wheel, the silence was deafening. He asked if I had paid extra for the tires and when I told him I had paid \$100 for each tire, he had no further questions. In fact, he did not say another word until we left the bakery. He had a special way of making a point by saying nothing at all.

We were almost halfway to his house when *he asked:*

*“¿Y no se verían mejor los \$1,300 en tu cuenta de banco Gonzalito? Ahora, si la gente dijera, mira qué bonito se ve el Jeep de Gonzalo! Vamos a darle unos \$50. Entonces sí, métele las llantas nuevas.”*

[And would not the \$1,300 have looked nicer in your bank account? Now, if people would say, look at Gonzalo's Jeep! It looks so nice. Let's give him \$50. Then, go ahead. Equip it with new wheels].

He was silent the rest of the way and when we pulled in the driveway he sighed again. It was a financial literacy lesson. What I did not realize was that this was just Part I of the lesson. Part II came when he and my grandmother took a trip in my Jeep to visit my sisters at A&I University in Kingsville. He and my grandmother rode in the back seat. When we were on the road, he asked:

*“¿Que es este cajón de muertos que llevas aquí atrás?”*

[What is this coffin that you carry back here?]

*“Es una caja de bocinas para el sonido, abuelo.”*

[It is a speaker box for the sound system, grandpa]

*“¿Y la extra?”*

[And where is the spare tire?]

*“Está en la casa abuelo, no cabía.”*

[It is at home, it did not fit]

*“¿Y si se te baja una llanta qué? Le subes al radio?”*

[So if you get a flat tire, what? Will you turn up the volume?]

He did not say another word throughout the fifty-mile stretch of highway between Raymondville and Sarita. I did hear him sigh a couple of times though and I could not muster the courage to raise the volume on the radio.

## **Finding God's Purpose for My Life**

I graduated high school in 1986 and immediately joined the workforce. I took a job as a gas station attendant at Sunrise Gulf and worked for several years before I took out a \$1,200 student loan to pay tuition and enrolled in the drafting program at TSTC in Harlingen. I was beginning to forge my own destiny. I saved some money and I purchased an old car that I drove to work and school each day. I held a full time job at the gas/service station and I worked on drafting assignments in the office between customers. I do not think I ever turned in an assignment that did not have a fingerprint or a grease stain. My professors came to understand but stressed that in drafting, lines, lettering, layout and neatness were key. One day, a Border Patrol vehicle came rolling in to the Gulf station. The passenger rear tire was flat and the agent needed it fixed. I went to work on the tire and he asked what I was doing with that drawing. I explained that I was going to school and taking classes to be a Junior Draftsman. "Why don't you join the Border Patrol?" he asked. We spoke for quite a while and he went on to tell me many of the benefits of being an agent as I tightened the lug nuts on the tire I had fixed. He went on his way but left me thinking of another career option. He had left an impression on me. Looking back, I think I put weight on this idea because a total stranger thought I was capable. I finished out the fall semester but made a conscious decision not to re-enroll for the spring semester because I had decided I was going to pursue a career in the Border Patrol. In reality, I had taken my eye off the goal as my grandfather had cautioned. In a matter of months, I defaulted on my student loan and began to make payments. The Border Patrol Headquarters was located on the frontage road on the way home. I drove past it every day and several months after I fixed a flat for that Border Patrol Agent, I quit thinking about it and I stopped in. I asked a series of questions and picked up an application for employment. In time, I had taken the written

and the oral exams. They did a background investigation and I did not hear from them again. My father began to worry and he encouraged me every day to go back to school. He told me not to put all my hopes on this plan and not to let time slip away.

*“Ponte a estudiar Gonzalo. No pongas todas tus esperanzas en La Migración. Si se llegan a tardar dos años para responder, vas a tener dos años de colegio y si se tardan cuatro tendrás un título. El tiempo de cualquier manera va a pasar.”*

[Go back to school Gonzalo. Don't put all of your hope in the Border Patrol. If it takes them two years to decide, you will have something to show. If it takes them four years, you will have a degree. Time is still going to elapse.]

I listened to my father. If I was going to go to school full time though, I could not do shift work at the gas station and I needed a steady schedule. I began to look for a job that had fixed hours. I applied with the Brownsville Independent School District. I showed up to the HR office every day, wearing the only tie I owned. I showed up every morning and courteously asked if any new vacancies had become available. My persistence paid off. I got an interview with the Food Service Department. They asked if I could drive a vehicle with a standard transmission. An interview was an opportunity to sell myself and although I had never driven a vehicle with a manual transmission, I told them I could and I said it with confidence. They offered me the job and I spent the weekend learning to drive standard. My friend Hugo from across the street taught me to wrk the clutch and shift the gears in single weekend. I quit my job at the gas station and went to work for the Child Nutrition Department, delivering canned and frozen goods for the kitchen staff. I now had a job that allowed me to work a fixed schedule from 6:30 am to 3:00 pm and this meant I could take night classes from 4:15 to 10:00 pm. I financed my schooling by taking out a loan at Blazer Finance in downtown Brownsville. I renewed the loan at the

beginning of each semester and I made installments while I worked and went to school. One day, after I was attending school at UTB, I received letter in the mail from the U.S. Customs and Immigration Department. It was the much-anticipated response. I opened the letter in the presence of my parents and read the first line.

*We regret to inform you that your application for employment with the United States Border Patrol has been rejected.*

The letter went on to reveal that I had signed the application and taken an oath that all of the information was true and correct to the best of my knowledge. One of the questions asked if I had ever defaulted on a student loan. The letter stated that the Border Patrol wants honest agents and that the background check had revealed that although I had paid back the student loan, the check I used to pay it off was dated after I had signed the oath. They enclosed a copy of the check and the document showing the date I had defaulted on the loan. The Border Patrol banned me from applying for three years. I was crushed. The thought of having been rejected was one thing but I had been rejected for being dishonest. I looked up and my parents were waiting for me to translate.

“¿Que dice?”

[What does it say?]

I was ashamed. I could hardly speak. My parents had invested so much in us and communicated high expectations for our spiritual life and for our life goals. They had given so much of themselves and I was letting them down. I had envisioned how proud they would be the day I walked through the front door in a uniform one day. This vision had played in my mind repeatedly. Instead, my employment was being rejected because I lied. I did not even want to

look at my father. I carried his namesake and he celebrated each time I came home with good grades or a medal for making the All Valley Band by stating:

“¡Ese es mijo, ponga el nombre de su padre muy en alto!”

[That is my boy, lift your father’s name up real high!]

He had a unique way of communicating high expectations. Even when he was celebrating my achievements, he was telling me not to ever embarrass him. In a somber tone, I told them what the letter stated and they responded by lifting me up and giving me words of encouragement. They could tell the letter had broken my spirit. They bowed their heads and lifted me up in prayer asking God to show me the purpose he had for my life. I have worked every day since then to make them proud. I kept going to school and God began to reveal himself in my life.

I set out to be an Education major and continued to work holding various positions in the Child Nutrition Department over the course of 7 years. It was in one of these courses where I met my wife. I was sitting in the front row. She walked in to that classroom and into my life. She went from being my classmate to being my best friend. We went through the Education program together and we grew closer each semester. We leaned on each other and even competed for the better grades. She graduated one semester ahead of me and I was proud of her when she took a position teaching second grade bilingual students at Palmer-Laakso Elementary in the Los Fresnos School District. I finished in December and accepted a job offer teaching a fourth grade bilingual class at Dr. Cash Elementary in San Benito. We both still lived at home but we began to talk about the future. Asking her to marry me was a decision that is second only to deciding to follow the Lord and she is a blessing in my life. After our engagement, we began house shopping. We took a conservative approach and I eventually made an offer on a modest home that was fully furnished. God continued revealing himself in my life and throughout my



life I have experienced what my father taught us during the family worship service. God gives us according to his mercy and grace. He shows us mercy and does not give us what we deserve and it is by His grace that we receive more than we deserve.

### **There is No Such Thing as Coincidence**

It was my first week on the job at Dr. Cash Elementary and I attended a staff meeting that Wednesday. The first item on the agenda was to welcome the new fourth grade teacher on the job. The second item was to inform the staff that the District had received a Title VII grant to put teachers through a Master's in School Leadership. They asked if anyone was interested and I was the only one that raised my hand that day. I stayed back after the meeting and Dr. Greer explained that being an administrator required a minimum of three years of teaching experience. I asked her about the length of the master's and she said three years as she handed me a pen agreeing to allow me to join the cohort. The program was going to pay for tuition and books and all I had to do was attend the classes with a cohort and complete the assignments. I was really excited about this opportunity and I knew, that this was not a coincidence. It was God speaking to me and showing me what he wanted me to do. My father had always taught us to seek God out and told us if we did so, all things would begin to fall in place.

I thoroughly enjoyed teaching fourth grade and accepted every opportunity to serve on campus committees. Each opportunity allowed me to grow professionally and this experience coupled with my graduate coursework prepared me to take the next step.

I was in the final semester of my Master's program, standing in front of the class. It was near the end of the semester and each of us had been assigned a book report on leadership. I was presenting a summary of *The Courage of Leadership* a book that talks about how the courage of

leaders has the potential to inspire followers to commit rather than to comply. I told the group that every school leader needed to keep a copy of this book in their offices as a reminder that sometimes we set out to meet the dragon in the battlefield but that we must realize that there will be times when the dragon will be waiting for us at the gate. At the conclusion of my presentation, my classmates gave me a golfer's clap. I was making my way to my seat when a lady who was taking the same class leaned over to ask if I was really interested in being an administrator. I told her that this is what I was working towards and she invited me to attend a job fair in the Los Fresnos CISD. Other classmates who sat behind her pointed and whispered, "She can get you a job there." I attended the job fair and the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum conducted the interview. That day, Los Fresnos CISD offered me an assistant principal position at Lopez-Riggins Elementary. San Benito CISD eventually released me to go work in Los Fresnos. The superintendent in San Benito stated he was willing to make an investment and that perhaps one day, I would return with experience. The following school year, I went to the Los Fresnos CISD and served in that capacity for two years and I applied everything that I had learned in my previous district. The principal allowed me to start student clubs that engaged students and created a positive campus climate. These activities were well received by parents. I continued to embrace opportunities to participate in committees and to look for ways to grow as a professional and I did something inexplicable. I applied for the Border Patrol again. I needed closure and I wanted to know if I could have made it. I went through the written and the oral interview again and waited for the background check. I also applied for a position as an elementary principal and waited for a decision from the interview committee.

## **Cuan Grande Es El/ How Great Though Art**

My wife and I were home when the phone rang one night during that summer. My mother told me that my father wasn't feeling well.

“Tu papá está enfermo. Algo tiene en su piel. Parece ser una alergia a un alimento. ¿Podras venir a llevarlo al hospital?”

[Your father is not well. Something is wrong with his skin. It appears to be an allergic reaction to something he ate. Can you come to take him to the hospital?]

I drove him to the hospital. It did not look like a rash to me. He had spots on his skin and it was obvious he was retaining fluids. He was admitted to the hospital where he remained for several weeks. My brother Felipe and I took turns spending the night. They ran a number of tests and I was still there one morning when the doctor was making the rounds. He came in with a clipboard and told me that the ultrasound had confirmed that my father had cirrhosis of the liver. I asked him what it meant and he told me it was terminal at this stage. He said it could be two days or two weeks and that it was hard to tell. I asked if he was a candidate for a transplant and before I could finish my question he said no and then he turned and walked away. My father was listening as he laid in the hospital bed behind me. I turned around and the tears began to run down my cheek.

“¿Que dijo?”

[What did he say?]

I choked up and could not speak. Somehow, I translated every word and by the time I finished I was crying uncontrollably. He was so composed and he spoke with self-assurance when he asked me:

*“¿Porque lloras?”*

[Why are you crying?]

“No llores“

[Don't cry.]

He pointed to the bible he had on the night stand that was next to his hospital bed.

*“¿Vez esa biblia que está allí? Levántala. Ábrela a 2 de corintios 5:8”*

[See that bible? Pick it up. Open it to 2 Corinthians 5:8.]

My tears continued to roll and to fall on the pages of the scripture.

*“Leéla, leéla.”*

[Read it, read it.]

I read it as I sobbed:

*Pero confiamos, y más quisiéramos estar, ausentes del cuerpo y presentes al Señor.*

[We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.]

My father went on to explain:

*“Yo no tengo miedo. Yo sé a dónde iré. Yo sé que tú y tu familia están asistiendo a la iglesia. Pero déjame decirte, si el mensaje no está tocando las cuerdas de tu corazón y no estas alimentando tu alma, te imploro que busques una iglesia donde si lo sientas y que sigas alimentando to alma. Un día tú te vas a encontrar en esta posición, y cuando ese día llegue, tienes que estar absolutamente seguro de a donde iras.”*

[I am not afraid. I know where I am going. I know you and your family are going to church. But let me tell you, if the message is not pulling at the strings of your heart and

you are not feeding your soul, I implore you to find a church that does and that you continue to feed your soul. You will find yourself in this position one day and when that day comes, you need to be certain where you are going.]

I spent as much time with him as I physically could. Over the course of the next few days, his condition deteriorated rapidly. My father died in that hospital surrounded by all of us. We gathered around him and held a worship service in the same fashion that he had led us for years. We lifted up prayers of gratitude and sang Oh Lord How Great Thou Art. I miss him dearly.

### **Listen and You Will Hear His Voice**

The following school year, I was hired as a principal at Palmer-Laakso Elementary and I wished my father had been around to see it. This was the same campus where my wife had worked since she graduated from high school. My promotion was bittersweet because my hiring resulted in her transfer to a school in the most rural area of the district. I had been the reason she was being transferred from the campus that she loved. We agreed that this was good for our family even though her new assignment was even further from our son's day care. She would have to get up even earlier to drop him off and get to work on time. I took over a high performing school and I learned as much as I could from the staff. I also contributed by adding student clubs and worked to create a harmonious climate.

I was in my first year as a principal when I received a letter from The U.S. Customs and Immigration Department. It was a letter telling me the date to report to the Border Patrol Academy. I was happy. There was no way I was going to leave the field of Education but in my own way, I had finally found closure. It was the closest thing to correcting what I had done wrong. I decided to write a letter turning down the opportunity. A couple of weeks later, I was

doing recess duty when I was called to the office. The mother of two of our students was asking to withdraw her children from school. She had arrived at the school in a Border Patrol vehicle that was waiting in the parking lot. She was going to be deported and she was there to pick up the kids for the last time. Overcome with emotion, I was sad to see them go. I reflected on what happened that day and realized that I had made the right choice.

Two years into this assignment, the superintendent summoned me to her office. She informed me that she was reassigning me to the position of principal of Olmito Elementary. My new charge was the opening of a new campus. This was a challenge that I had not anticipated and if I had, I might not have started another graduate program. A group of administrators in the District had signed up for courses towards a superintendent's certificate and the university was willing to offer classes in Los Fresnos if they could get a minimum of ten students to enroll. My colleagues convinced me to join the cohort and since I was wrapping up my second year as principal, I felt I could take this on.

At first, I did not understand the rationale for my reassignment but I came to accept it and decided to view this new assignment as a challenge. In hindsight, I am glad that I approached it from that perspective because opening this campus would actually prove to be a series of challenges. The greatest challenge was that relative to the functionality of other campuses, Olmito Elementary, still had a significant list of items that were incomplete. Those of us, who worked there, could not understand how the District received a certificate of occupancy. The parking lot was not paved; the intercom nor the fire alarm were operational and we did not have any doors throughout the campus or stalls in the restrooms. The frustration by staff grew stronger with each passing day and keeping everyone focused on instruction while construction continued around us was a test of leadership. After the first week of school, I called a meeting

and told the staff that we had an opportunity to define the character of our school. I told staff that at the end of the school year, people would either point in our direction and say, “Poor staff at Olmito Elementary. What could one expect with all the challenges they had to overcome?” I then presented an alternative and told them that we also had an opportunity to do things in such a way that people would look at us and say, “Wow, look at what they accomplished, in spite of all the challenges they had to overcome.” The demeanor of the staff changed to one of resolve and commitment. I felt that this was a defining moment for us as a campus and we never looked at the challenges the same way again. We came together with the most pleasant disposition and finished the first school year with a Texas Education Agency *Recognized School* rating.

Principals filled the back of the Board Room during a Special Called Meeting in December of 2005. The strained relationship between the superintendent and the board meant meetings would regularly extend beyond midnight. Still, administration required school principals attend and stay for the entirety of every meeting. It was well after the midnight hour that night when the board came back into open session and took action to part ways with the superintendent. The agenda listed an item for closed session to discuss a separation agreement. On the advice of counsel, the board also appointed an interim superintendent. The first motion to name an interim did not pass. Then, the board passed a motion to name me as the interim superintendent. With flip phones in hand, the audience exited the room while principals remained trying to make sense of what had transpired. The board president asked to speak to me and provided me a brief explanation. I could see him speaking to me but I could not hear him over the pounding of my heart. I explained the entire experience when I got home and my wife and I took a knee to pray for guidance and ask the Lord to allow His Spirit to permeate the district. The challenges of opening a school paled in comparison to the challenges I would face

as an interim superintendent. One could say there was a bit of a learning curve for an elementary principal that had just received his superintendent's certificate but I was willing to serve in this capacity until the board found a permanent superintendent.

It was during the first few days in this new assignment that our Chief Financial Officer asked to meet with me. He informed me that after twenty-four years of service he had decided to retire at the end of the year and that he highly recommended the passing of a bond issue for the construction of schools. He shared a demographic study that showed that enrollment was beyond the capacity of some of our schools and he pointed to the projections by the demographer for continued growth. The Lord blessed me the day that Martin Pena, a retired superintendent from Los Fresnos who also served in various districts, walked into the office to offer his assistance and serve as a mentor. God placed in him my life for the benefit of the community and the organization and I came to admire his selfless service and genuine desire to help me grow. He provided me with the framework of school finance and working knowledge of the Instructional Facilities Allotment, a state funded program that assists property poor communities finance the construction of instructional facilities.

A solitude accompanies you in the role of the superintendent. It does not take very long to realize that you are not able to take on all the responsibilities on your own and that you need divine intervention. My parents taught us to humble ourselves before the Lord and to seek His guidance and I wasted no time trying to lead the district on my own. I humbled myself, before God and asked him to give me the courage of David, the wisdom of Solomon and the strength of Samson and I believe He has given me according to His mercy and grace. A climate dominated by harmony has led to a high degree of stability that enabled us each year to build on the efforts



of the previous year. Our collective efforts have allowed us to tackle challenges that in my moments of weakness seemed insurmountable.

During the first five months that I served as interim, I spent a significant amount of time praying for wisdom, immersing myself in the finance structure, the Instructional Facilities Allotment (IFA) and presenting the information in an awareness campaign throughout the community. In May of 2006, a referendum for a \$33 million school construction bond passed with a 77% approval rating. The Lord blessed this campaign with the support of an action committee that came together to ensure that the community understood the importance of investing in the education of our students. The community of Los Fresnos traditionally supported administration during bond elections and the committee worked to continue with that practice. Approval of this referendum meant the district could now apply for financial assistance through the state IFA program that funded as much as seventy-five cents on the dollar.

It was during one of the presentations to a room full of parents, that one of the members of the board approached me to comment on how well the community responded to my presentation. He noted the manner in which I was able to explain the intricacies of the program in English and Spanish and asked if given the opportunity, I would consider staying on as superintendent. It was shortly thereafter that the board of trustees moved to hire me in that capacity.

The passing of the bond was only the beginning, and we continued to work with various firms to carry out a plan to build two elementary schools, a ninth grade campus, and several infrastructure improvements. The district was working with a financial advising firm that prepared the district's application and submitted it to the Texas Education Agency while we worked with an architectural firm to finalize the architectural drawings. Several weeks before

the Texas Education Agency was to release the list of IFA grant recipients, we received a call from the representative with the financial advising firm. He was calling to inform us that due to a clerical error that left out “form B” of the application packet, the district would not be on the list for assistance through the Instructional Facilities Allotment grant program. It took me a couple of days to get over the initial shock and internalize what occurred to create the circumstances that led to that phone call. The next several weeks, would be a test of leadership. I exercised the patience of Job but soon it became apparent that I would have to draw on the courage I had been praying for and that I would have to work with resolve if the students of our district were going to receive the benefits of the debt service that our community had overwhelmingly endorsed. The scripture states that where two or more gather to pray, the Lord will be among them and I will never forget the days that our CFO and I took a knee and raised prayers asking the Lord to do what several people, including the Commissioner of Education, said was no longer possible. Our resolve, integrity, and commitment to the students we serve were tested during the next several months but one August morning, one day before the list of districts that would receive state assistance for the construction of instructional facilities, I took a phone call from the Commissioner of Education. I was leading a training during our Administrators’ Academy prior to the start of the school year, I stepped out of the high school to answer the phone that was ringing in my pocket. He was calling to congratulate us and to inform me that he did not know what had happened but the Governor for the State of Texas had instructed him to put Los Fresnos back on the list. I thanked the commissioner and I took a knee as I hung up the phone to thank God for answering our prayers. I returned to the training and we continued to work on a plan for improving teaching and learning.

We set out each day to deliver a quality educational experience that results in the development of socially responsible life-long learners. From the day one, when I came to work as an assistant principal at Lopez-Riggins Elementary, I have been committed to the mission of Los Fresnos CISD. In a very short period, I came to understand the unique needs and characteristics of the students. It was through my interactions and the relationships I established with parents and community members. One-to-one meetings with parents revealed a genuine concern for the education of their children and a belief that education holds the promise for a brighter future for their children. It soon became clear that parents cherish and desire a formal education that for circumstances beyond their control had eluded them. Well over three-fourths of the student population in Los Fresnos CISD are economically disadvantaged. The challenge for teachers is creating the experiences that students who live in poverty would otherwise not have. Through these experiences, teachers are able to create schema and a framework for vocabulary and higher order thinking that enables students to think critically about the world around them. This challenge is exponential when you consider the structure of a school funding system based on property values and the geographic location of the Los Fresnos CISD, a district located in the heart of Cameron County, one of the most impoverished areas in the nation. In my role as the superintendent, I was able to act on something I knew to be true as a principal. Sustaining the success of our students would be contingent on our ability to exercise sound financial decisions. I encouraged staff to “save where we can so that we could spend where we must. This philosophy was further instilled in me by a conservative board of trustees that consistently expressed a clear understanding of the fiduciary responsibility that had been entrusted to them by the community of Los Fresnos. I continued to grow professionally and became well versed in the structure in school funding. I began to refine my knowledge through

participation in statewide organizations and to serve on various advisory committees at the Texas Education Agency. As I traveled throughout Texas on personal and professional trips, I took note of the quality experiences afforded to students enrolled in other parts of the state. Even our most conservative approach to the allocation of resources would not free up the financial means to fund the equipment and facilities needed to create similar experiences for the children we serve. I realized that our students would one day compete at the post-secondary level with counterparts that have participated in classroom experiences in areas of science, technology, engineering and math applications that we are not able to provide due to a lack of financial resources. The disparity in the resources that make this possible and knowing that I had to be a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves emboldened my resolve. Moved by a moral imperative to stand up for students that are not worth any less than students in other parts of the state, I agreed to serve as a witness for the Taxpayer and Student Fairness Coalition that filed a suit against the State of Texas asking for equity and adequacy in the funding of schools. The Texas Education Agency put us through what I referred to as the punishment phase with a voluminous request for information that consisted of 147 items. Our staff worked hard to compile the reports and although it meant we were all going to work long hours to prepare, we would not be deterred and felt we had a moral obligation to stand up for our students. I worked tirelessly to prepare for the day I would take the witness stand and when the day came, I did not let my nerves and the beating of my heart get in the way. I drew on the courage of God's promises and the experiences I had been afforded. Judge Deitz, at the District Court ruled in favor of the children of the state but that decision was overturned through the Texas Supreme Court Ruling stating:

*The Framers of our Texas Constitution placed the responsibility for education policymaking squarely with the Legislature. Those decisions are not immune from judicial review. Lawmakers decide if laws pass, and judges decide if those laws pass muster. But our lenient standard of review in this policy-laden area counsels modesty. The judicial role is not to second-guess whether our system is optimal, but whether it is constitutional.*

*Our Byzantine school funding “system” is undeniably imperfect, with immense room for improvement. But it satisfies minimum constitutional requirements. Accordingly, we decline to usurp legislative authority by issuing reform diktats from on high, supplanting lawmakers’ policy wisdom with our own. The Texas Legislature, the center of policymaking gravity, is not similarly bound. And smartly so. Our Constitution endows the people’s elected representatives with vast discretion in fulfilling their constitutional duty to fashion a school system fit for our dynamic and fast-growing State’s unique characteristics. We hope lawmakers will seize this urgent challenge and upend an ossified regime ill-suited for 21st century Texas.*

I see myself in the students we serve and I understand their unique needs. Driven by a moral imperative, I joined those who were willing to take the witness stand in an effort to be a voice for those who could not speak for themselves. In doing so, I joined the efforts of those who came before us and did their part to continue the campaign for educational equality in Texas (San Miguel, 2000). Although the outcome did not clearly result in providing the equity and adequacy in school funding, I remain committed to working with a competent team that passionately sets out to create opportunities for students to succeed. Over the years, our students have experienced success and I thank God for allowing me the opportunity to serve in this community.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS: EMERGENT THEMES

I have dedicated the second portion of this chapter to the data collected from the five focus group interviews. Several categories emerged from the analysis of the data and I have captured the findings in this chapter.

#### **Research Question 1:**

In Research Question 1, I explored how my life-experiences as an immigrant who grew up in the borderlands of Texas shaped me and prepared me to be an agent of change in the role of the superintendent in the Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District: a District serving predominantly Hispanic students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds. The data collected through the autoethnographic exploration yielded a rich source of data. The emerging categories from my *testimonio* were: Enseñanzas [Teachings], Family, Faith, Economic Hardship, Education, and High Expectations.

#### ***Enseñanzas***

The researcher noted experiences that were rich in what Delgado Bernal (2001) categorized as *pedagogies of the home*. These experiences emerged in the interaction between the subject at the center of the study and various members of the family. The experiences appeared to be embedded into the fiber of daily life and were clearly intended to pass on family

values, culture, a positive outlook on life, a Christian faith, making sound decisions and even financial literacy.

One of the participants in the Family Focus Group stated that among the things learned at home was respect for parents and elders. The participant stated that these teachings transcend the household and that this respect now extends to the immediate supervisor/boss.

*“I think we all agree that we see our bosses as our respected leaders and we need to respect them. Even when they are not there, just like when dad was working away from home, we know that we need to respect them and work just as efficiently, just because they are gone, does not mean we disrespect them. I think everyone agrees that this is what was ingrained in us and we are applying these things in our own professional life.”*

Participant three added:

*“I think another value that was passed on to us that develops leadership is service. My mother served us with humility and dedication. When she could not, my father would serve her. He would cook, he loved to cook, he loved to serve us and create dishes and have us taste them and he would serve us. He was a great helping hand when he was home and I see that as the heart of a servant and not an authoritative figure but one that leads through service”.*

Participants recalled the firmness and strict environment of their upbringing. They recalled that regardless of the circumstances respect was the cornerstone in the household. Children were not allowed to disrespect elders or each other. Participants recall having to evaluate who was being invited into the household. One participant recalled, “You had better make sure that the person you were inviting to cross the threshold was not going to show

disrespect to any member of the household with their language or the manner in which they carried themselves. Another participant recalled writing a letter to her mother when she was in college.

*“ I wrote her a letter in Spanish, even though by then, I would have felt more comfortable expressing myself in English. I would not dare write her in English even though mom would have understood every word. She even spoke some English by then. It was considered disrespectful. I remember that she did not write me back but held on to it and the next time I visited, she had corrected my Spanish on the letter and during that visit she went over the corrections with me. ”*

### **Family**

The importance of the family unit emerged as one of the most consistent themes. The researcher noted a number of references made to the absence of the father figure during episodes in which he was away from home working in the shrimping industry. The researcher also noted the value that the narrator, who is at the center of the study, placed in the role of the father when he was not away from the household for reasons related to work. The father’s presence was important in the rearing of the family, providing guidance in decision-making and most importantly as the spiritual leader. The role of the mother was no less important. The researcher noted that she occupies a special place within the family unit. Participants recalled that she exhibited the qualities of a dynamic leader that naturally tailored her leadership style to the circumstances while exhibiting the “Guerrera Spirit” (Guzman, 2012). The subject at the center of the study clearly intended to capture the noble nature of the mother who chose to defer that role of spiritual leader to the head of the household; choosing to remain instead in a supporting role. The researcher asserted the following:



*My father came to know the Lord because of my mother and her Christian upbringing. She had grown up in the Presbyterian Church and she was steadfast in the Lord. She was well versed in the scripture but she encouraged and supported him to take the lead role in our spiritual upbringing.*

The Family Focus Group communicated that she had the ability to reinforce and inculcate Christian teachings without trampling on the father's role of spiritual leader in the household. Participants spoke of their mother's skill in quoting scripture and could take a conversation back to scripture regardless of the topic. They recalled that when the patriarch of the family was away at work, she would skillfully work him into conversations with the kids. Instead of simply quoting scripture she would remind her children of a quote or something he had referenced during family worship service.

*When dad was away, mom had to be the mother and the father in the house. She never let us feel his absence. When I would ask, if I could go to a gathering, she would say, when your father comes back, you could ask him for permission. We will respect whatever he decides.*

The grandparents or *abuelos* had a significant role in helping shape the researcher/subject at the center of this study. The relationship with *Abuelo* and the anecdotes shared in the narrative provided insight into the manner in which the character of the researcher was forged. It is clear that *Papá*, *Mamá* and *Abuelo* drew his authority to impart wisdom from the wise decisions that he had made and the manner in which he chose to live his own life. It was noted that the narrator does not question the credibility of *Papá*, *Mamá* or *Abuelo* as the authority figures who were clearly working to help shape his character nor does he point to evidence of inconsistencies in

the enseñanzas or teachings that these family figures were attempting to transmit and the lived experiences.

Anecdotes were shared that capture the manner in which parents directly ask that respect is shown to elders. The narrator recalled the following:

*“En esta casa van a hablar Español. Que falta de respeto es ese?*

*Como van a estar hablando en Ingles delante de sus padres y sus abuelos?”*

*[You will speak Spanish in this house. What lack of respect is that?*

*How can you be speaking English in the presence of your parents and grandparents?]*

Participant 6 relived moments in which respect for family was inculcated.

*“Family gatherings were very important but it was very important at these gatherings that we showed respect as we greeted. It was expected that we say, “Hi grandpa. Hi Grandma.” That we say hello with a hug and a kiss and if you were distracted with your cousins, you were immediately reprimanded, “Oh no. You go greet your grandparents with a hug and a kiss and you look them in the eyes.” You could not move on to say hello to the next person until they were finished conversing with you. Then you could run off and go play.”*

Although parents demanded respect for the elders of the family, data collected demonstrates the manner in which the elders in the family garnered respect through relationships and the exchanges with the narrator.

*“He did so with grace and elegance and he would keep a five-year old from losing interest and running off to play. He explained things in ways that helped me comprehend*

*and he wrapped them up in the same elegant way that my abuela wrapped gifts. He encapsulated the takeaways in a refrain [Spanish sayings] and did so in an effort to make sure I would remember.”*

*He imparted wisdom throughout my life and I came to appreciate [Abuelo] more with the passing of time.*

Participants in the Family Focus Group recalled the manner in which culture was transmitted.

Participant 2 stated:

*“Mom would teach us how to sing rancheras. She would liked to sing rancheras, and obviously, the genre is part of our culture. I remember her saying, I want you to learn how to sing this song. I would stand there and she would sing the first verse and she would have me repeat it. She would stop and tell me, “Okay, no. You need to stand up straight” and go on to teach me how to hold my hands and the posture and she was transmitting, you know, that artistic thing that she had that was very her. She would teach you how to correctly sing and how to live the song and I remember that the better, I listened and mimicked what she was asking me to do, the more proud she would be. She would say, “Exactly! That is how you are supposed to do it.”*

Participants agreed that one of the things that they cherished most was time with family and the unity that was lived.

*“When it comes to holidays, it was getting together for Christmas, for Easter. It was family, it was food, it was unity. The holy days were very important in our family.”*

## Faith

The data collected in the *testimonio* provided by the researcher is rich in references to the spiritual capital imparted during his upbringing. The data captures the nurturing of a Christian faith beginning during the researcher's childhood years and continuing throughout his upbringing. The constant presence of the accumulation of spiritual wealth was noted through economic hardships, periods of prosperity, emigration or the relocation of the family and periods of living in state of nepantla. Within the family unit there was a consistent nurturing of and a connection to Christian faith and values. The spiritual life of the elders in the family was anchored in Christianity and they made a conscious effort to inculcate these values through song, anecdotes, advice and story;

- *El hombre es el arquitecto de su propio destino Gonzalito. Dios nos da oportunidades de hacer decisiones y forjar nuestro futuro. Yo te aseguro que no van a bajar angeles del cielo para sacarte de un poso y ponerte en terreno mas alto. Al momento que quites tu mirada de la meta te aseguro que dejaras el camino que te lleva hacia tu destino.*

[Every man is the architect of his own destiny young Gonzalo. God allows us to make our own decisions and to forge our own future. I can assure you that angels are not going to descend from heaven to take you out of the depths and to place you on high ground. The moment that you lose focus of your goals, you will inevitably abandon the path that can take you to your destiny.]

The researcher referred to his Christian faith and the manner in which this was modeled:

*-They bowed their heads and lifted me up in prayer asking God to show me the purpose he had for my life. I have worked every day since then to make them proud. I kept going to school and God began to reveal himself in my life.*

*-My father had always taught us to seek God out and told us if we did so, all things would begin to fall in place.*

The researcher also professed his own faith and Christian values:

*-God continued revealing himself in my life and throughout my life I have experienced what my father taught us during the family worship service. God gives us according to his mercy and grace. He shows us mercy and does not give us what we deserve and it is by His grace that we receive more than we deserve.*

*-It was God speaking to me and showing me what he wanted me to do.*

*-God placed in him my life for the benefit of the community and the organization and I came to admire his selfless service and genuine desire to help me grow.*

### **Economic Hardship**

The data collected captures periods of economic hardship that presented challenges for the household. The researcher noted that it is during the periods of economic hardship that the researcher accumulated increased amounts of cultural and spiritual wealth. The exercise of spiritual values and faith was observed throughout the narrative but was also more pronounced during periods of economic hardships. Participant three of the Family Focus Group stated:

*“One of the things that I remember and that gave me a lot of confidence is the fact that when dad was home and not working, he was present. He was not off doing other things.*

*He would sit and talk to us. He would teach us. He was there and that provided for me a great sense of security.”*

Participant 6 in the Family Focus Group stated:

*“My favorite memory of him, because I miss him so much is when he would come home from work. I just remember him come up on the driveway, get out of the car and walk towards us with his arms extended and this big smile. He was so strong it seemed like he was able to carry us all at the same time. He was as happy to see us as we were to see him. When he had that accident, it is almost like I have chosen not to remember that. I almost forgot what he had to do to recover. How financially, we went through a very difficult time but I don’t even want to dwell on that because.. I mean there was a lot of good that came from that because we so their faith [in action]. We looked to [mom and dad] for that faith support that we knew that no matter what we were going to be ok because God is for us and not against us, and that He would provide. Sure enough, we never went without but just thinking about it brought a flood, it opened of emotion.”*

Participant 4 added:

*“This image of my father coming home with arms extended... He had that accident and his knee was never the same, then when he was able to take the next job, he still walked on that knee and he never quit. Financially, things were hard. He walked to work. We saw it in action. He never quit. He was a provider and took pride in doing so. He had an amazing work ethic.”*

*“Mom was the manager of finances in the home, but she was also very resourceful. She wove plant holders, and winter caps out of yarn and sell them to teachers. She had a way in the garden so she would sell some of her plants to try to make ends meet.”*

## Education

The first expression of a desire to pursue a post-secondary education is mentioned in connection with a summer youth work experience. The narrator comes the realization:

*“Mas mescla! Mas mescla! Mas mescla!”*

[More mix! More mix! More mix!]

*I was physically spent every day and had no trouble falling asleep when I got home during those two unforgettable weeks. I could hear the voices of those bricklayers in my dreams. Nothing made me more college ready than the hard labor the bricklayers put us through. I distinctly remember thinking, “There is no way, I can spend my life mixing cement. I have to go to college and get a degree.”*

The data collected in this study also shows a desire to pursue a career in architecture during high school and after graduation from high school. The narrator shares a journey that leads to the field of Education and an eventual desire to achieve a higher level of proficiency in a challenging leadership position in the field.

Participants of the Family Focus Group stated that parents expected “good grades”. Participant 2 stated that he remembered the grandfather instilling the need to acquire a formal education as this was something that could not be taken away from you. When discussing whether there was an emphasis on acquiring a formal education, several participants of this Family Focus Group stressed that both parents but their mother in particular, stressed the value of bilingualism and retaining the proper Spanish as a component of a formal education. Parents cautioned their children about the erosion of conservative values and about straying from their Christian upbringing. Participant 5 stated:

*“I remember how mom and dad would inculcate this in us by quoting scripture: For what profits a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul.”*

Participant 4 recalled an instance in which she was doing homework when the maternal grandparents came to visit.

*“I was doing some social studies homework and my grandfather approached me at the dining room table. He asked what I was studying and I made the mistake of telling him what I was studying. He immediately said, “Oh no, no. That is not how they acquired that land”. He began to tell me stories and to share his knowledge”. I remember him telling me that those who get to write history get to tell it from their perspective.”*

Participant two stated:

*“I recall that when he was shrimping, he would show us his hands, he would say “Look at my hands. I want you to get an education so that you do not have to have your hands [chalice] like mine.”*

### **High Expectations**

The data collected describes a culture of high expectations that encompasses various aspects of the narrator’s upbringing. This culture of high expectations is palpable at the initial stages of the life’s journey and sustained throughout the narrative. The data indicates that there were high expectations in educational attainment and participation in activities intended for the enrichment of the academic experience. The high expectations also hold true for the manner in which adults were addressed and how respect was communicated in relationships. The adults communicated the high expectations, held themselves to those same standards, and demonstrated respect for each other’s roles as members of the family.



Each member of the family communicated high expectations in unique ways and the data collected reveals that from a very early age, the narrator was being shaped in a nurturing environment in which the elders in the family served as a resource to show where pitfalls may exist. The narrator captures the manner in which his father communicated high expectations:

*I carried his namesake and he celebrated each time I came home with good grades or a medal for making the All Valley Band by stating:*

“¡Ese es miyo; ponga el nombre de su padre muy en alto!”

[That is my boy; lift your father’s name up high!]

*He had a unique way of communicating high expectations.*

Participants in the Family Focus Group recalled that their mother communicated high expectations by preparing a poem for each of her children while they were still in the womb. They recalled how she shared it with them when they were older and the immense pressure to rise to the level of expectations that was embedded in the stanzas of her poetry.

## **Research Question 2:**

In Research Question 2, I examined the manner in which relationships with members of the learning community shaped my character and how my character in turn shaped the organization. The emerging categories from my *testimonio* and the five focus groups were; The Pulse of the Community, Effective Leadership, and Overcoming the Struggles of Poverty through Education.

### **The Pulse of the Community**

The consensus among the former Los Fresnos superintendents that participated in the focus group interview is that high expectations for the performance of students emanates from

the community. They elect trustees that share the same philosophy of education and charge them with hiring a superintendent that is committed to continuous improvement. Throughout the interview, superintendents stressed the importance of understanding the needs of the community and emphasized that establishing and maintaining relationships with members of the community of Los Fresnos was imperative. They further stated that it is in that interaction with the superintendent, that the community feels empowered. Participant 2 stated:

*“It is through that relationship that the community builds trust, respect and show their support.”*

An Administrator Focus Group composed of administrators that have served in Los Fresnos for over 10 years concurred with the need to build relationships through active participation in the community and the importance of understanding their needs and expectations.

Participant 6 of the Principal Focus Group stated:

*“I think just understanding that the community is a huge part of what we do, keeping them at the forefront of our decision making – making sure that kids are the primary concern...we take on their cultural celebrations, we bring them into our schools and we celebrate them. They become part of our family and we [become part] of theirs”.*

One of the superintendents drew laughter from the other participants when, in an effort to illustrate how he perceived the community’s expectation to be visible and to interact with them in meaningful ways by stating:

*“I have never attended so many weddings and funerals in my life as I did when I came to Los Fresnos”.*

The Superintendent Focus Group went on to reveal that the community of Los Fresnos takes pride in having high performing schools because they see education as a vehicle to a better future for the next generation. This group was unanimous in their belief that a superintendent in Los Fresnos has to be clearly grounded in the “why” of the position. Both stated that this was unique when compared to the other districts where they had worked. The perception that the community wants good schools and is attentive to the overall performance of students and the management of the District was also unanimous among the superintendents. Principals stated that there is a culture of high expectations. Participant 1 of the Administrator Focus Group expressed:

*“Los Fresnos has always expected that we will perform above the region, above the state in everything that we do in academics, always”.*

The focus group of trustees also recognized that there exists in the community, a culture of high expectations for student performance. Participant 6 was emphatic when asserting the following:

*“A culture of excellence. We have that culture. We are always looking at the state and how we are compare with the state [performance]. I think that has built in from past Boards and people in the community. That is the one thing that I always remember that people made comments to me when I was first running for the Board and stuff about that. It is an expectation, it is a culture that we have here. When you get in, you need to make sure you are going to carry that on. You know what I mean. Mrs. Romero, I can remember having that conversation with me.”*

Participant 3 spoke of the importance of maintaining a “culture of excellence”:

*“We want our kids to compete, not just here in the valley, we want them to compete statewide, we want them to be part of our motto, “What We Do Here Shapes the World” and the only way we can have our kids changing the world is if they are at that [high performance]level”.*

Participant 1 in the Board Member Focus Group asserted the following:

*“When we are talking about academics, I think that the sense of community and what is expected from the community is excellence. Before academics were measured as they are now, people would say, “Oh we have good schools”. But we were graded on things that were not measuring academics, we were graded on band, we were graded on athletics and anything that could be measured, the community demanded you be the best. So when the accountability of academics and student performance came around, the goal was still the same. This community expects the best no matter what it is. We did not have mariachi for a long time, but once we got it, it became the best. You know, we might not have had wrestling until this year, but the expectation is still the same because you are not just wrestling anywhere. The community expects the best, whatever it is”.*

Superintendents recalled the pride that community members express when the school district is the topic of conversation and how the school district is a source of unity for residents of all ages. Referring to community pride, a principal who participated in a focus group interview asserted that coming from another district, he could not understand the pride with which they [the community] wear the Falcon moniker. “You know, anywhere they go, there is a certain amount of pride; there is an amount of joy they feel when they say hey, my kids go to Los Fresno or I graduated from Los Fresno.”

The perceptions of these focus groups was validated by the responses by participants of a Community Member Focus Group. Community members expressed an expectation that the superintendent of the Los Fresnos School District have a clear understanding of the unique needs and characteristics of the community. They stated with conviction that they felt this should hold true in every community and they left no doubt that administration is a steward of the resources that the community has earmarked for the education of their children.

Participant 1 provided the following statement:

*“A good education is very important to our children and the superintendent, Board members and the community should all be on the same frequency when it comes to that. I think it is one of the most important things that a superintendent must be able to pull this district forward and it should be that way in any district.”*

Participant 5 added:

*“I think it is really important that when a person decides that she or he has a desire or decides that they are going to be a superintendent or want to go along with that type of career, that they know what it is really going to entail. I realize that they do a lot of schooling and education and so forth and so on but they need to have a commitment, a complete commitment, not only to their family, but that they know that they are looked at every day, seven days a week and 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. You have to earn the respect of the people you supervise, the Board, the teachers, but also of the community.”*

Participant 2 shared a reciprocal relationship of accountability, pride and respect:

*“The most valuable resource in our community is our children. When our children are winners from UIL to swimming, it makes it easier to pay our taxes. I have paid a lot of*

*taxes for many, many years and so did my parents and grandparents. It makes us proud in our community to have a great leader at the top, it starts at the top”.*

### **Effective Leadership**

Several themes emerged during the data collection process pertaining to leadership. The most frequently cited themes included a focus on student performance with a commitment to continuous improvement, respect, and humility and a description of the data collected is provided here.

Participants in this study stated that Los Fresnos CISD is not unlike other school districts that insist that the superintendent of schools share the morals and values of the community. Participants stated that the superintendent is expected to lead with integrity and honest. Participants also noted that a trustworthy leader with a strong work ethic was most desirable in Los Fresnos. The Superintendent Focus Group recalled that there is an expectation throughout the community of Los Fresnos for the superintendent to be versatile in her or his leadership style to provide leadership commensurate to the circumstances surrounding a given set of circumstances. Superintendents that participated in the focus group stated that the community of Los Fresnos CISD views the district’s leader as an agent of change that is prepared to break through barriers, cultural or otherwise, with good communication and problem solving skills.

Participants clearly articulated the importance of the attainment of a quality education for all students in the Los Fresnos School District and it was evident that the perception among the participants of this study is that the superintendent of schools plays a vital role in achieving the District’s mission. It is important to note that participants in the Board Member Focus Group and the Community Focus Group recalled that Los Fresnos CISD has always had good

leadership and each group could recall the era and the contributions the systemic change they had made and how each had built on the foundation left by the prior administration. Focus groups of former superintendents, community members, administrators, and the Board of Trustees, spoke of a commitment to excellence and an expectation for students to compete at the highest levels in curricular, extra-curricular and co-curricular programs. The data collected indicates an expectation that the superintendent in Los Fresnos must lead with a focus on student performance and these four focus groups stated that academic performance with an emphasis on continuous improvement was the top priority. The researcher also noted that on numerous occasions participants stated that the expectations they have for the superintendent in Los Fresnos should be the same for any district. One of the participants in the community focus groups stated:

“I think it should start with the superintendent knowing how the community of Los Fresnos feels about their children”. The most important thing, the most important product of this school [district] is our children. And a good education, is very important to our children and the community, the board members and certainly the superintendent should be on the same page. I think this is one of the most important things that a superintendent must be able to have to be able to pull this district forward or any district forward.”

In responding to a question pertaining to cultural synchronicity, Participant 1 in the Board Member Focus Group stated:

*“I think that cultural synchronicity was the only accountability we had before. I would have imagined that [a superintendent’s] probability of remaining within that community was not good if the community did not feel you were a “good fit”. But now, the*

*superintendent still has to meet the subjective accountability of fitting into the culture and you also have the objective accountability as well.”*

The researcher noted that leadership was a term that was used in describing the superintendent but also the Board of Trustees. The Superintendent Focus Group recalled the ethical approach to Board governance in Los Fresnos CISD. This group was unanimous in their perception that Los Fresnos CISD has had a long-standing tradition in which the Board is respectful of the superintendent as the Chief Executive Officer and the superintendent in turn is expected to be respectful of the role of the Board of Trustees. Participant 1 stated:

*“One of the things that I think sets Los Fresnos apart in terms of what has led to the performance of its students, academic-wise, and when you compare it to other districts in the [Rio Grande] Valley, has been the political atmosphere. Politics, in Los Fresnos, and we are talking about school politics, is no different from other communities. The difference is, that those politicians, going back to when Participant 3 first came [to the District], those politicians that ran for the Board and then became the majority of the Board. That was the end of politics. Then they turned to school and said, professional, you come to us with where we need to go. That type of thinking, politicians are still out there. That type of thinking came into existence when Participant 3 first came in and through my period and Participant’s 2s period. [The Board] still leaves it to the professional, unlike other communities where politics get in the way of education, achievement, learning, and so forth and [Boards] try to run the schools as opposed to letting the professionals come to them with the recommendations. Unlike other places, they can separate that and I think that has allowed Los Fresnos, to grow the way that it has.”*



Participants in this study stated that respect was the cornerstone of the positive Superintendent-Board relations, the relationship between administration and the community and the Superintendent and District Staff. Participants of the focus group of the Board stated that the superintendent shows them a high degree of respect and throughout the years has addressed Trustees as Mr. or Mrs. Followed by their surnames. They revealed that they have often observed how the superintendent exercises the same level of respect and humility with the community, parents and staff members. The Board of Trustees also noted that the Superintendent demonstrates respect by being a good listener. Participant 2 of the Board Member Focus Group highlighted the ability to provide feedback to the Board coupled with the ability to receive feedback/listen, as a skill through which the current superintendent shows respect.

Participant 2 noted that in doing so, the superintendent has in turn earned the respect of the Board. Participant 3 noted that respect is possible as a result of trust and humility. She noted that the Board trusts the superintendent as they have seen that he has the ability to humble himself to hear what a Board, which serves as the voice of the community, has to say. Participant 3 illustrated what is possible when mutual respect exists as a result of the superintendent exhibiting a level of humility that results in effective communication:

*“I don’t think any of us are afraid to voice how we feel and what our priorities are and it takes a different type of person to accept it and be willing to move in the same direction as the School Board and [for us] not to fight over how things get done.”*

Participants of the Community Focus Group and the Administrator Focus Group also noted the ability to establish and maintain relationships based on mutual respect as a leadership skill that is exhibited by the current superintendent. Both groups noted the willingness of the superintendent to listen to the community and staff and the humility with which he is able to

listen to concerns or to accept feedback and suggestions. Both groups recalled the emphasis on respect and spoke of respect as a value that is instilled by parents and grandparents. In separate focus group interviews The Board, the Community, and Administrator groups, spoke of respect as a guiding principle that transcends cultures and spoke of respect as something that is cherished. Clarifying questions revealed that respect is seen as a mechanism for effective and appropriate communication. These groups speak of respect as a value that they fear can be lost in future generations of learners if it is not protected. Administrators noted that they take cues from the superintendent on the manner in which they need to demonstrate respect. Participant 1 of the Administrator group noted that after observing how the superintendent treats [parents and members of the community], principals began to follow suit, showing the same level of respect. Participant 1 went on to state;

“Like someone mentioned early [in this interview session], you model that not only as a superintendent but as a community member, as a dad, as a parent. You go to games, you are there as a fan, talking to parents shaking hands, and you are, “How is it going? I haven’t [spoken] to you in a while.”

Participant 2 in the Administrator Focus Group stated:

*“Respect is something that you were taught and so you carry that into your profession and your own life too and you want to instill that in your children. I think respect is key as one of the main beliefs that is brought into the school.”*

### **The Promise of Education**

One of the most consistent themes that emerged in the context of stories throughout the data collection process was that education holds the promise of a brighter future. The evidence

collected was consistent with literature that postulate that stories serve as guideposts for our elders and policy-makers in our communities (Brayboy, 2006). Participants told stories of their grandparents and parents as people with a strong work ethic who did not have a formal education often beyond the primary grades. They told stories that captured the wisdom of the elders in their families and the value they place on education. Participant 2 of the Board Focus Group recalled:

*Both my parents, grandfather and father were veterans, but they were very hard working and very successful. They were very smart on what they did and how they got there. By the time I got through Jr. High, I had more formal schooling than my grandparents and my parents. They insisted:*

*“Mijo quedate en la escuela. Get educated.”*

*[Son, stay in school.]*

*“And I did. Now, I made sure that my children had a degree, and they have vowed to me that they will make sure their children get a degree. I told them I will haunt them if they do not get a degree.”*

The Community Focus Group spoke of a different mindset that exists today compared to when they were in school. Participant 1 reminisced:

*“Most of the kids that went to school with me [over 65 years ago] were out of school by the end of the eighth grade. Their parents did not appreciate or did not know how important education could be and many kids were either allowed to quit school or taken out of school to work in the fields to help supplement the income for the family. Today, everybody knows. I think every parent knows that a college education is necessary. It is no longer enough to just go learn English and be able to solve a few problems.”*

Numerous references were made by participants of the focus group interviews depicting education as a mechanism for moving people out of poverty. Each time that the topic came up, the participants in this study credited parents and grandparents as the drivers of the dream. It was no longer enough to accept the pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1991). Participants credited elders with inculcating a goal for a post-secondary education stating that they wanted to see the next generation have a better quality of life than the previous generation. Participant 7 stated:

*“My parents did not have an education, a formal education, but I always knew that education was important. There was never a question as to whether I would go to college. I had no idea how I would pay for it, but I was going to go to school.”*

The entire Administrator Focus Group reiterated this desire to take part in a post-secondary education and each had a story to tell about how their parents wanted them to have a better quality of life. Participant 4 shared her father’s words:

*“I do not want you laboring in the hot sun patching asphalt.”*

She also told of her mother’s wishes stating:

*“I do not want my daughter to work all day sowing blue jeans at Levi’s Strauss.”*

Community and Board members recalled parents stating that they had worked too hard to get the family to this juncture and parents were going to make sure their children were not going to take steps back [into a greater degree of poverty].

### **The Mexican School**

The researcher opted to conduct a deep dive into the perceptions of the academic experience for a group of community members in Los Fresnos. While facilitating a planning meeting for the Centennial Celebration in 2015, several participants of the planning committee

made mention of their experience while attending the Mexican School. A certain degree of resentment and a need for cultural healing was noted among some of the participants.

Participants of three of the focus groups in this study provided data for this portion of the study. The Community Focus Group members and the Focus Former Superintendent Group of and the Board of Trustees Focus Group provided data. Participants of two other focus groups stated they had no prior knowledge of the Mexican School or the experiences of students who attended this campus.

The data collected in this study reveals that the Mexican School consisted of a one-room school house that was once located in the area where the Transportation Department is currently located. Participants described its exact location with a high degree of familiarity:

“Right behind where the bus barn is. By the big, well, between the portable building when you enter there. There is a big tree. When you enter there, as you are going in on the left side. That is where the little school was [located]. “

Participant two of the Superintendent Focus Group recalled this as his first experience in school and starting school in what he referred to as low first while other students started in first high.

*“That was our introduction to school; I went to first grade there. I’ve always been teased because my sister is just about one year younger than I am and I went to school there, but then you went to low first then you move to high first. So, you were in first grade two years. So, I was there two years and when she came in, I guess because of what I was doing she had already learned a little English. When she came in, she came in at first high. We wound up graduating from high school together.”*

*“I believed that it was fair. The schools were providing us the Mexican American kids with an opportunity to go to school. That was the goal, the cultural goal. Our parents wanted their kids to go to school and we were afforded that opportunity to go to school. I do not remember any negative things happening to me. I do not know if it was what the general feeling was or if that was totally accepted or not. Why are they putting the*

*Mexican kids over here and the Anglo kids over here? There was really no difference in the building. There was no air conditioning or anything like that. It was just a matter of where we were placed. That was the concept that TEA put in for those of us, some of us who were in school here for the first time. If we worked ourselves up, then we could go to the other school but we had to be there two years at least”.*

Participant one of the Superintendent Focus Group had also attended a Mexican School and had a similar experience as participant two. He, however, attended a Mexican School in Rockport. He went on to add that these schools were still part of school systems when he began his teaching career in 1960 and the presence of these schools into the 1970s. He recalled that there was a Mexican School serving elementary students in Elsa and another in Edcouch with a third school in the middle that took all of the Anglo population.

Two participants in the Community Focus Group engaged in a conversation about the Mexican School in Los Fresnos:

Participant four:

*“Our family did not know English, so we were raised in a Spanish speaking environment. In order to overcome the language barrier, they [School District] had to teach us. So they taught us” [English at the Mexican School].*

Participant one:

*“Do you remember a bilingual teacher in that program? Did you go to the Mexican school?”*

Participant four:

*“Yes, I went to the Mexican school.”*

Participant one:

*“Do you remember a bilingual teacher?”*

Participant four:

*“No, no, bilingual was not required by the state until years later.”*

Participant four:

*“No, not for many, many years”.*

Participant four:

*“Right, so I could not have a bilingual teacher”.*

Participant one:

*“Enrollment to the Mexican should have not never been required. Common sense should have told the superintendent at that time that they needed somebody that could communicate with the kids. Not to teach Spanish, but to communicate with the kid and help a kid learn English”.*

Participant four:

*“Who had finished college that was Hispanic? Who? Where would you get a teacher from... to come and teach, who knew the language and knew the other?”*

One participant in the Board of Trustees Focus Group was able to offer a perspective to the Mexican School:

*“From what I hear, I am second hand. I never went to the Mexican school. I’ve heard of the Mexican school. I went to the band in the Mexican school. By the time I came around it was the band hall in later years, but I do not remember, I think it was the pedagogy or the system at the time. My sisters talked about it but I do not ever remember them ever talking about it negatively like it affecting them negatively. They were almost insulated, allowed to learn at their own pace. I think it gave them more strength and I think it gave them the ability to succeed together. I never heard them speak about it negatively. Yes, I heard them speak about it. I heard them talk about attending there. They had I guess, to be able to speak English before they could go across the street to the other school. It is*

*where the bus barn around that area that big tree. That is where the Mexican School was [located]. I never heard them saying any negative comments about the experience.”*

Data was also collected from the archives in the school records room. Permanent record cards dating back to 1929 were analyzed. Numerous permanent records exist that validate the existence of the Mexican School. The study also noted the enrollment of focus group participants that stated they had attended the school. In addition, the study of records also confirmed the enrollment and attendance of the sisters of a participant in the Focus Group of the Board of Trustees.



## CHAPTER VI

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this autoethnographic exploration was to conduct an examination of the *self* and to study the manner in which my life experiences shaped me into the person and the leader I have become (Bochner, 2012; Boylom & Orbe, 2014; Chavez, 2012; and Butler, 2009). I conducted this research with the purpose of contributing to the body of knowledge pertaining to leadership studies, gaining a deeper understanding of the culture of the community in which I serve and understanding who I am. A deeper understanding of the community in which I serve and knowing who I am enables me to lead in a manner that empowers the next generation of leaders (Leary and Tangney, 2012; Chin, 2013; Chang, 2008). I took an academic approach to self-examination and used leadership theories as a lens through which this study would reveal my leadership style and my character (Holt, 2003; Gonzalez, 2001; Wall, 2006; Perez Huber, 2009; Smith, 1999; and Guajardo, Guajardo, Valadez, & Oliver, 2012). I also set out to learn how my efforts to shape the academic experience of children in the Los Fresnos CISD resulted in me being shaped by the community in which I serve.

*La educación empieza en la casa* [Education begins at home] is a concept that my parents firmly believed. My grandparents, specifically Abuelo Nacho, my siblings, my culture, the lived experience, and the human condition aided in the process. The upbringing that I received began to forge my character and to shape me into the person I am today. My father taught me to fear the Lord and gave me a conscience to guide my thoughts, and my decisions. He showed me what it meant to walk in the light, instilled a strong work ethic in me and gave me sound advice. My mother taught me to pray for guidance, for mercy and for grace. Because of her, I have stood tallest when I have taken to my knees to pray for forgiveness and ask Him to show me the way. Together, *mama* and *papa* taught me to show respect, held me to high standards and stressed the importance of a formal education. My grandfather taught me to pursue my goals while seeking knowledge and discernment. He taught me to see the Lord in the rain, the sparrow and the sorghum fields. From him, I learned that lessons can be taught by scaffolding questions and that wisdom can be shared by provoking thought. I learned that stories serve as guideposts for children as well as adults and that in these exchanges; we can bridge a generation gap. My siblings taught me collaboration and to recognize when I need to take the lead.

In poverty, I accumulated wealth and learned the finer things in life. I learned to cherish time with family, and forgo the things that matters not. I learned to be resourceful, to accomplish more with less, to be conservative and kind. Most importantly, I learned to trust in God. I learned to express gratitude and empathy and share what little I got and to overcome life's challenges by never giving up. It filled my coffers with tenacity and an abundance of resolve; poverty was a gentle teacher that helped me learn a lot. Failure taught me that arrogance can be a stumbling block while humility gives you clarity of vision. In failure, I learned that honesty leads to the path of wisdom and that the path of wisdom would lead me to my destiny. As with

the fire used by blacksmiths, change molded me and gave me form. I could not see it then but my ability was being transformed.

Emigration catapulted me into a state of confusion and I lived in a state of *nepantla* but over time, I developed a *mestiza consciousness* that enabled me to indulge bilingualism and biculturalism (Anzaldua, 1987; Bernal, 2012). I continued to accumulate cultural capital and I continue to draw on funds of knowledge that inevitably influence decision. I draw on my experiences and *enseñanzas* as I work to shape out organization (Bernal, 2007).

I can now see that my lived experiences as an immigrant growing up in the borderlands of Texas prepared me to be an agent of change and transformation in the role of superintendent of the Los Fresnos CISD.

The forging of my character has had a positive impact on the shaping of the organization and the relationships that I have enjoyed with members of the learning community have continued to shape me. I have made a conscious decision to serve with a moral imperative and to work collaboratively with staff to maximize the learning opportunities for the students we serve. My lived experiences have shown me that education holds the promise of a bright future and that we can build on the rich experiences and the cultural capital of our students as we shape their world. I work with a consciousness that helps me appreciate that I continue to be shaped through the interactions with members of the community and the organization that I lead.

An autoethnographic study conducted by a Hispanic Superintendent in South Texas has the potential to contribute to the larger body of knowledge pertaining to school leadership and its role in responding to the national dilemma of the impact of changing demographics and the sociological, educational and economic challenges facing our country. Our ability to help all

students succeed in a state that is currently educating a minority-majority necessitates educational leaders with the ability to achieve cultural synchronicity and demonstrate an awareness of the importance of reaching cultural congruence. The positive effects of achieving cultural congruence with all stakeholders in the academic experience of children and the impact that this has on the overall performance of students in the classroom have been well documented (Flores, 2001; Tella, 2007; Lavy and Sand 2014; and Modi, 2015).

### **Research Questions**

The study set out to pursue the answer to the following research questions:

1. How did my life-experiences as an immigrant growing up in the borderlands of Texas prepare me to be an agent of change in the role of superintendent in the Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District; a school district serving predominantly Hispanic students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds?
2. How have relationships with members of the school learning community shaped my character and how did my character shape the organization?
3. How can an autoethnographic study conducted by a Hispanic Superintendent in South Texas contribute to the larger body of knowledge pertaining to school leadership and its role in responding to the national dilemma of the impact of changing demographics and the sociological, educational and economic challenges facing our country.

This chapter contains a summary of the study, a section on conclusions drawn from major findings and recommendations for future research.

## **Summary of the Study**

The study was conducted during the fall of 2018. The researcher began by sharing his *testimonio*, a narrative description of the personal and professional lived experiences beginning with the earliest recollections (Pérez Huber, 2009; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012) The narrative of the lived experiences was presented in unguarded fashion and rich in detail in an effort to convey the cultural wealth transmitted through the structure of the family unit. I share it in an attempt to reveal how my character was forged and to reveal the manner in which my upbringing and the lived experience shaped me into the person and the professional that I am today. I did not tell my story to impress reader but rather to impress upon the reader what is possible in the life of minority students if we are able to draw on the funds of knowledge they inherit from their upbringing. The autoethnography also provides a framework for reconciling the data collected through the focus group interviews. The five focus group interviews served to capture and reveal the culture, morals and values of the superintendent and the community of Los Fresnos. The focus groups also reveal the community's perceptions of the person and the superintendent. This aspect of the study is important when seeking a better understanding of the *self* because a person's identity resides in the intertwining of the fibers of self-perception, the individual's action or inaction, and the perceptions of others. The reconciliation between the storying of the lived experiences and the data collected from the focus group interviews provided the researcher with the information required for drawing conclusions.

## **Overview of the Problem**

Twenty-one million elementary and secondary students of immigrant families were enrolled in the nation's public schools in October of 2016, representing 26% of all students (U.S. Census, 2017, Table 1). Demographers have long held that by the year 2050, our nation will be

increasingly more diverse and that there will be no racial or ethnic majority among the general population of the United States with Hispanics being one of the forces driving this demographic change (Murdock, 2004 and 2007; U.S. Census, 2010; America's Voice, 2014). Gandara and Rumberger (2009) affirm that public schools in the United States have represented "the great equalizer" or the place where assimilation into the mainstream is inculcated regardless of the culture that students bring to school. This approach, however, is devoid of the benefits of validating the cultural capital and funds of knowledge that students already possess when they enroll in the public schools. As a result, most immigrant students who enter school as English Learners (EL) have low achievement and attainment (Gandara and Rumberger, 2009; Murdock, 2004 and 2007, America's Voice, 2014). As the demographic landscape shifts, how our nation will manage the well documented disparities in education and economic indicators afflicting minorities including Hispanics, the fastest growing demographic in the nation, will continue to be a dilemma facing national leaders tasked with adopting policy solutions (Murdock, 2004 and 2007, America's Voice, 2014). An autoethnographic study conducted by a Hispanic Superintendent in South Texas has the potential to contribute to the larger body of knowledge pertaining to school leadership and its role in responding to the national dilemma of the impact of changing demographics and the sociological, educational and economic challenges facing our country.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I placed myself at the center of research, as a member of learning community, and employed the paradigms and circular type of research that is associated with autoethnographic studies. I included information about my beliefs and my spiritual faith in an effort to avoid miscommunication and to enable the reader to see what I see (Wilson, 2008). I collected data

from the focus groups by using a standardized, open-ended interview approach and captured audio and video recordings. I immersed myself in the data by creating a transcript of the views collected and reviewing them to make preliminary observations that led me to identify patterns. I developed a coding system that I used to group the data and I carried out a thematic analysis of all views collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Bernard, & Ryan, 1998; Bernard, H. R. 2010, and Creswell, 2012). I used the coding scheme to group the data in a manner that allowed me to create a data set of emerging themes, explore evidence and make conclusions. I conducted an in-depth review of the narrative of each of the focus groups and this process enabled me to capture the interrelatedness of the themes.

I also reviewed documents and memorabilia captured in the course of the focus group interviews. I analyzed these in an effort to get to culture, to validate the lived experiences, and get a gain a better understanding of that which was shared by members of the focus group.

## **Participants**

The study included five focus group interviews using a standardized, open-ended interview approach. The researcher captured audio and video as he interviewed immediate family members, principals, elders in the community, three former superintendents, and the board of trustees.

### **First Focus Group**

I began the focus group interviews with a standardized open-ended interview of my siblings (5 sisters and two brothers). My goal was to capture the lived experience, what they remember and the essence of the values that were transmitted through our upbringing. This focus group interview also served as validation of the narration of my lived experience.

## **Second Focus Group**

I explored the manner in which I have collaborated with staff to make curricular and professional development decisions. I interviewed principals who have been serving in the district for a minimum of ten years. This was important to the study because I served alongside many of them in the capacity of principal and they saw me make the transition to the position of superintendent in the same school district.

## **Third Focus Group**

I collected data by interviewing a focus group of six elders who have lived in the Los Fresnos community for a minimum of 20 years, had children graduate from the school system and served on at least one advisory committee in the past. Elders in the community have the ability to provide comparative data as it relates to the role of the superintendent. This focus group was important to the study because, our identity originates in the annals of history and it is further archived in the memories of those who have come before us.

## **Fourth Focus Group**

I interviewed a focus group of three of the former superintendents who each served in the Los Fresnos CISD for terms exceeding five years. In addition to being familiar with the role of the superintendent in the Los Fresnos CISD, these superintendents continued to reside in the area and are familiar the work I have done. Two of them still live in the community and the third has served as my mentor. Interviewing the elders and former superintendents will served as great source of data and allowed the researcher to pay ceremony to the past.



## **Fifth Focus Group**

The Los Fresnos CISD has enjoyed a period of relative stability in the makeup of the Board of Trustees. In 2010, the Los Fresnos CISD Board was named the State Honor Board at the TASA/TASB Convention by the Texas Association of School Administrator. The community has reelected them to their positions since then. I collected data by interviewing the Board of Trustees as a single focus group and complied with the Open Meetings Act by conducting the interviews in a duly posted meeting of the Board of Trustees.

### **Summary of Major Findings**

This autoethnographic exploration of a Hispanic superintendent in South Texas generated the following findings:

1. The superintendent's lived experiences are very similar to those experienced by many of the community members and the children in the Los Fresnos CISD.
2. The superintendent has a clear understanding of the unique needs and characteristics of the children in the community.
3. The superintendent was raised in a household with high expectations in all aspects of life, in a nucleus that values the family unit, and where respect for elders was a non-negotiable.
4. A culture of high expectations that emanates from the community has permeated the Los Fresnos CISD. The Board of Trustees, the superintendent and staff share the high expectations and this has led to a commitment to create a learning environment in which all students can flourish.

5. The superintendent's active participation in cultural celebrations and being highly visible/accessible throughout the District continues to be a community expectation in the Los Fresnos CISD. It is through interaction with the superintendent that the community communicates their expectations and the superintendent shares the vision of the district and student success.
6. The superintendent works with a moral imperative and draws on spiritual capital of his faith and the funds of knowledge that were imparted from an early age.
7. The superintendent works to establish and maintain interpersonal working relationships with each member of the Board of Trustees.
8. Superintendent-Board relations are harmonious and it is evident that this relationship is firmly grounded on mutual respect.
9. The Los Fresnos CISD has experienced stability in the makeup of the Board of Trustees, the position of superintendent, and campus leadership. A low teacher turnover rate was also noted. The District has capitalized on stability by refining teaching methods and ensuring that initiatives are systemic.
10. The Board Trustees and the community of Los Fresnos have a deep appreciation for the superintendent's humility, ability to listen, ability to take direction, and the diligence with which he works collaboratively with staff to ensure *all* students succeed.
11. The cultural congruence shared by stakeholders allows for a high degree of cultural synchronicity.
12. The superintendent's and the community's lived experiences have led stakeholders to view education as a mechanism for overcoming the struggles of poverty. As such, there is value placed on education and this drives a commitment to continuous improvement.

13. Family engagement is not approached as a mere measure of compliance but rather as a demonstration of respect for parents as individuals, their role in the education of children, as well as the means through which the District communicates its mission and promotes an awareness of the opportunities available to students.
14. A strong measure of commitment to the success of students was noted at every level. All stakeholders expressed support and a deep level of respect for the work of the teachers in the District.
15. The superintendent has exercised effective leadership that is collaborative, transactional and well aligned with the culture and mission of the school district.
16. Although community members had opposing views of their experiences while attending the Mexican School in Los Fresnos, they were cohesive in their current expectation of providing a quality education for all students and doing so with a moral imperative.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study resulted in numerous conclusions. The conclusions were drawn from an analysis of the data collected through the autoethnographer's *testimonio* and the focus group interviews. Several conclusions were drawn from the *testimonio* provided by the researcher.

1. The cultural capital transmitted through the pedagogies of the home (Bernal, 2001) equipped the researcher with funds of knowledge and a wealth of cultural capital (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2009) that he was able to draw on as he progressed through the continuum of his formal education and in his professional journey from teacher, campus administrator, principal and superintendent.

2. The funds of knowledge, cultural capital (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2009) and Christian faith provided the researcher with guideposts (Brayboy, 2006) for decision making in his personal and professional career.
3. The lived experiences instilled in the researcher respect, humility, work ethic and high expectations. These character traits were modeled and effectively communicated by parents and grandparents.
4. The researcher, an immigrant from Matamoros, Tamaulipas found himself navigating through a state of nepantla (Anzaldua, 1987) when he entered the public school system in the United States, at Ebony Heights Elementary in Brownsville, Texas.
5. The researcher developed a mestiza consciousness (Anzaldua, 2015) in the Spanish vs. English struggle as acceptable forms of language between the home and the school setting.
6. Spiritual capital transmitted from grandparents, to the parents and on to the researcher and his siblings provided a source of strength and hope through periods of economic hardship.
7. The constructs of the researcher's Christian faith influenced his decisions in his personal and professional life.
8. The researcher's values, morals, and beliefs were already congruent with those of the community of Los Fresnos and he continued to work to achieve a higher level of cultural synchronicity through active participation in events within the Los Fresnos School District.

Conclusions were also drawn from the focus group interviews. Participants in the focus group interviews expressed the importance of having a superintendent that is an active member

of the community and highly visible throughout the District. The data collected indicates that community members, and the Board of Trustees place high importance in students' ability to see themselves in school district leaders as this may inspire them to pursue similar careers and set high goals for themselves. The study concluded that the superintendent operates as an effective member of the organization due to a leadership style that has been a good match for the school district. The data further indicates that he is perceived by the community, administrators, and the board of trustees as a leader that embodies good moral character, integrity, and humility; desirable traits in district leadership. The research also concluded that the superintendent works with a moral imperative as he sees much of himself in the students of the district. It was interesting to see that the superintendent and participants in the administrator focus group expressed that they see themselves in the students they serve. The superintendent and administrative focus group revealed that their lived experiences were not much different to the lived experiences of the children they serve.

The data indicates that the Community of Los Fresnos measures the effectiveness of the superintendent's leadership in the leader's pedagogical knowledge and ability to improve teaching and learning. There is a clear expectation that the superintendent's leadership style be congruent with the values of the community and that the superintendent is able to lead in a way that motivates staff to commit to continuous improvement and to deliver services that result in increased student performance.

Lastly, an exploration into the perceptions of community members who as students attended the "Mexican School" in Los Fresnos yielded differing perspectives. Research asserts that the "Mexican Schools" that existed throughout the borderland of Texas were only a small part of the rigid English Only racially motivated national movement (Blanton, 2007; De Leon,

1983; Orozco, 2012; Montejano, 2011; and Najera 2105). The literature revealed that the movement was prompted by what was referred to as the “Mexican Problem” by those who feared that there was a social cost to be paid for the low wage labor that was made possible by Mexican immigration. Proponents of the movement on the “Mexican Problem” feared that social cost of low wage labor would result in the “undoing of America” (Blanton, 2007; De Leon, 1983; Orozco, 2012 and Montejano, 2011). The mandates handed down during the first quarter of the twentieth century from State Superintendent of Education, R. B Cousins, were intended to “Americanize” non-English speaking students during the elementary years with the intent of “shedding their foreign-ness” (Blanton, 2007 p.62; De Leon, 1983; Montejano, 2011).

Some participants in the study reconciled the experience in the Mexican School as “the way things were” and had nothing negative to say about the experience. Other participants recalled the experience with disdain and told of how it destined children of Mexican descent to an education of lesser quality and how the children of farmworkers opted instead to go work in the fields. The data also reveals the resolve and the will of a community that has risen above the injustices of the past to transform its schools from a state system that almost a century ago permitted the marginalization of some students of Mexican descent through segregation to the current school system that provides a quality educational experience for *all* students. The segregation that resulted from these laws, left scars that are still palpable in the recollections of some of the elders in the community who are still working to achieve cultural healing while others accepted it as an opportunity to attend school and to participate in the academic process.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study are consistent with the literature, as it relates to the effectiveness of leadership and the source of a leader’s authority. A leaders’ understanding of

his or her own identity; how education, culture, upbringing, values and morals helped shape the *self* (Leary, & Tangney, 2002; Anzaldúa, 2015; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017) and how the leader functions as a contributing member of the organization (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) is critically important. It is equally important to comprehend the manner in which the follower's self-conceptions, their evaluation of the collective *self*, and their level of inclusiveness (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer & Hogg, 2004) interact with their perception of the leader (Romero, 2004; Drazenovich & Skovira, 2010; Hofstede, 2000) and combine to define a leader's effectiveness.

The findings of the autoethnography demonstrate that the researcher, who is at the center of the study, operates from the well-grounded, platform of his upbringing and cultural values. It is evident that “the professional and the person” at the center of the study is defined by this upbringing and the spiritual capital and not by the administrative positions in which he has served. Leadership effectiveness is critically contingent on, and often defined in terms of, a leader's ability to motivate followers towards a collective goal, mission or vision (Knippenberg, Knippenberg, Cremer & Hogg, 2004). The superintendent exercises the type of shared leadership that empowers those around him. The empowerment of those with whom he works coupled with the acceptance from a community that shares the same values and culture of high expectations, and the student outcomes are the source of the authority afforded to the superintendent as a leader. Several theories help assess and comprehend the symbiotic relationship that exists between the perceived effectiveness of leadership and the acceptance by the member group; and the degree to which that acceptance empowers the leader (Hofstede, 1993, 2000 & 2006; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; Drazenovich & Skovira, 2010; Romero, 2004).

The data indicates that the Community of Los Fresnos measures the effectiveness of the superintendent's leadership in the leader's pedagogical knowledge and ability to improve teaching and learning. There is a clear expectation that the superintendent's leadership style be congruent with the values of the community and that the superintendent is able to lead in a way that motivates staff to commit to continuous improvement and deliver services that result in increased student performance. Similar building blocks exist in the Social Identity Model of Leadership (SIMOL) as proposed by Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) which illustrates the leadership processes in the context of a shared group membership where leaders, as group members ask followers, as group members, to exert themselves on behalf of the collective. Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins (2005) refer to this model as one in which leadership is seen as a vehicle to social identity-based collective agency in which leaders and followers see each other as partners. This mutual identity-based model relationship both enables and constrains the practice of leadership and provides the basis for overcoming the traditional opposition between the leader and the led (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005; and Anzaldúa, 2015). This model considers leaders and followers as interdependent; actively relying on each other to create the conditions under which mutual influence is possible (Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; and Anzaldúa, 2015).

The analysis of the emerging categories and overarching themes indicated that the effectiveness of the superintendent's leadership can also be attributed to factors that include his upbringing, the transmission of cultural and spiritual capital, and the lived experiences. The similarities between the lived experiences of the superintendent and those of the members of the learning community in the Los Fresnos CISD facilitated the acceptance of the superintendent as an immigrant, in every sense of the word. The acceptance allowed him to go beyond



*psychological citizenship* (Laframboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993; Sindic, 2011; and Ng, Rochelle, Shardlow & Ng, 2014) and become an accepted member of the community.

The study further revealed that the community is highly engaged in communicating high expectations for the educational attainment of all children and the quality educational experiences that prepare children for post-secondary success. The researcher further noted that after communicating high expectations, the community places confidence in professionals to deliver on the District's mission. The study revealed the academic attainment that is possible through a commitment to continuous improvement in an environment of high expectations and the effectiveness of achieving a high degree of cultural synchronicity. The autoethnographic study validated the voice and "lived experiences" of the researcher at the center of the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, Mercado-Garza, 2005, Guajardo and Guajardo, 2010). It provided insight into the character development of the superintendent and the manner in which he has been able to draw upon on the funds of knowledge and the cultural capital obtained through the *pedagogies of the home* (Mercado-Garza, 2005; Delgado Bernal, 2010; and Anzaldua, 1987).

The data generated through this study revealed that the superintendent exercises effective leadership and does so in a manner that is consistent with the expectations of the community as well as the members of the organization. The autoethnography is consistent with the research by Hofstede (1993) who proposes that managers derive their authority from the people managed: culturally, they are the followers of the people they lead, and as such, their effectiveness is to some degree dependent on the members of the organization/group. The analysis of the data reveals that the superintendent plays a key role in establishing and maintaining interpersonal working relationships with stakeholders and his efforts sustain a climate of trust in which the work can occur.

The data collected indicates that the superintendent draws on these to make conscious and unconscious decisions. A reconciliation of the data collected from the focus group interviews with the researcher's autoethnography revealed the positive results in the performance of students can be attributed to the cultural synchronicity that exists in the community of Los Fresnos (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Haberman, 1991 and Lipitz & Rodriguez, 2012). The shared culture and values have resulted in a harmonious environment in which stakeholders work with a single focus on improving the academic experience of the children of Los Fresnos CISD.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

As demographics continue to shift across Texas and the Nation, a study pertaining to the effectiveness of culturally congruent leadership and the degree of cultural synchronicity that exists between administration and the community of learners may yield valuable data that may help shape administrator and teacher preparation programs. The research study suggests that staff in school districts serving a minority or diverse population of students would benefit from professional development that increases the awareness of the benefits of culturally congruent teaching. School Districts should build capacity in staff through professional development that stresses the need for achieving cultural synchronicity between administrators, teachers, and students. It is recommended that teacher and administrator preparation programs include experiences that develop an understanding of the resistance that can emerge from the pedagogies of the home and grow in learning environments that do not attempt to achieve the cultural congruence in which minority students can flourish. It is further recommended that policy makers work with a moral imperative and consider the results of this study when adopting policies that shape curriculum, assessment and the academic experience of a growing Hispanic population. Failure to consider the need to create environments that are conducive to learning

and move towards cultural synchronicity may result in repeating the mistakes of the past intended for Americanizing students. The results of this study suggest the need for a deep dive into the effects of the existence of Mexican Schools along the borderland of Texas and the perceptions of those that were required to attend school in a segregated setting. .

### **Concluding Remarks**

Education in a democratic society will continue to have a special place and purpose but if we are to succeed, educational leaders cannot continue to operate under deficit thinking. It is critical to the future of education in Texas, that educational leaders concern themselves with the emotional wellbeing of the students they serve. Educational leaders must possess the ability to increase the social and cultural capital and recognize the resistance that may arise from the *pedagogies of the home*. Unless the leader accepts this responsibility as a strategy for achieving a higher level of proficiency in the field of education, minority students will continue developing strategies of resistance. A superintendent's ability to do this successfully requires the individual to understand the *self* before he/she can understand those he/she intends to serve. As a leader, the superintendent must be willing to completely immerse the *self* in the culture of the community/organization because it is at this intersect where an interesting phenomena occurs; culture begins to shape the leader/*self* and the leader/*self* begins to shape the culture (Pelias, 2003; Wall, 2006; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010).

### **Reflections**

The circular type of research that autoethnography as a method of research, provided in this study was rewarding and therapeutic. The study narrates the intimate moments of the lived experience and reveals the culture and the success generations of children have experienced in

the Los Fresnos CISD, a community where people are willing to exert themselves on behalf of the collective. Although the narrative in the autobiographical portion of the study limits anecdotes of disappointment to a single incident, the researcher is convinced additional opportunities for learning reside in a deeper dive into the lessons that are nestled in episodes of failure in the journey we call life.

The study of the culture of the Los Fresnos CISD through the lens of the superintendent necessitated the introspective approach found in the literature. The process resulted in the researcher and participants in the focus group interviews paying ceremony to the past with a high degree of reverence and it was in that reverent approach that the exercise became therapeutic. Participants indulged in the contributions of those who shaped them through upbringing, the manner in which the lived experience forged the character of a community, the challenges that strengthened the people, and the struggles that fortified character. The acknowledgment of the importance of *enseñanzas* [teachings] and the realization of what resulted in the collective shaping of a culture was a celebration of life. The achievement of students that results from the high expectations of a culture that shares values and morals allowed participants to look to the future with hope for a stronger Texas and a prosperous nation.

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## APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLE CONSENT FORM FOR ADMINISTRATORS

#### **An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Professional and the Person: A Life's Journey of a Hispanic Superintendent in South Texas**

Investigator: Gonzalo Salazar

Background: My name is Gonzalo Salazar and I am conducting this study in partial fulfillment of a Doctoral degree, under the supervision of a dissertation committee chaired by Dr. Francisco Guajardo.

You have been selected because you have served as in the capacity of principal/administrator in the Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District for a minimum of ten years. We have worked together in service to the children of our district, you have seen me grow in role as superintendent of schools and have working knowledge of my work. In addition, you understand firsthand the importance of leadership and you have insight into the manner in which the superintendent shapes the organization and the manner in which the organization shapes the superintendent.

Procedure: If you agree to participate, I will ask a set of predetermined questions and collect your responses as data for this study. The interview will consist of 10 questions that will be asked in a single session. It is anticipated that the session will last approximately one hour. The researcher may follow up with you individually if, in the process of the interview, we identify documents, photos, or other mediums that you might want to share for further analysis. The data collection procedure will include video and audio recording of the focus group responses, and you will be asked to sign a separate consent form. Audio and video recordings are utilized in this type of study to enable the researcher to transcribe the responses and accurately analyze the data that is collected.

Risks or Possible Discomforts Associated with the Study: There are no anticipated risks associated with your participation in this study.

Benefits of Participation: This study will provide no direct benefit to participants. However, the insight and information you share may provide valuable information that can contribute to the body of knowledge regarding leadership and organizational development.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. If, for any reason you decide that you would like to discontinue your participation, simply tell the researcher that you wish to stop.

Anonymity and/or Confidentiality: The researcher will mask the identity of the participants in this focus group interview. Your names will be masked by referring to you as participant 1, participant 2 and the participant number will be assigned randomly. The data will be kept confidential, in secure storage of files. The informed consent and data will be stored separately and once all data has been collected, data containing identifying information will be destroyed in accordance with the required research study timelines. Coded data and the codebook that links participants with their coded data will be stored separately and only the researcher will have access to any identifiable data.

Who to Contact for Research Related Questions: For questions about the research itself, or to report any adverse effects during or following participation, contact the researcher, Gonzalo Salazar at (956) 459-2562 or [gsalazar@lfcisd.net](mailto:gsalazar@lfcisd.net) or Dr. Francisco Guajardo at (956) 494-3149.

Who to Contact Regarding Your Rights as a Participant: This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Protection (IRB). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel that your rights as a participant were not adequately met by the researcher, please contact the IRB at (956) 665-2889 or [irb@utrgv.edu](mailto:irb@utrgv.edu).

Signatures: By signing below, you indicate that you are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study and that the procedures involved have been described to your satisfaction. The researcher will provide you with a copy of this form for your own reference. In order to participate, you must be at least 18 years of age. If you are under 18, please inform the researcher.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_  
Date

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### FOCUS GROUP 1 SIBLINGS

1. Can you identify some of the pedagogies of the home that build leadership skills? (I framed this question by defining Delgado Bernal's *Pedagogies of the Home*)
2. Was value placed in acquiring a formal education in our upbringing? If so, how was it communicated and by whom?
3. What are some of the cultural values that were transmitted by our mom and dad and how were these transmitted?
4. Describe the contributions of other relatives in forging the character of our family members.
5. How were high expectations communicated during our upbringing and how did these shape us into people we are today?
6. Do the pedagogies of the home shape our professional decisions?
7. What role did spiritual upbringing hold in the growth and development in our household?
8. Dad was employed as a driver for Coca Cola, he was a header on a shrimp boat, a shrimp boat maintenance man at the dry docks, a school bus driver and an athletic field maintenance man. What do you remember most from the different periods?
9. What role did our mom hold in our upbringing?
10. In the context of our upbringing, what are some life experiences that Gonzalo draws on in his professional role?



## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### FOCUS GROUPS 2 THROUGH 5

#### RETIRED SUPERINTENDENTS FROM LOS FRESNOS, COMMUNITY ELDERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND BOARD OF TRUSTEES

1. What are the guiding principles that a superintendent in Los Fresnos should hold in high regard?
2. What type of leadership was required in education when you were a student and how does that compare to leadership required in education today?
3. Is it important for the superintendent to achieve cultural synchronicity (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Haberman, 1991 and Lipitz & Rodriguez, 2012) with the community in which she or he serves?
4. What are some *pedagogies of the home* (Delgado Bernal, 2008) that you draw upon as a leader in Los Fresnos CISD? (I framed this question by defining *Pedagogies of the Home*).
5. Although all school districts have the same accountability standards, the dynamics in each community are different. Describe what you perceive are the similarities and differences between Los Fresnos CISD and districts in other parts of the Rio Grande Valley and the state?
6. Some members of the community still recall attending the Mexican School. In what ways did this statewide approach to educating children of non-English speaking homes in the borderlands of Texas impact the community? Are there other historical events do you believe forged the character of the learning community in the Los Fresnos CISD?
7. If you could describe the values of the Los Fresnos CISD in five words, what values would you choose?
8. How has the superintendent shaped the Los Fresnos CISD and how has the Los Fresnos CISD shaped the superintendent?

9. What cultural values and character traits do you see in the current superintendent?
10. What are the primary cultural values that lead to positive relationships in the Los Fresnos CISD?

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gonzalo Salazar was born in Matamoros, Tamaulipas on February 25, 1968 to Gonzalo and Angelica Salazar. His family emigrated to the United States in October of 1974 and he enrolled in school in Brownsville, Texas. He attended the University of Texas in Brownsville (UTB) where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in 1991, with a Major in Spanish and a Minor in Bilingual Education. He continued his graduate work at UTB and earned a Masters of Education Degree in 1996. Upon completion of his Master's Degree Salazar worked for the San Benito CISD as a fourth grade bilingual teacher.

He began his administrative career in the Los Fresnos CISD in 2001, at Lopez-Riggins Elementary where he served as an Assistant Principal. In 2002, he assumed the role of Principal at Palmer-Laakso Elementary and in 2004; Salazar was appointed the inaugural Principal of Olmito Elementary. In December of 2005, the Board of Trustees named him Interim Superintendent of Schools and hired him as Superintendent in June of 2006. He has served on numerous local and state organizations including, the Equity Center and the Texas Association of School Administrators Legislative and Executive Committees, Commissioner's Cabinet of Superintendents and member of the Future Ready Leaders Institute. In 2017, Salazar was selected as a member of the State Board of Education Long Range Planning Committee. He continued his graduate studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) where he earned a Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership. Dr. Gonzalo Salazar resides at 6771 Pinecreek Avenue in Brownsville, Texas and may be reached via email at [gsalazar@lfcisd.net](mailto:gsalazar@lfcisd.net).